Charro

In Spain, a **charro** is a native of the province of Salamanca, especially in the area of Alba de Tormes, Vitigudino, Ciudad Rodrigo and Ledesma. It is likely that the Mexican *charro* tradition derived from Spanish horsemen who came from Salamanca and settled in Jalisco.

In Mexico, **charro** is a term referring to a traditional horseman or cowboy of Mexico, originating in the State of Jalisco. In the rest of Mexico the equivalent term was "vaquero". In Texas, which defeated Mexico, and won its independence in 1836, "vaquero" was the term used by the Spanish speaking citizens of the new Republic. The term was also prevalent in what are now the U.S. states of California, Nevada, and New Mexico.

History of the American CowHorse

The modern horse was reintroduced to the Americas by the Spanish conquistadors. By the time the Spanish missionaries were making their way into California in the 1700s, the Spanish vaqueros (cowboys) were well established in other parts of America and came with them.

The King of Spain granted large tracts of land to loyal subjects, which were the basis for the "Californio" ranches and lifestyle common until the mid-1800s (and whose eventual owners were the source of the names of many California communities, including Irvine and Pacheco). These vast ranches raised range-bred beef for Mexican and other markets. The cattle were half-wild and dangerous, requiring a fast, well-trained horse that could intimidate an individual cow, turn it back from the herd, separate it for branding and other handling, and do it all effortlessly.

Over time, the "Californio" cowboy or *vaquero* developed a system of training working cow horses that became famous for its elegance, precision, and difficulty of training the horse. The roots of these methods are in European dressage, a system to train horses for war. Adopted by the pre-Moors and Moors in Spain, and transferred to the Spanish conquistadors, the Californio methods created horses so sensitive to their riders' signals they were known as "Hair-trigger" or "whisper" reined horses.[1]

At the time, a finished reining horse (as it was called) required at least seven years to train: three to four years to train the basics in a bosal hackamore, then at least a year carrying both the bosal and the high-ported spade bit (named for the spade-shaped port which was from 1-3" high) to help the horse learn how to carry the bit, then several years refining techniques in the spade until the horse was a "made" reining horse. The training could not be done by just any Californio, and reining horses were valuable because of the difficulty of training and scarcity.

A finished reining horse could be controlled and directed with minute movements of the fingers of the left hand, which hovered above the saddle horn. (Compare to the grazing-bit style of Western riding developed in Texas, where reins are split between the fingers and the hand moves in front of the saddle, controlling the horse by neck reining.) Because of the potential severity of the spade bit, chains added to the ends of the reins to balance the bit in the horse's mouth, and knotted and braided rawhide reins which prevented the reins from swinging unnecessarily, even at a lope, the "made" reining horse seemed to run, stop, spin and handle a cow on its own, with little communication from its rider.

For almost 150 years, the Californio's reined cow horse was famous throughout California and into the West. They helped work the huge herds of longhorn cattle driven from Mexico to California, and performed the day-to-day chores on the vast cattle ranches.

In the early-to-mid 1800s, the Gold Rush changed the complexion and future of California. The influx of newcomers into the Golden State helped to dissolve the vast cattle ranches of earlier days. On the ranches that did remain, modern livestock management techniques and machinery eventually eliminated much of the need for a well-trained, versatile working horse.

By the early 1900s, the reined cow horse had gone from being a necessity to a luxury, and there was little activity to sustain the history or background of this training tradition. Most ranchers were struggling to survive the Great Depression. This trend continued through World War II; few people had the time to be concerned with the history, the horses and the training programs of "the old days." Only a handful of horsemen who remembered the old Californios or worked with them on the remaining California ranchos learned the old ways of training a "made" reining horse.

Among those who maintained the tradition in its purest sense is Ed Connell, author of the definitive spade-bit reining horse training manuals *Hackamore Reinsman* and *Reinsman of the West.* Trained in the 1940s by some of the last of the original Californio reinsman, Connell recorded this knowledge that provide an overview of the methods of training a "made" spade-bit horse resembling the famous horses of the past.

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