

History

# Caballeros on spirited steeds gave Rodeo Gulch its name

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**R**ODEO GULCH didn't get its name by accident or because someone had a romantic or far-fetched notion.

The area happened to be where Spanish and Mexican ranchers of Santa Cruz Mission days assembled their herds for rodeos.

And please, please! pronounce that musical Spanish word as "ro-day-o" with the emphasis on the "day."

Rodeo means a "gathering." Arroyo del Rodeo Rancho, a Mexican Land Grant of approximately 1,500 acres, was given to Francisco Rodriguez in 1834. The gatherings there were for various purposes: to sort out the cattle herds that got tangled while roaming, to brand them, to slaughter them for their hides and tallow (not meat), and sometimes a gathering was just for fun, to test the skills of the caballero.

Stars of the rodeos were the caballeros and vaqueros and there have rarely been horsemen to equal them. The Californios rode their horses everywhere — except to bed. From birth to death they were at home in the saddle.

Within a few days of birth babies were taken on horseback from the family's rancho to the nearest mission for baptism. The clip-clop of horses' hooves was music in their ears for the rest of their lives. When a boy reached the age of 4 or 5 he was put into the saddle on his own horse and by the time he was 10 he was an expert horseman.

This wasn't all for fun and games. Horses were an economic necessity for Spanish Californians. Rancho land grants included thousands of acres and the cattle also numbered in the thousands. There were no fences and the half-wild animals ranged for miles.

Just for example, General Mariano Vallejo had unlimited grazing land in the Sonoma area for his 12,000 head of cattle, his 7,000 head of horse and 2,000 sheep.

**S**ANTA CRUZ MISSION herds roamed at will between the Pajaro Valley north to Año Nuevo, with Indian herdsmen keeping an eye out for grizzlies and mountain lions. The local mission was started in 1791 with 30 cows that, 35 years later, had multiplied into nearly 4,000. Thirty horses had increased to a herd of 900 by 1828.

It is recorded that grizzlies often sat up on the hill above the mission waiting for an unguarded moment in which to snatch a calf, lamb or piglet.



An impressive figure, *El Caballero* rides through town.

M. Koch collection

## A glance at history

Hides and tallow were big business with sailing ships calling to take on great loads, which were carried out through the surf by workmen, loaded into small boats that then delivered them to the ship. No wharf in those days. The hides were dried stiff and hard. The tallow was rendered, poured while liquid into bags or "botas" of hide, then allowed to cool and harden.

Actually, the first animals introduced into Alta California by the Spaniards were mules and horses driven north from Mexico with the Portola Party in 1769. In 1774, a second herd of horses, mules and cattle, came with the Anza Party. Until those years, the Ohlone Indians had never seen horses or cows.

The Ohlones learned fast. The mounted herdsmen who guarded the flocks — usually Indians — were called *vaqueros* (cow-men.)

**H**OWEVER, THE caballeros were the gentlemen on horseback and they dressed the part. The full Spanish-American costume worn daily, included a broad-brimmed sombrero, sometimes decorated with embroidery, braid and glitter; a short jacket also lavished with embroidery and silver buttons; wool or buckskin trousers slashed up the sides and decorated with more silver buttons and fancy lacings. His saddle was often inlaid with silver and embossed with intricate designs. His silver spurs were long and wicked and you could hear him coming. The bit in his horse's mouth was silver, and the *tapaderos* (leather guards that protected his feet in the stirrups) were silver-trimmed. He jingled and jangled when he walked but he didn't walk very often or very far. It wasn't fitting

for a caballero to walk when he had his horse tied at the front gate, ready to go.

The caballero's horse was a trained animal, often of Arabian blood, delicate of leg and head but wiry and spirited, strong, and most important — intelligent.

Col. Albert Evans, who toured California, including Santa Cruz County, in the 1860s, described a "fiery little pinto horse with the artificial pasear gait, trotting with forelegs and galloping with the hind ones." Many were highly trained animals, the pride of their owner.

One Santa Cruz teen-ager got into serious trouble over a horse. In an act of malicious mischief the teen-ager cut off the mane and tail of a fine saddle horse owned by a local caballero. The year was 1847. The presiding local *alcalde* (judge) was William Blackburn, a man of few words and strong opinions. Apparently, Judge Blackburn respected the old law demanding an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. He heard the evidence then ordered the teen-ager to suffer a head-shaving in public — right in front of the judge's office.

Main tool of the vaquero and the caballero was a braided rope of hair and hide called a *reata* (ree-atta). He carried it coiled neatly, fastened to his saddle, and with it he could rope and throw almost any animal, including man. Two or three ropers working together could capture and immobilize a grizzly bear.

**R**ODEO TIME was also show-off time for the caballero in all his finery. Rodeo Gulch was the scene of many exciting contests of skill as well as the usual roping, branding and slaughtering. There were horse races; also a contest in which the caballero at full gallop leaned down to pick up a coin or a handkerchief from the ground. He could light his cigarillo at a full gallop.

"Carrera del gallo" was another test of his skill. A live rooster was buried in the earth with only its head above ground. The caballero started at a gallop from about 60 yards away, leaned down and grabbed the unlucky fowl as he dashed past. He risked life and limb in this and other daring contests.

On summer evenings the caballero even courted his lady love from horseback, serenading with guitar outside her window, or perhaps merely exchanging warm and meaningful looks with her as he circled the town plaza — on horseback of course, and she walked demurely with her dueña.