

ZORRO: Fictional swashbuckler has local grains of truth

EDITOR'S NOTE: The Sentinel is celebrating its 150th year in 2006 by reaching into our archives to republish some noteworthy stories out of the past. The following article was printed in the Santa Cruz Sentinel on August 26, 1998.

By **DAN WHITE**
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

Tiburcio Vasquez and Joaquin Murieta never left the blazing mark of "Z" on Santa Cruz County. These famous bandits were swaggering hellraisers, not heroes.

But some historians believe Vasquez — who once shot a Santa Cruz constable — and Murieta, who allegedly boozed it up in brothels near Watsonville, inspired Johnston McCulley's "Zorro" creation almost 80 years ago.

'The Mask of Zorro' also has another local connection — the creepy captain named Love, based on San Lorenzo Valley resident Harry Love, 'The Black Knight of Zayante' and namesake of the Love Creek settlement.

Stories of these rogues' exploits in Santa Cruz County are hard to square with the legend of Zorro, the wholesome imaginary swordsman who fought injustice in early California.

But Santa Cruz historian Phil Reader said these two 19th century robbers may be the real men behind the mask.

And the latest Zorro film, "The Mask of Zorro," also has another local connection — the creepy captain named Love, who was based on a real San Lorenzo Valley resident.

Harry Love was known as "The Black Knight of Zayante" and was namesake of the Love Creek settlement.

Like the legend of Zorro itself, the legacies of the two robbers contain a load of made-up fluff, with just enough grains of truth to keep scholars guessing.

On Thursday, Reader sat upstairs at the

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McPherson Center for Art and History in downtown Santa Cruz, leafing through a bulky book about lawmen and outlaws. The dapper Vasquez stared smugly from one page. Murieta, in a painting based solely on myth, shouted vengeance, straddling a rearing horse.

"Like Jesse James, the facts get distorted," Reader said as he looked at the pictures and turned the page. "After a while, reality becomes less interesting."

The reality is probably a lot raunchier than the glorified versions that ended up influencing "Zorro." Vasquez proved just how un-Zorro-like he could be during his 1871 attack on Santa Cruz.

Vasquez and his gang road into town, ostensibly to spring relative and fellow bandit Narcisio from the county jail. "They got pretty well liquored up before the raid," Reader said.

Tiburcio was remarkably incautious, considering he'd just done hard time in San Quentin. His obligations to Narcisio were shoved on the back burner when the Vasquez gang neared an Ocean Street brothel and gave in to lust.

"They decided to have a good time and then spring Narcisio," Reader said.

But the madam, identified in one newspaper account as one "Madame Peanuts," knew they were bad news and turned them

away. This provoked a mini-riot.

Tiburcio and his two cohorts rode around shooting out all the windows. A cap and ball hit the madam's corset, knocking her down but leaving her uninjured, Reader said. "If they'd killed her, it would have been a scandal, with all those city fathers in the brothel at the time."

Later, in a shootout that evening, they wounded a Santa Cruz constable who tried to stand them down with no back-up. Thinking they'd killed the lawman, the three men rode away, shooting up the old Flatiron Building as they passed. Reader said he discovered a plank with bullets in it while the Flatiron was being demolished after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

But Vasquez was as foxy as Zorro, and larger than life even in his own time. It was well known that writer McCulley loved the old bandido myths, and Vasquez's story was the most notorious of all.

The latest of the Zorro movies, "The Mask of Zorro," starring Antonio Banderas and Anthony Hopkins, adds even more fuel to these local legends by including real-life characters with Santa Cruz County links. In fact, the film features possible Zorro inspiration Joaquin Murieta. The film makers depict Murieta as Zorro's brother instead of Zorro himself.

Murieta is believed to be a bandit who terrorized the California gold fields in the 1850s, though some are convinced "Joaquin Murieta" was just a convenient label

pinned on dozens of different robbers. That would account for Murieta's Zorro-like skill at being everywhere at once.

Reader said stories link the bandit to the tumble-down neighborhood of Whiskeytown, where Freedom now stands.

"It's the kind of place where you could get a bottle of whiskey and a woman," Reader said. There used to be 30 or 40 bars there. They knew Murieta well."

In the latest Zorro movie, Joaquin Murieta is stalked by a character named Harrison Love, who is trying to collect reward money for killing off the bandit. In the film, Love wounds Murieta, who commits suicide rather than face death at the hands of the sadistic captain.

In a rage, Love decapitates the dead man, and later slices off the hand of Murieta's comrade, the legendary Manuel Garcia, aka Three Fingers Jack.

In real life, Love really did claim that he killed the men in 1853, dismembering and decapitating them. Love even pickled his grisly trophies in a big jar of whiskey or brandy, as shown in the movie.

Conflicting news reports hold that the head was kept in a Wild West museum or perhaps a saloon in San Francisco, only to be lost either in the 1890s or possibly the 1906 earthquake, according to the book, "The Real Joaquin Murieta," by Remi Nadeau.

But the truth about the body parts remains as murky as the alcohol that embalmed them. Even at the time, journalists suspected that the head and hand were part of a money-

making scheme.

In fact, an 1856 version of the Santa Cruz Sentinel published a story that Murieta had "returned from Mexico," that he had been seen "by a man who knew him," and that his gang was still stealing horses in the Pajaro Valley.

Despite the Sentinel, Love still gained \$5,000 for his alleged killing of Murieta and then used this "blood money" to set up a local timbering operation in the San Lorenzo Valley. The ill-fated Love Creek settlement, partly buried in one of California's worst landslides in 1982, is named for Love's water-powered sawmill.

This area is also the backdrop for Love's untimely death.

Love, in 1867, became jealous of a man he felt was paying undue attention to his wife, the famously homely Widow Bennett. He tried to ambush the couple at his Zayante rancho. The alleged lover shot back and hit Love, who later died in surgery after his arm was amputated at the shoulder.

The movie's Love connection is unassailable. But the identity of the "real Zorro" is tougher to prove, largely because McCulley created such a mishmash hero, and never explicitly defined the time period. Sandra Curtis wrote in her new book, "Zorro Unmasked."

The McCulley never mentioned either bandit as influences. Still, the similarities are intriguing. Both Zorro and his nasty counterparts have good looks, swagger, astonishing success with women, a foxlike

ability to sneak up on people and hide for years at a stretch. Reader also said members of those old gangs used false and colorful names like Zorro — The Fox, in Spanish.

And, like Zorro, Vasquez and Murieta have been written up as folk heroes representing the underdog.

In Zorro's case, this meant sticking up for oppressed Mexican people. In the case of the bandits, it meant resistance to the "gringo" domination of old California.

In one account, Murieta is the victim of American toughs who raped his wife and told him that "greasers aren't allowed to mine gold from American soil." Vasquez also showed his populist credentials by bragging that he could mobilize troops to push back the gringos.

Other Zorro-Vasquez-Murieta evidence is more anecdotal. It is well known that one of the early screen Zorros, Douglas Fairbanks Sr., was obsessed with Vasquez. And Murieta was subject to a fictionalized account that rewrote him as a character who, like Zorro, was a nobleman with a swashbuckling alter ego.

If nothing else, all of these stories all share at least one major theme in common: They are tasty mixtures of real-life excesses with made-up fluff.

As author Remi Nadeau wrote in his Murieta biography, "One man's legend is another man's fact. Between these two extremes lies an intriguing gray area."

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