

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Vanished Vaquero

Back home! Mexico was wonderful and its fascination makes a return trip a must. I think the native Mexicans' appreciation of what the country has in beauty, culture, history, climate, and sheer interest, should be carried over and cultivated in Monterey as well as in the entire state of California.

No matter where you go in Mexico, the natives, Indians who speak English, and the Mexicans, are extremely proud of their past history, their old public buildings, the cathedrals and churches, the artists, the haciendas, the plazas and gardens, the craftsmen and their work, their heroes of the past to whom they have erected great and beautiful monuments. California has so much that is like our neighbors to the south, so many names that are familiar to the residents of both countries. The Franciscan priests who founded the chain of missions along the California coast, started from Mexico; even our home city of Monterey, California, and Monterrey, Mexico, were named for the same titled gentleman, and our plazas, our adobes our street names, our heroes – in fact all our early history is so interwoven with Mexico and Spain – that we should be most brotherly toward and interested in this country south of our border.

Having just returned from Mexico and the country of the "burro" I welcomed the arrival of a book, "California Vaquero" by A.R. Rojas, published by The Academy Literary Guild of Fresno, California. The author writes in the dedication: "This book is affectionately dedicated to those Don Quijotes who in yesteryear rode the ranges of Kern County carrying a long rope instead of a lance and wearing a 'ten gallon hat' in place of the 'mamabrinós' helmet."

The book publishes a collection of tales gathered from the vaqueros of the San Joaquin Valley and its surrounding Sierra. The time: The years when the greatest cattle empires of North America were passing out of existence.

The author writes: "The gate below San Emidio, where one spring morning 9,000 head of steers were counted through on a drive to summer pasture has long since fallen. Some migrant used its timbers to warm his shivering body. The southern San Joaquin is no longer a cattle country. Of the great army of old school vaqueros

who rode the Kern ranges, all that are left are three aged, decrepit men living their few remaining years in Bakersfield; the end of an era that had so courageous a beginning."

All through Mexico the burro is a most familiar sight. Maybe one will see one of the tiny grey animals all alone among the cacti o the desert, or so covered with a load of sugar cane, wood or flowers that only his head and tail would be visible; or carrying his master, along with a load, to the market, but always seemingly ready to do his part.

The author of "California Vaquero" really shows his appreciation of this fascinating little animal – the burro. He writes: "Though their masters may never seem to have thought to eulogize them, the real heroes of the migrations into California from Sonora were the lowly burros, half dead bags of bones, specters of famine and overwork, with feet worn down to the quick at the end of a journey.

"Many rich mines in the deserts of the west would never have been discovered had not the early-day prospector found at hand a noble little animal which fools have made a symbol of stupidity"

Our author of "California Vaquero" gives credit to four old men from whom he received his first stories of early California cattle barons and their workmen. These men were living out the final years of their life in Canon de Soledad on the edge of the Mojave desert. They told him stories in the shade of old cottonwoods as they rolled brown paper cigarettes, smoked gravely, and told in old voices tales of vaqueros, brave horses, fierce wild cattle, bandits and buried treasure. They were Leonardo Ruiz, Dolores Martinez, Jim McFall and Juan Ardia, heroes all to "a kid among men."