

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Jo Mora's Own Story

Through the interest and kindness of William David Pratt of Carmel Valley Manor, the Monterey History and Art Assn. is now the proud possessor of a letter written in long hand by the late Jo Mora, noted Peninsula artist, to the late Sen. James D. Phelan of San Francisco on December 10, 1920.

This letter, Mr. Pratt writes, was found among some papers on the old Noel Sullivan estate. Somehow the letter had escaped water, mildew and lately the fire which destroyed the old house on the property, known as "Hidden Hills."

Mr. Mora writes the senator: "Mr. Smith, our club manager, telephoned Monday just as I was leaving the city and informed me that you had purchased my little bronze - 'Stretching Leather' and wished to know the meaning of the title.

"In riding broncos, the one desire of a top twister is to ride with hands free (holding reins or mecate only) and spurs clear of the cinch. This is called "riding straight up." Now, if the horse proves to be too much for the rider and the latter is forced, to keep from being unseated, to take hold of the saddle with his hand or hands, he is said to 'stretch leather.' Often, if he holds to the pommel, it is called 'choking the horn.' The significance of these blunt phrases is quite apparent.

"I am here (San Francisco) to 'settle up' one of the most important and interesting commissions I have ever been given. It is to execute the Sarcophagus for Father Junipero Serra and the three Franciscans buried beside him in the Carmel Mission. Could anything be grander for a sculptor who loves his California - or fraught with more romantic, and sentimental possibilities? I'm girding my loins for the supreme professional effort of my life!

"With best wishes to you and appreciation of your interest in my efforts, I am very sincerely yours. J. J. Mora." One of Jo Mora's lifelong interests was the California "vaqueros", that hearty breed of missionary-trained horsemen who tended the immense mission herds for 80 years before the Texas cowboys appeared on our national scene. In "Californios," his last book, completed by Mora only three weeks before his death on October 10, 1947, he pays tribute to the daring and

skill of these hard-riding pioneer cowhands, bringing to light much fascinating information about their methods and equipment, their evolution from wild Indians to finished cowboys, their contributions to the economy of the province during seven decades, and their tremendous influence on the techniques of the cattle industry, especially in California.

According to the "about the author" printed on the jacket cover of the book, Jo Mora was born in Uruguay in 1876. He came to the United States as a child, studied at New York art schools, became a cartoonist on Boston newspapers, and finally drifted into the Southwest, where for many years he lived a nomadic life as a cowboy, ranch hand, and friend of the Hopi and Navajo Indians. All the while he was active with pencil and brush, ranging over the entire West and preserving for posterity much of the romance and lore of a now vanished era.

During the last years of his life he won added renown with his beautifully executed and historically accurate dioramas, including the Portola, expedition up the coast of California and discovery of San Francisco Bay, which was one of the most beautiful and fascinating exhibits in the California building at the exposition on Treasure Island which was destroyed by fire before the fair was over. Pictures of that work of art on colored plates are on exhibit in the museum of the Pacific Building in Monterey.

Mora also was the artist who executed the handsome exhibit of an early day Spanish wedding party on horseback displayed in the Copper Cup room at the U. S. Naval Postgraduate School. He also executed the dioramas depicting the life of his friend Will Rogers, done for the Will Rogers Memorial at Claremore, Okla.

Jo Mora's widow, his son, Jo N. Mora, and his daughter, Mrs. Walter Anderson (Patty), reside, on Sunridge road in Pebble Beach. Most of his famous dioramas were designed and made in the Mora studio, also at Pebble Beach. Mrs. Mora gave to the Monterey History and Art Assn. a number of years ago, an autographed copy of "Californios", a photograph of the famous artist-sculptor, and a memorial half dollar designed by Mora at the time of the centennial celebrations of the discovery of gold in California in 1946, now on display in the Casa Serrano, the headquarters of the History and Art Assn. The letter presented by Mr. Pratt will be added to that collection.