

# History of the Vaquero Tradition in California

## The Four Seasons of the Reined Cow Horse

By Benny Guitron & Sandy Collier



The Hackamore

Cattle were started as 4 or 5 yr olds in a hackamore. Nothing was put in their mouth until their teeth had come in and their mouth was mature. (Protecting the inside for hackamores was very important as not to come off their jaws. Soft and pliable was good). The hackamore was fitted 2 finger widths above the nose cartilage (bump), and hung loosely, so it contacted the chin muscle first, then the chin bone. The length of the hackamore was approximately 10" from nose button to last knot. If a horse got tough in a hackamore, there was always the hair hackamore to be used for a few days. It was probably being made out of the tail hair, and demanded more respect. As the horse became more trained, a smaller hackamore was used. It was placed higher up on the nose, towards where the nasal will rest when the horse is in the 2 rein. The mecate (reins) was 22' long and made of the soft mane hair. The hackamore is a bit complex because when you pull the direct rein, the pressure actually comes from the opposite side of the head, so lots of time needs to be spent at this point, until the horse sorts it out. When they learn to follow their nose, it's much closer to the neck than a simple mouth prod. But, in those days, there was an infinite amount of time to train a horse, lots of miles, brush to steer around and plenty of jobs to be done. These were essential ingredients that made these horses some of the best trained animals the world has known.

The Snaffle Bit

However, once a lot of us start our horses as 2 year olds and they need to compete as 3 year olds. There's an huge infinite amount of time, miles, stress and cattle. The snaffle is a simpler device requiring less time and skill. When you pull the direct rein (also rein), the pull is direct laterally and easily understandable. There's no worry of coming up the delicate jaw. The snaffle is now used by many trainers to start their colts as 2 yr olds and ride them through their 3 yr old years, before putting them in a hackamore for their 4 and 5 year old years.

History of the Vaquero Tradition

This training method was developed by the Spanish Vaqueros and was refined on the ranchos of early California. The Vaqueros had come up from Sonora Mexico with the padres to settle California. The missions were built, natives converted and cattle became the currency for the area. Great pride was taken in the gentle handling of the livestock, and this could only be achieved by finely trained horses and cowboys. They had no clock, no calendars, everything was the same and there was lots of time to train horses. There was an abundance of leather and time to build hackamores, vests (frankie leiras), and in a tradition was born. The National Endowment for the Humanities is dedicated to keeping that tradition alive and in use. You can contact them for more information at [www.neh.gov](http://www.neh.gov)

The Two Rein

As the horse gets more educated, the hackamore gets smaller and soon it's time for the horse to start carrying a bit. This is put on over the smallest hackamore, was called a basal. There are several ways to hold the 2 sets of reins, but the idea is for the basal reins to be used exclusively in the beginning. Gradually moving towards 50/50 with the direct reins until after a minimum of 1 year, the basal reins are used exclusively. This gets the horse used to "padding" in carrying the bit while still being controlled by the familiar workload.

Straight up in the Bit

A horse is considered to be "straight up in the bit" when he is carrying a spade bit and being completely guided by it. The basal was still worn and used to tie the horse up. The Spanish buckle bits are very sophisticated works of art, made by hand perfectly in a horse's mouth to achieve the best reaction that the Vaqueros sought after. They had crooked (rollers) and copper in the mouth pieces to help the horse's mouth stay moist and soft. They were always used with a leather curb strap as it was not meant to be a leverage bit, but a signal bit. Some used to tie a string from the halldown sack between the bit and the reins and in a days work without breaking it. Riding a horse straight up in the spade bit is like driving a Mercedes. It is the ultimate in a finely tuned, supremely responsive horse and that special bond, caring that an other training process can produce. The rear chains served several purposes as did most of their equipment. When the horses stood from a water trough while out checking the cows, it protected the headstall reins from getting wet. They also kept the shanks off of the reins. The weight of the chains caused a drag on the reins that was counterbalanced by the buttons that were tied on the 12-16" of the reins. When the rider picked up the reins, the horse could feel the pull coming and could respond before the slack was taken out of the reins. This greatly contributed to the very fast response any cue from the riders hands. The buttons on the reins could also keep the reins from the horse's neck off the reins, increasing their longevity and keeping the leather soft.

This training method was developed by the Spanish Vaquero and refined on the ranchos of early California. The Vaqueros had come up from Sonora Mexico with the padres to settle California. The missions were built, natives converted and cattle became the currency for the area. Great pride was taken in the gentle handling of the livestock and this could only be achieved by finely trained horses and cowboys. They had no clock and no calendars; every day was the same and there was lots of

time to train these horses. There was also an abundance of leather to braid hackamores along with reatas (rawhide lariats) and so a tradition was born.

### **The Hackamore**

Hackamore colts were started as 4 or 5 yr olds. Mecate was 22' long and made of mane hair (as that was softer than tail hair). Beveling leather for hackamores was very important so as not to scurf up their jaws, pliable was good. If the horse got heavy in the hands, the fix was to go to a softer lighter one. Today's horses are much finer and will not tolerate pain, so we must be very careful not to scurf them up. Fit the hackamore 2 finger widths above the nose cartilage (bump), underneath it should hang so it contacts the chin muscle first, then the chin bone. As you go to smaller hackamores, you can move up the nose, towards where the bosal will rest when the horse is in the 2 rein. The length of reins is about 1 full arm span, and the length of the hackamore is approximately 10" from nose button to heel know. If a horse got tough in a hackamore, there was always the hair hackamore to be used for a few days; that was prickly and demanded more respect.

Hackamore is a bit complex because when you pull the direct rein, the pressure actually comes from the opposite side of the jaw, so lots of time needs to be spent here until the horse sorts it out. When they learn to follow their nose, it's much closer to the neck rein then a snaffle would produce.

In those days there was infinite amount of time to train a horse, lots of miles, brush to steer around and plenty of jobs and miles. These were essential ingredients that made these horses some of the best trained animals the world has known.

## **The Snaffle Bit**

However, now we start our horses as 2 year olds and they need to compete as 3 year olds. There's not infinite amounts of time, miles and cattle. The snaffle is a simpler device requiring less time and skill. When you pull the direct rein (plow rein), the pull is direct and easily understandable. There's no worry of scurfing up the delicate jaw, so this is now used by many to start their colts as 2 yr olds and ride them through their 3 yr old year, before putting them in the hackamore for their 4 and 5 year old years.

## **The Two Rein**

As the horse becomes more educated, the hackamore gets smaller and soon it's time for the horse to start carrying a bit. This is put on over the smaller hackamore, now called a bosal. There are several ways to hold the 2 sets of reins, but idea is for the bosal reins to be used exclusively in the beginning, while gradually moving towards 50/50 with the bridle reins until, after a minimum of 1 year, the bridle reins are used exclusively.

## **Straight up in the Bridle**

That's when the horse is considered to be 'straight up in the bridle'. The Spanish bridle bits are very sophisticated works of art, made to balance perfectly in a horse's mouth to achieve the head position that the Vaqueros sought after. They had crickets (rollers) and copper in the mouth pieces to help the horse's mouth stay moist and soft. These bits were always used with a leather curb strap as it was not meant to be a leverage bit, but a signal bit. They used to tie a string from bulldurum sack between the bit and the reins and do a days work without breaking it.

The rein chains served several purposes, as did most of their equipment. When the horses drank from a water trough while out checking the cows, the chains protected the braided reins from getting wet. They also kept the slobber off of the reins (some call them slobber chains.) The weight of the chains caused a drape in the reins that was counter balanced by the reins having the “buttons” tied on them, so that when the rider picked up the reins, the horse could feel the pull coming and could respond before the slack was taken out of the reins. This greatly contributed to their very fast response to any cue from the rider’s hands. The buttons on the rein ends also kept the sweat from the horses neck off the reins, increasing their longevity and keeping the leather soft.

Riding a horse straight up in the spade bit is like driving a Maseratti. It is the ultimate in a finely tuned, supremely responsive horse, with that special head carriage that no other training process can produce.

### **More History**

**Father Kino** was a great horseman and breeder. He brought many families to settle in California from Pima Rea Alta, Sonora Mexico along with lots of cattle and the hardy but small Spanish Barb horses. The Anglos from the east later crossed their thoroughbreds on these small horses, which become the **Steeldust** line and later the Quarter horse. The cattle were branded for identification and ownership. By the mid 1700’s, California, which was once so isolated, started to see an influx of people. The Spaniards were forced to populate and distribute land or lose it. **De Anza** was to blaze a trail for settlement and in 1775 a large group of families, friars and cattle made their way north at 2-1/2mph for 1200 miles on The Devils Hwy in South Arizona. They made friends with the Indians in Yuma and learned where water and river crossings were and came up coastal California. The missions were established along the way, spaced 1 days walk apart for 650 miles. The

route was called **El Camino Real**. The Spanish government later gave land grants to settlers who could trace their origin to Spain.

In the early 1900's, The Mexican revolution upset trade between California and Mexico, so California was forced to trade with the English in the East. They were mostly interested in cow hides and tallow. Hides became known as "California Bank Notes." The remainder of the carcass (minus the prime cuts of beef) was then left to rot in large numbers and attracted a lot of grizzly bears. Roping grizzlies became a high stakes sport, requiring responsive horses and great roping skills. The ropes, called reatas, were made of braided rawhide. The hides were very important to the quality of the reata with an old, thin Jersey cow being the most sought after. The best tallow came from around the kidneys and was left in the sun until it liquefied. Cold beef liver was used to shine up the leather.

Being a good roper and rider was the top rung of ranch jobs. The **Vaquero** was Spanish, coming to California from Mexico, while the more Caucasian cowboys coming from Nevada became known as **Buckaroos**.

#### *Other equipment:*

**Spurs** to inform and demand precision, not to punish. They were as ornate as possible. Some had chains that jangled from them. The riders feet controlled the horses body and the hands controlled their face.

**Different bits and cheek pieces** i.e. **Las Cruces** has straight cheeks, **Half Breed** has no spoon but a straight mouth and a narrow high port. The Vaqueros put the bit in the side of the horses mouth where there were no teeth. **Spade** had very high port

**Tapaderos** protected the rider's feet from brush and usually had a long 'flag' of leather on them that could be waved at a cows face to haze it or shush one along.