

# Notes, Documents, and Queries

## The First American Rodeo Never Happened

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For the past thirty years, sport historians, rodeo historians, and writers for such diverse publications as the *Guinness Book of World Records*, and Official Programs of New Mexico's annual Rodeo de Santa Fe, have contended that the first American Rodeo took place in Santa Fe, New Mexico in June of 1847.<sup>1</sup> From this convenient date, the sport is usually described as having passed quite naturally from the Mexican vaqueros to the American cowboys in the course of their ranching chores. The sole source for this information is a letter allegedly written by the nineteenth-century novelist, Captain Mayne Reid, to his friend Samuel Arnold in Ireland. According to Westermeir, one of only two writers claiming to have seen the actual manuscript.<sup>2</sup> Reid's "eyewitness account" reads exactly as follows:

Santa Fe, 10th June, 1847.

The town from which I write is quaint and of the Spanish style of building and reposes in a great land kissed by the southern sun. You have cows in old Ireland, but you never saw cows. Yes, millions of them here, I am sure, browsing on the sweet long grass of ranges that roll from horizon to horizon. At this time of year the cowmen have what is called the round-up, when the calves are branded and the fat beasts selected to be driven to a fair hundreds of miles away.

This round-up is a great time for the cowhands, a Donneybrook fair it is indeed. They contest with each other for the best roping and throwing, and there are horse races and whiskey and wines. At night in the clear moonlight there is much dancing on the streets.<sup>3</sup>

I have been unable to determine exactly how or when Reid's letter first came to the attention of the historians. No books about Reid or his works mention either the letter or the manuscript collection from which it reportedly came.<sup>4</sup> Steele, author of the most recent scholarly work about Reid, was not familiar with these items until I contacted her in September, 1981. Our efforts to locate the original letter have been unsuccessful but are continuing.<sup>5</sup>

The earliest reference to Reid's letter appears to be Westermeir's 1947 rodeo history, *Man, Beast, Dust*, 6 which has been used by most later writers. Apparently, none of these writers who have cited or quoted from Reid's letter has ever questioned Westermeir's accuracy or his interpretation of the manu-

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script. All who refer to the Santa Fe rodeo use the words New Mexico in their discussion, but those words do not appear in or on Mayne Reid's letter as published by Westermeir or Robb.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Westermeir's discussion of the letter contains a glaring typographical error, indicating a date of 1874 rather than 1847.<sup>8</sup> Despite the fact that Westermeir gives the correct date in the direct quotation, and that his discussion clearly indicates that he is referring to 1847, as when he states: "Some twenty-five years *later* . . . on the Fourth of July, 1872 . . ."<sup>9</sup> [italics mine], at least two articles on rodeo history repeat the erroneous date.<sup>10</sup>

These inconsistencies and repeated errors, along with other pieces of conflicting evidence uncovered in conjunction with another study, led to a complete reexamination of Reid's letter. The results clearly indicate that this document has been misinterpreted, and that the real origins of American rodeo have yet to be determined.

Nineteenth-century Santa Fe was familiar to Americans from the writings of explorers and geographers, as well as Santa Fe traders and their wives.<sup>11</sup> It became better known after the outbreak of the Mexican War in 1846. On August 18th of that year, United States troops commanded by Col. Stephen W. Kearny made a peaceful entry into Santa Fe and raised the Stars and Stripes over the Governor's Palace.<sup>12</sup> However, the peaceful conquest was soon followed by months of insurrection, and in early 1847, the first American Governor, Charles Bent, was murdered and scalped.<sup>13</sup> Santa Fe remained under martial law until the ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo which ended the war and ceded the territory of New Mexico to the United States, February 2, 1848.<sup>14</sup>

Several of the American soldiers stationed at Santa Fe added their recollections to the literature describing social, economic, and aesthetic characteristics of the town.<sup>15</sup> These works and those previously mentioned are remarkably similar. Most writers estimated the population at thirty-five to forty-five hundred, and over ninety-percent Spanish-speaking. The economy was dependent upon sheep raising and various aspects of the Santa Fe trade. Popular pastimes included dancing and gambling. Although numerous festivals were described, I found no account or description of any activity resembling the round-up described in Mayne Reid's letter.

The absence of roundups may be explained by the fact that there really was no cattle ranching in New Mexico at the time; goat's milk was much more readily available than cow's milk.<sup>16</sup> Sheep raising was a major source of income for the area, and continued to be for many years.<sup>17</sup> In his landmark work, *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest*, published in 1874, Joseph G. McCoy described the cattle business in Texas, Wyoming, Colorado, Kansas and several other states, but mentioned only sheep ranches in New Mexico.<sup>18</sup>

A significant reason for the absence of cattle ranches around Santa Fe was the lack of sufficient grazing areas. The following descriptions by two members of the United States Army which occupied Santa Fe in 1846-47, are typical. Cooke described his arrival in Santa Fe as follows:

. . . we approached the 'city.' At the foot or at the extremity of a main ridge of the Rocky Mountains, in the midst of a gray barren country without grass, and in the sandy flat valley of a mountainous stream, there it was, like a very extensive brick yard indeed.<sup>19</sup>

Edwards addressed the problem of grazing pastures more directly:

Although Gregg, in his work *Commerce of the Prairies* speaks of the valley of Santa Fe as a fine grazing spot, we found it just the contrary, there being not any grass for twenty miles; and we were obliged to send our horses as far as Galisteo to find a sufficiency.<sup>20</sup>

He went on to note that the army finally began sending their horses to Bent's Farm north of Taos where there was plenty of grass. This was an inconvenient solution as Bent's Farm was over one hundred miles from Santa Fe.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Bent's Farm was in Colorado.

It is difficult to imagine where in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Mayne Reid might have stood to see those millions of cows grazing on sweet long grass that stretched from horizon to horizon. It is also difficult to locate a fair to which Santa Fe cattle might reasonably have been driven for market. The nearest such fair at the time was in Chihuahua, Mexico, in the very heart of the Northern Mexican cattle-ranching country.<sup>22</sup>

None of the writers surveyed used the terms "quaint" or "Spanish-style" or any synonyms for these terms, in their descriptions of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Edwards, who arrived there with Col. Keamy on August 18, 1846, had the following reaction:

Our first view of this place was very discouraging. Although much larger than any we had seen yet, still there were the same mud walls and roofs and the accompaniments of dirt, pigs, and naked children. . . .

The city of Santa Fe, although spread over a large extent of grounds, is very thinly inhabited; and with the exception of the buildings around the public plaza, consists only of scattered huts, surrounded by large fields of Indian corn. On one side of the public square . . . stands the governor's palace. It is the only building in the whole city having glazed windows.<sup>23</sup>

Reid himself, in his semi-autobiographical novel the *Scalp Hunters*, described Santa Fe this way:

We stroll through the town. It reminds me of an extensive brick field before the kilns have been set on fire. We encounter the same brown adobes everywhere; the same villainous-looking lepros lounging at the corners, the same bare-legged, slippered wenches; the same strings of belaboured donkeys . . . In all my life I never suffered ennui as when cooped up in this semi-barbarous town . . .<sup>24</sup>

Captain Mayne Reid was no idle tourist. During the latter nineteenth century he became a highly successful writer, best-known for adventure novels with such titles as *The Scalp Hunters*, *The Lone Ranche*, and *The Desert Home*, all supposedly based on his travels and experiences. Reid was born in Northern Ireland in 1818, and came to the United States in 1838. Some years of his life in America remain a mystery, but others are well documented by the United States government and several biographers.<sup>25</sup>

The records show that on December 3, 1846, Mayne Reid enlisted as a lieutenant in the Second Regiment of New York Volunteers.<sup>26</sup> At the end of December, he sailed for Mexico to fight under General Winfield Scott in the Mexican War and serve as war correspondent to the periodical *Spirit of the Times*.<sup>27</sup> The United States forces landed in Vera Cruz March 9, 1847, and the ensuing Battle of Vera Cruz continued until March 27.<sup>28</sup>

Following their victory at Vera Cruz, Scott's forces fought their way inland. Reid's only major battle during the Spring was at Cerro Gordo, April 13-18. However, there were numerous guerrilla battles and minor outbreaks as Scott attempted to maintain communications with Vera Cruz as the army moved inland. They spent most of May at Jalapa and departed for Puebla at the end of the month, leaving one division in Jalapa.<sup>29</sup> According to General Scott:

. . . the Army at Puebla was not inactive. All the corps amounting to about 5,000 effective men, were daily put through their manoevers and evolutions. We were also kept on the alert by an army sometimes of superior numbers, hovering about us . . .<sup>30</sup>

On August 7, 1847, Scott's forces departed for Mexico City.<sup>31</sup> Along the route, Reid fought in the battles of Contreras and Churubusco, August 19 and 20; Molina del Ray, September 8, and Chapultepec, September 13. Reid was severely wounded in the Battle of Chapultepec and never fully recovered. Complications from those wounds ultimately caused his death in 1883.<sup>32</sup>

For his leadership and courage in the Battle of Chapultepec, Reid was cited by General Winfield Scott for "conspicuous bravery."<sup>33</sup> He was later promoted to the rank of captain, the title he used for the remainder of his life.<sup>34</sup>

On the basis of this account of Mayne Reid's military career during the Mexican War, it must be concluded that if Reid was in Santa Fe, New Mexico in June of 1847, then like Abner Doubleday in Cooperstown, he would have been AWOL from the United States Army! There is nothing in any of Reid's writing to suggest that he made the treacherous four-thousand mile trip, nor is there any indication anywhere that he was ever absent from any of his military duties.

There is, however, a logical explanation for Reid's letter to Samuel Arnold, for in addition to Santa Fe, New Mexico, there are numerous towns named

Santa Fe in Old Mexico. One of these towns is located in the State of Vera Cruz, twelve miles inland from the port city of Vera Cruz. This Santa Fe is very prominent in writings about the Mexican War because it was the first settlement on the long march from Vera Cruz to Mexico City.<sup>35</sup> It is part of a vast area which had been devoted to cattle ranching since the time of Cortez.<sup>36</sup>

Reid described scouting and guerrilla activities around Santa Fe both in his articles for *Spirit of the Times*, and in his Mexican War novel, *The Rifle Rangers*. These descriptions are very reminiscent of his letter to Arnold, for example: “. . . the pursuit brought us to a large meadow where 500 cattle were grazing.”<sup>37</sup> or:

What a glorious sunset! What a lovely land! . . . on my left waves the flag of our own land, kissed by the declining beams of the Mexican Sun!<sup>38</sup> [italics mine]

More dramatic are these lines from Chapter Ten, “Going on the Scout from Vera Cruz” in Reid’s novel *The Rifle Rangers*:

. . . I ascended the butte to obtain a view of the surrounding country . . . A broad belt of forest . . . swept up to the foot of the hill. Beyond this lay an open tract or meadow or prairie upon which were browsing thousands of cattle.<sup>39</sup>

and further along in the same book:

At some distance from this enclosure, thousands of cattle were now browsing upon the grassy level, their spotted flanks and long upright horns showing their descent from . . . Spanish bulls.<sup>40</sup>

In this same chapter, Reid also mentions seeing vaqueros lassoing wild cattle and wrestling bulls to the ground by twisting their tails.<sup>41</sup>

Similarities between these passages by Mayne Reid from *Spirit of the Times* and *The Rifle Rangers* and Reid’s letter to Samuel Arnold describing a quaint town, kissed by the Southern sun, where there were millions of cattle grazing on the long sweet grass, strongly suggest that all three described the same town of Santa Fe, the one located in the state of Vera Cruz, in Old Mexico.

While descriptions of Santa Fe, New Mexico contained no accounts of events resembling the roundup described by Reid, similar activities were commonplace on the cattle haciendas of Mexico.<sup>42</sup> Calderon, wife of the Spanish Ambassador to Mexico, visited numerous haciendas in 1839. In November, she spent a week at one hacienda for the *herraderos*, or branding. Her account of this fiesta is similar to Reid’s roundup.

Surveying the makeshift market constructed by the Indians, the platforms and musicians, and colorful clothing which all of the people had purchased for the event, Calderon wrote: “Nothing could be more picturesque than the whole scene . . .”<sup>43</sup>

The events began when seven hundred bellowing bulls were driven in from the plain, and then three or four at a time into an enclosure. Those who appeared fierce and “likely to afford good sport” were greeted with cheers and applause.

They stand for a moment . . . the horsemen gallop up, armed only with the lasso and with loud insulting cries, *ah toro!* challenge them to the contest. The bulls paw the ground then plunge furiously at the horses . . . Round they go in fierce gallop . . . amidst cries and shouts from the spectators.

The horseman throws the lasso. The bull shakes his head free . . . tosses his head proudly and gallops on. But his fate is inevitable. Down comes the whirling rope, and encircles his thick neck. He is thrown down, struggling furiously . . . then his legs being also tied, the man with the hissing red hot iron . . . brands him . . .

After an enormous number of bulls had been caught and labelled we walked amongst the Indians who had formed sort of a temporary market . . . we then returned to see a great bullfight, which was followed by more *herraderos*—in short spent the whole day amongst the *torros*, and returned to dinner at six o’clock . . . In the evening, all the people danced . . .<sup>44</sup>

Unless Reid’s letter to Samuel Arnold can be located, any explanations of it will be tentative. However, all of the evidence reviewed concerning Reid’s military career, along with his and other nineteenth-century writers’ descriptions of both Santa Fe, New Mexico and the Santa Fe located in Vera Cruz, Mexico, lead to the same conclusions. There was no rodeo in Santa Fe, New Mexico in June of 1847, and Mayne Reid’s famous letter to Samuel Arnold was written from Old Mexico and is not a significant document in American sport history.

## Notes

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3. Westermeir, *Man, Beast, Dust*, p.34.
4. Joan Steele, *Captain Mayne Reid* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978); Edwin W. Gaston, Jr. *The Early Novel of the Southwest* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1961)
5. Letter received from Joan Steele, 26 October, 1981.
6. Westermeir, *Man, Beast, Dust*, pp. 33-34.
7. Westermeir, *Man, Beast, Dust*, pp. 33-34; Robb, “Early Rodeos,” p. 72.
8. Westermeir, *Man, Beast, Dust*, p. 33.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Carson, “Late Frontier,” p. 74; Bird and Bird, “Rodeos,” p. 34.

11. Alexander de Humboldt, *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, trans. John Black, 4 vols. (London: Longman, Hurst, Orme and Brown, 1811), vol 2, bk. 3, ch. 8; Zebulon Montgomery Pike, *Arkansaw Journey-Mexican Tour—Volume II of the Expeditions of Zebulon Montgomery Pike*, ed. Elliott Coues (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1895), pp. 604-608; Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, 2 vols, ed. Max L. Moorhead (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954); Susan S. Magoffin, *Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico, the Dairy of Susan Shelby Magoffin, 1846-1847*, ed. Stella M. Drumm, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1926).
12. Ruth Laughlin Barker, *Caballeros* (New York: D. Appleton Century Co., 1935), pp. 66-67.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.
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16. David Lavendar, *Bent's Fort* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co., 1954), p. 294; Edwards, *Campaign in New Mexico*, p. 42; Pike, *Arkansaw Journey*, pp. 607-608; Cooke *Conquest of New Mexico*, pp. 42 and 49.
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18. Joseph G. McCoy, *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest* (Kansas City: Ramsey, Millet and Hudson, 1895). (Originally published 1874).
19. Cooke, *Conquest of New Mexico*, p. 27.
20. Edwards, *Campaign in New Mexico*, p. 60.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, vol. 2, ch. 5; John H. Culley, *Cattle Horses, and Men of the Western Range* (Los Angeles: Ward-Ritchie Press, 1940), pp. 229 and 290; David Dary, *Cowboy Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), p. 27; Tom Lea, *The King Ranch*, 2 vols. (Boston: Little Brown and Co., 1957), 1: p. 112.
23. Edwards, *Campaign in New Mexico*, pp. 45-46.
24. Captain Mayne Reid, *The Scalp Hunters* (London: Darton and Hodge, nd.), p. 71. The analogy to a brick yard, also used by Cooke, apparently originated with Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, 1:77.
25. Steele, *Mayne Reid*, pp. 17-22.
26. William H. Robarts, *Mexican War Veterans, A Complete Roster of the Regular and Volunteer Troops in The War Between the United States and Mexico, from 1846-1848* (Washington: Bretanos, 1887), p. 65; Gaston, *Early Novel*, pp. 279-80.
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30. *Ibid.*
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40. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Frances Calderon de la Barca, *Life in Mexico* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1931); James Norman Schmidt, *Charro Mexican Horseman*, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1969); Dusenberry, *Mexican Mesta*.
43. Calderon, *Life in Mexico*, pp. 281-83.
44. *Ibid.*