

# SJC Vaqueros - The Real Cowboys

By Jerry Nieblas, as told to Janice Pickartz

*Editor's note: As a pre-Mission descendant of the Juaneno Band of Mission Indians and two early Californio Rancho families, Jerry Nieblas has been invited to share the accurate, factual story of the Juanenos' historical connection to San Juan Capistrano and the Mission San Juan Capistrano.*

The vaqueros of San Juan Capistrano were magnificent men. Many were descendants of the original Portola Expedition from Spain - this expedition accompanied St. Junipero Serra from Spain to Mexico and into California. With an

overpowering simplicity and gentle, humble spirits, these dignified men embraced and radiated a work ethic comparable to none.



*SJC Vaqueros ending their workday, bringing in the last of the cattle to the Rancho*

*Photo courtesy of San Juan Historical Society*

their hats to the ladies to say hello and occasionally enjoyed spirits from the local watering hole. Early Californio barbecuing by the vaqueros was a perfected craft as well. The weekends meant large family gatherings, barbecues and Mass on Sunday morning. Beef, lamb, pork, Spanish rice, Spanish beans, Sonora style tortillas and regional Capistrano sarsa (salsa) was enjoyed.

But, no matter how "enjoyable" Friday and Saturday had been, you could hear the vaqueros come in to early Sunday morning Mass by the rolling sound of their spurs on the tile floor, dressed in their best, going to sit in the back pews of St. Serra Chapel.

A handful of vaqueros also worked at the Old Mission when the seasons changed, taking very little pay because of the sense of pride in giving back to the very place they were connected to...In the 1800's there was a great drought and food shortage - the Old Mission was running out of food. Rancho Yorba had the vaqueros cut some of their best cattle out of what was left of their best stock. The beef was brought to the Mission to feed the community. As an expression

Their heritage was Mestizo. A combination of Juaneno, Early Californio Spanish and Mexican. And, they were the men who kept the ranchos, cattle and land, prosperous and thriving.

The vaqueros only rode working, stock quarter horses. They would say that choosing the right horse meant staring in the horse's eyes and breathing in his nostrils. And, if the horse returned the same, an instant bond was born. The connection between horse to rider and rider to horse was unbreakable. A formidable team, bonded for life.

While they worked from sun up to sun down, daily, in all weather conditions, late Friday afternoons were sometimes spent in town. These gentlemen always smiled and tipped



*Master Vaqueros rounding up stray cattle*

*Photo courtesy of San Juan Historical Society*

of gratitude, the Mission gave Rancho Yorba chapel, the statue of St. Antonio from the Great Stone Church. From then on, the chapel was called San Antonio Chapel. The statue was kept above the main altar and remained there until the chapel could no longer be used. It was then donated by the Yorba Family to the Bowers Museum - for years it was on display in a place of honor. Physically and spiritually, the vaqueros, the Missions and the Ranchos stayed joined and committed, taking care of each other.



*Rancho Vaqueros on their working stock quarter horses, branding cattle*

*Photo courtesy of San Juan Historical Society*

Here are just a few of the good and honorable men that worked the Ranchos, the lands, and the herds until their last breath: the Avila men, Doc & Charlie Belardes, John Changala, Viejo Magel, the Manriquez men, Cecelio Martinez, Francisco Nieblas, the Olivares men, Damian Rios (Master Trainer of the Rancho stock quarter horses), the Serrano men, Malcolm Stewart and Chapo Valenzuela. On The Feast of St. Joseph & Swallows Day, all the vaquero men were there but one, in particular stood out on that day...Chapo Valenzuela would ride onto the Mission



*Cattle de-horning by Rancho Vaqueros*  
*Photo courtesy of San Juan Historical Society*

grounds, overflowing with San Juan Capistrano families, Mission nuns & priests, and many visitors. With Mission bells joyously ringing, he rode his white horse, dressed in Early Californio Spanish attire, carrying the banner of St. John of Capistrano. He would then present the banner to one of the historical women of the town - they were also dressed in their Early Californio Spanish attire. The banner led a great religious procession throughout the Mission grounds. Then, the Fiesta Los Golondrinas that sometimes lasted for days, would begin.

A new English style has attempted to replace rich San Juan Capistrano's vaquero history. But that will never happen. In a recent city council meeting, an audience member dared to categorize the horse community of San Juan Capistrano as "owning 1.5 houses, 2.5 cars and 3 horses." Capistrano's real horsemen will never be referred to as equestrians - such an assumption is an insult...These real horsemen didn't need money, they didn't abuse the land. They were proud and honorable men. They were greater horsemen than the Spanish who taught them, becoming vaqueros who were second to none. And, though the vaqueros themselves have sadly disappeared, most of them rest in peace in the Old Mission Historic Cemetery and their enduring spirits live on...in the Rancho lands, the adobes and their descendants who still call San Juan Capistrano, home.

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