



## ELP and ESP Station Handout Vaquero

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this handout is to teach you how to lead the Vaquero Station on your ELP or ESP day. You will learn about vaqueros and the hide and tallow trade at Sutter's Fort in 1840s, Mexican California. Through the Vaquero Station, your students will learn and connect with the past by exploring the complexities of 1840's life. There are many possible hands-on activities at this station, such as making your own cattle brand symbol, leather working, or lassoing cattle.

### HISTORY

Raising cattle was John Sutter's most profitable business. When Sutter arrived in Mexican California in 1839, there were at least 70 ranchos in California that were involved in the hide and tallow trade. Sutter acquired his cattle from a few different ranchos along the coast. When Sutter purchased Fort Ross from the Russian American Fur Company in 1841, he acquired roughly 2,700 head of cattle. By 1846, Sutter had over 10,000 cattle. Heinrich Lienhard, one of Sutter's clerks, wrote that five or six cattle would be slaughtered each day to feed Sutter's workforce. Depending on the harvest season for the agricultural crops, Sutter had 200 to 300 workers. Excess meat could be dried and sold to sailors on ships. However, beef was not as valuable as the hides and tallow.

Raising cattle was an important part of the Mexican California economy because hides and tallow were so valuable. Tallow, which is rendered beef fat, was generally stored in a rawhide bag sewn with the hair side out, averaging 25lbs., called an arroba. Tallow was used to make candles, soap, hide dressing, water proofing, lubrication, and a base for some medicinal salves. Hides and bags of tallow were like currency. California, during this time, was a bartering economy, and cow hides were known as the California bank note. Hides had a value from \$1.50 to \$2.50.

The Industrial Revolution created a demand for leather (hide) belts to turn the wheels and conveyors on equipment. Trading vessels from New England visited the shores of California to trade for hides and tallow and took them to industrialized cities. Later, a demand for beef increased because of the discovery of gold in 1848. During the Gold Rush, tens of thousands of people from all over the world, descended upon California. Cattle ranching continued to be an important industry and vaqueros evolved into an icon of the American West.



## THE PEOPLE

**Vaquero** is the Spanish name for someone who cares for cattle, a “cowboy.” The story of the vaquero begins with the Spanish. The Spanish Conquistadores brought with them cattle and horses which were two important elements in a vaquero’s life. California supplied vaqueros with ample land to raise their cattle. California grasslands were created by a variety of environmental conditions, including wildfires. Besides wildfires, California Indians deliberately set fires to manage the natural environment. Fires burned freely, consuming vegetation. This destruction returned nutrients to the soil and healthy vegetation, including grass, sprouted up in the fires path. These grasslands were ideal for raising great herds of cattle. Sutter needed vaqueros to manage his herds of livestock and most vaqueros at Sutter’s Fort were California Indians from the local Miwok tribes. Some California Indians were forced care for cattle during the Mission Era and became skilled vaqueros and brought that knowledge to Sutter’s Fort.

### Some of John Sutter’s Vaqueros

**Bruno:** Eastern Miwok- He was a trusted vaquero and was one of Sutter’s lancers who accompanied Sutter whenever he left the Fort. Bruno served in Company H of the California Battalion during the Mexican-American War.

**Democrates:** Eastern Miwok - He was a vaquero and was listed as the Orderly Sergeant for the Indian Infantry in Sutter’s 1845 army. He was also one of Sutter’s mounted bodyguards.

**Olimpio:** Eastern Miwok – He was appointed Mayor Domo of the vaqueros on July 20, 1847 over John Canaca, as mentioned in the New Helvetia Diary. He learned the vaquero skills at the mission at San Jose. Olimpio was often dispatched to different villages to bring in workers and he served as a guide to important visitors and courier for important mail. He accompanied Sutter to the gold fields and transported gold to Sonoma. In 1848, Olimpio was made Keeper-of-the-keys for the Fort.

**Salvador:** Eastern Miwok - He was a vaquero and was probably one of Sutter’s mounted lancers who guarded him on trips outside the Fort’s walls.

**Yustino:** Eastern Miwok - He was a vaquero and was probably one of Sutter’s lancers who guarded him on journeys.

**Harry:** He and his wife Manuiki came with Sutter to California from the Sandwich Islands, the original party who founded New Helvetia. He was an experienced sailor. Worked as a vaquero at the Fort and became Mayor Domo. Eventually, Sutter put him in charge of the California Indian workers at Hock Farm.

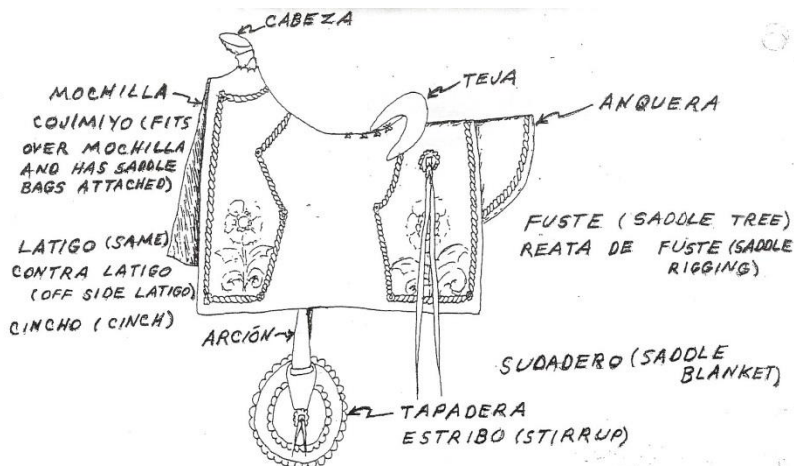
## The Life and Work of the Vaquero

The vaqueros cared for their horses and trained them to be tools to help care for cattle. They cared for their cattle by leading them to lush grass and protecting them from bears and other wild animals. Once a year, the vaqueros round up the cattle to separate the cattle from the different ranches, brand them, count them, harvest the hides and tallow from those that are ready, and herd the others to new grasslands. These roundups usually involved vaqueros from several ranchos and were large social events as well as work parties. The vaqueros would show off their riding, roping, and cattle handling skills. They would hold competitions and award prizes. These roundups became known as **rodeos**.

## The Tools of the Vaquero

### Montura or Silla (Saddle)

The vaquero's saddle was made of wood which was covered with wet, untanned (raw) cowhide. The rawhide would shrink around the wood and become very hard as it dried. This gave the saddle great strength. Finally, the saddle was covered with tanned leather which often had beautiful geometric and flower designs stamped into it. The tanned leather part of the saddle is called the **mochilla**. The saddle had a knob or **cabeza**, later called a horn, at the front, and the vaquero would use the knob to hold his **lazo** (lasso) after roping a cow. The western saddle that we use today is made the same way except for some minor changes.



### Reata (Lasso or Lariat)

The vaquero always carried a rope, or **reata**, tied to his saddle. It was usually about 80 feet long and carefully made out of four strips of rawhide braided together. The reata was mostly used for catching cattle and horses. Cattle were often caught by two vaqueros working together. One vaquero would rope the cow by the neck or horns and the other

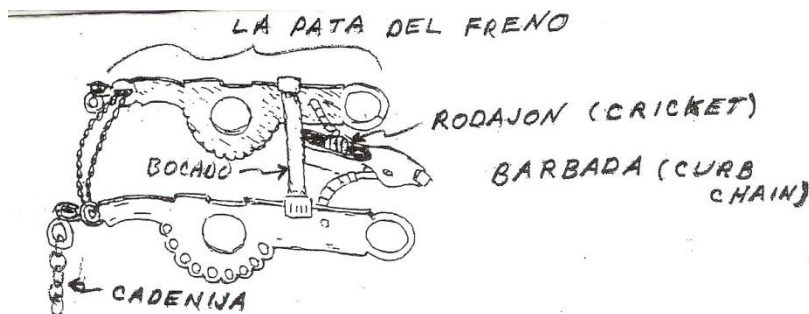
would catch the hind legs. This is still done on ranches and in rodeos today and is called **team roping** or **heading and heeling**.

The reata could be used as a weapon to kill bears which preyed on the cattle. In addition, it was used in warfare and proved very effective against the American Army during the Mexican-American War. Vaqueros took great pride in their skill with a reata and they would spend a lot of time practicing using it.



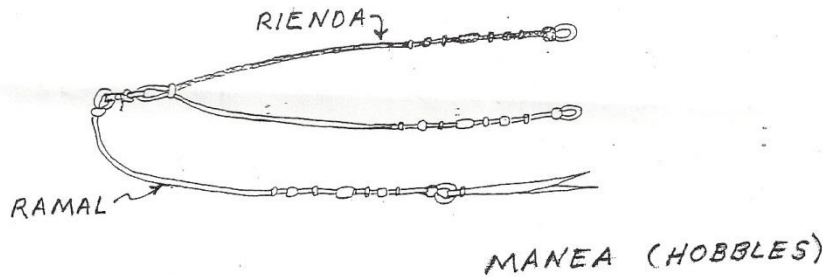
### **Freno (Bit)**

The California vaquero used a type of curb bit called a spade bit on their horses. It was typical of the California vaquero, but was almost never seen outside the territories worked by the Californios. It is generally thought to have been developed in California, but the technology may have come from Spain. The California spade bit, often called the Santa Barbara spade bit, was usually finely crafted and ornamental, and was often richly decorated with silver.



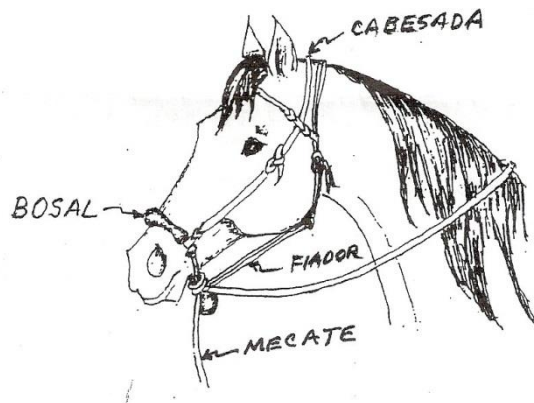
### **Riendas (Reins)**

Reins were usually braided from rawhide like the reata. The California style rienda was a single rein forming a loop going from one side of the bit to the other. It had a whip-like piece called a **ramal** attached to it. The rein was attached to the bit with chains



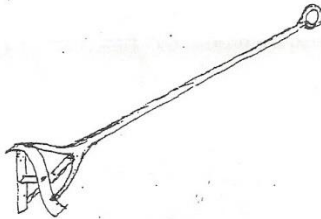
### **Bosal or Jaquima and Mecatē (Bosal or Hackamore and Macarty)**

The California vaquero often used a braided rawhide loop called a **bosal**, which was wrapped around a horse's nose. This was especially used on young horses to avoid hurting their mouths with the iron bit. A rope, usually made of horsehair and called a **mecate** was tied to the bosal and used as reins. English speaking cowboys called this rope a macarty.



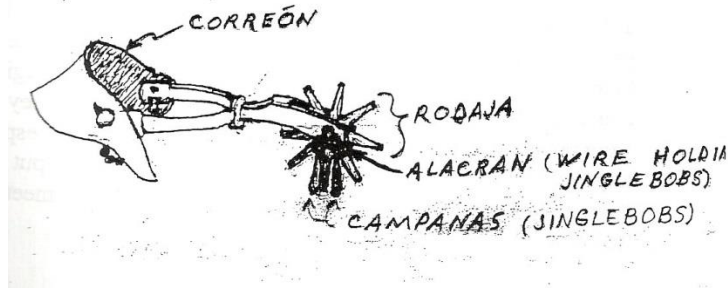
### **Hierro (Branding Iron)**

The vaqueros marked their horses and cattle with a branding iron to identify the owner of the livestock. The brands were often very artistic in design and symbolic of the family or rancho of the vaquero.



### **Espuelas (Spurs)**

The California vaquero almost always wore very large spurs when riding. The spurs usually had clappers that would strike the rowels, creating a musical tinkling sound as the vaquero rode along on his horse; they were often decorated with silver.



### **La Reata - Continued**

It was usually about eighty feet long, and braided from four strands of untanned cowhide. Untanned (raw) cowhide is heavy, and it becomes hard and stiff as it dries. A rawhide rope, therefore, has the qualities of having sufficient weight to be thrown into the wind from a galloping horse, and sufficient stiffness to hold a loop open as it flies through the air. The reata enabled the vaquero to handle cattle and horses running over large expanses of unfenced land.

### **How a Reata is made:**

- Step 1: A fresh cowhide, preferably from a thin animal, is staked out on the ground. It is allowed to dry until it becomes slightly firm, and can be easily cut.
- Step 2: A continuous strip, approximately 3/4" wide, is cut from the hide, beginning at the center.
- Step 3: The strip is stretched out between two trees, or posts, and the hair is shaved off with a knife.
- Step 4: The strip is cut into 1/4" wide thongs. This may be done by running the strip between a nail and a sharp knife stuck in a piece of wood 1/4" apart.
- Step 5: The thongs are softened slightly by running them between three nails set in a block of wood.
- Step 6: The thongs may be skived down to an even thickness. This may be done with a blade set into a block of wood.
- Step 7: The hair side edges of the thongs are shaved off this may be done with a sharp knife set at all angle in a block of wood.
- Step 8: The thongs are tied up into four balls. This may be done by tying the thongs in half hitches over short sticks.



Step 9: The thongs are coated with tallow, soap, or cactus juice as they are braided in four strands over a core consisting of a 1/8" wide rawhide string. Each plait of the braid is forcefully pulled tight.

Step 10: A **honda**, or eye, is attached or tied at one end of the reata.

Step 11: The new reata is stretched out between two trees or posts, and it is twisted through a forked stick which is run *up* and down its length to soften and even out its texture. It is left stretched out until completely dry.

Note: The biggest secret to braiding rawhide is probably working it at the right texture or firmness. This is done by adjusting its moisture content. It should not be too wet. Putting it in a dampened burlap bag works well for achieving the right moisture content.

## **THE FORT**

In the original Fort, there was not a vaquero room as represented today. The room represents the vaquero barracks that was located outside the Fort's walls. For the Vaquero station, you are welcome to utilize the room as part of your presentation. There are many items in the room that can be shown but please be respectful of the artifacts and the display in the room.

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTIVITIES**

1. Have the equipment available for students to view and handle, including placing the saddle on the saddle stand and placing the reata and mecaté in the proper location. Other equipment the students can handle are the cattle brands, spurs, powder horn, and cow hide. You can discuss the differences in the saddles on display and have the students guess what the most important vaquero tools there are in the room.
2. Have students practice braiding with leather thongs or bootlaces.
3. Have scraps of leather and tools for students to practice stamping and decorating leather, possibly making leather conchos and stamping them with letters or a brand such as Sutter's. The Fort provides stamping tools and wooden hammers to use. Consult the resource list for places to get leather fobs for leather working.

## **Making the Leather Keychains**

The tools to use are located in the ELP storeroom. To use these tools consult with the ELP Coordinator. If not already purchased as shaped pieces of leather, cut the leather into the desired shape that you want for keychains. It is best to do this before your ELP or ESP day. On the morning of your ELP, get the leather tools from the ELP Storeroom. You will need to soak the pieces of leather for about 30 seconds to a minute to soften the



leather. This will make it easier to strike the symbols into the keychain. NOTE: Please use rawhide or wooden mallets for leather working, not regular hammers.



Sample of keychains



Leatherworking tool box and mallets

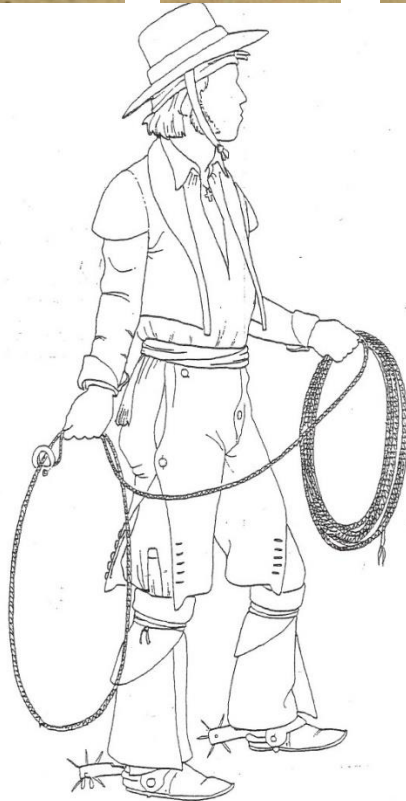
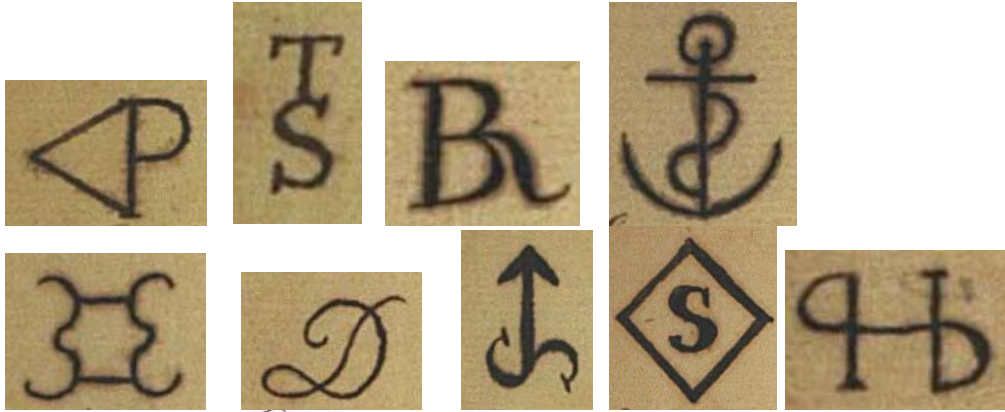
4. Show the students how the reata was thrown and let them do it.



Photos are of a wooden bull's head on a straw bale. This can be used to show lassoing. The Fort provides the straw bale, bull's head, and lassos.

5. Combine with vaquero station with the rope making station and let the students make their own mecaté. See Rope Making station handout for further information.
6. Have the students design their own cattle brand. This could be something the students include in their journal. Have them use their initials and possibly shapes to design their brand. Below are some of the brands that are listed in a brand book that Sutter kept, which is now in the Sutter's Fort Archives.





Example of traditional/work clothes of a vaquero

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