

Sands, Kathleen Mullen. *Charrería Mexicana: An Equestrian Folk Tradition*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993. Pp. xvii, 344. Notes, photographs, glossary, bibliography, index. \$45 clothbound, \$24.95 paperback.

Kathleen M. Sands is a professor of folklore and American Indian literature at Arizona State University. She has published four volumes on American Indian literatures as well as numerous articles on that subject and on cowboys and *charros* [Mexican horsemen]. Her interest in *Charrería*, Mexico's national sport, began with a visit to a Mexican-American ranch near Phoenix, Arizona, in 1985. Fascinated with the skills exhibited by the local *charros*, Sands began to research their sport and its significance in both Mexico and the United States. Eight months of field work in 1990-91 involved interviews with *charros* and *charras*, as well as attendance at *charreadas* and practice sessions in both countries. She supported this firsthand experience with extensive references, as exhibited by the nine-page bibliography.

Sands accepts the following definition: "charrería is the practice of horsemanship in the national custom and of the various activities of the charro. The word . . . denotes all of the exercises and events . . . that charros undertake" (p. 269). The central focus of the book is the *charreada* or rodeo itself, as competition, performance, and celebration. The book "explores how charrería dramatizes the most important events and conflicts and upholds the most valued elements of Mexican history and culture. It also examines how charrería provides an articulation of ethnic pride in Mexico and a mechanism for ethnic identity maintenance in Mexican-American enclaves in the United States" (xv-xvi). Sands believes that the charro is to Mexico what the cowboy is to the United States and the matador is to Spain, a national symbol. She carefully analyzes and explains his position as both hero and villain.

Obviously, *Charrería Mexicana* is not primarily a history book, although it does include a brief history of charrería. In pursuit of her goal, Sands covers much more, including selection and training of horses, learning to ride, descriptions of the events and rules, and costumes. The explanations are quite detailed, right down to the costs of purchasing and maintaining horses. She also goes through the complete *charreada* from beginning to end twice, once as way of introduction to "Rodeo Mexicana," and again to thoroughly explain the rules

and scoring. Cultural interpretation of the sport includes reviews of charro films and selections of charro ballads. Running throughout is a discussion of the many tensions within the charro community. These include generation gaps. Mexico versus U.S.A. disputes and, of course, gender controversies.

Sands is at her best in explaining the significance of charrería to the participants and to Mexican and Mexican-American identity. Her description of why participants feel it essential that charrería remain an amateur pursuit is especially persuasive. She also explores the ways in which the myths and legends of Mexican history are institutionalized into the sport through strict rules of conduct and costume as well as competition. She notes that even the recently added women's event, *escaramuza* (a kind of equestrian drill team with musical accompaniment), has been cloaked in Mexican history and made to be an integral part of the charreada. This is a remarkable achievement, given the fact that the event has no link to Mexican history and was actually inspired by an exhibition at an American rodeo.

Charreada rules restrict the activities in which charras can engage. Although the popular *escaramuza* requires the same athletic prowess as the men's contests, performers bear the double handicap of having to ride sidesaddle and wear an elaborate outfit that includes a full-skirted dress with high neck and long sleeves over crinolines and ankle-length pantaloons. Calf-length boots and a huge sombrero complete the costume. Whatever she does, the charra must remain "twice a lady." Moreover, the *escaramuza* is controversial. Charros are even more ambivalent than cowboys about women's participation in their sport. Friction is exacerbated by the fact that economics often require men and women to share horses, something unknown in American rodeo.

The arrangement of *Charrería Mexicana* may be somewhat confusing to readers familiar with the citation format used in publications like the *Journal of Sport History*. Sands' actual reference citations are located in parentheses in the main body of the text, while the 47 pages of end notes consist of explanations and additions to the text, which themselves contain citations. While placement of some of the material in the notes is quite logical, other details appear to belong in the main text. Important information that is placed in the notes is not only less likely to be read, it is not indexed. For example, on pages 308-311 of the notes. Sands explains the split among charro associations in both the United States and Mexico, describing one Mexican organization that has remained aloof from the national charro federation while exerting tremendous influence on the sport. This discussion is essential to complete understanding of charrería, its governance, and the issues that currently divide it. It therefore belongs in a more central location. The same is true of the rules, which were drastically changed in 1990. In the end notes. Sands explains how the rules described in Chapter 5 differ from ones in existence for many decades before. She also explains that the changes caused controversy within the charro community, as many traditionalists felt they were destructive to the sport. Like the information on governance, it would

seem this material is important enough to be part of the main text.

Also buried in the notes is the rather offhand statement (p. 297, no. 17) that: "The Spanish word *rueda* is the source for the term rodeo used for cowboy competition in the United States . . ." Sands adds that *rueda* refers to an event in a round arena. This is doubtful. The Spanish *rodeo* or roundup has long been accepted as the source for the American term rodeo, with the 1918 Ft. Worth event cited as the first cowboy contest outside California to be called a rodeo. Moreover, very few early rodeos, including the famous Ft. Worth one, took place in round arenas. Many had no facilities at all; those that did were most often held at race tracks, with baseball and football fields also used; none are round. On the other hand, *rueda* commonly refers to a wheel, or today an automobile tire.

Despite consulting many sources, Sands clings to the traditional explanation of *charrería* as a direct outgrowth of ranching tradition in Mexico, noting that the only event which does not share this background is the *escaramuza*. Like many rodeo historians before her, Sands ignores the fact that riding bulls had no place in the work of the rancher, *vaquero*, or cowboy. Rather, it was originally a means of fighting bulls. The same is true of the charro contest known as the *cola* or bull tailing. Those events moved from gentlemanly contests to the haciendas and became part of what was subsequently organized and named *charrería* (see for example Mary Lou LeCompte, "The Hispanic Influence on the History of Rodeo, 1823-1922," *Journal of Sport History*, 12 [Spring 1985]: 21-38).

Sands also maintains that bullfighting and *charrería* are separate traditions (p. 275), despite considerable evidence to the contrary. While Spanish bullfighting is, of course, much older, in Mexico the *corrida de toros* and *charreada* were inextricably entwined during much of the nineteenth century. Several charro contests, including the *colas*, *manganas*, and coin games, were regularly included at bullfights in both the United States and Mexico, while *matadors* appeared as part of the hacienda celebrations in conjunction with rounding up and branding cattle.

Several individuals excelled at all the skills of both sports. One of these was "el gran charro y torero mexicano Ponciano Díaz, nativo de la hacienda de Atenco . . ." who gave the first exhibition of *charrería*, and toured Spain in 1889 with the famous charros Agustín and Vicente Oropeza. (Leovigildo Islas Escarega, "Síntesis Histórica de La Charrería," *Artes de Mexico*, 99 [1967]: 16.) Sands never mentions Ponciano Díaz, whom several sources in both English and Spanish mention as a major figure in the development of the sport. She does state that "Porciano Díaz Gonzalez staged the first public charro exhibition in Mexico City (p. 64), and also attributes to him activities with which Ponciano Díaz is usually credited. Whether Ponciano Díaz and Porciano Díaz Gonzalez are the same is uncertain, although Sands does list in her bibliography at least two works that discuss the former but not the latter.

The book contains over 40 black-and-white illustrations, many photos

by Sands herself. They illustrate many key points and concepts, and are strategically placed throughout in conjunction with the text to which they relate. This greatly enhances their value, and indicates the great care and attention of the author to all the details of her work. As Sands notes, a charreada is an extremely colorful event. Therefore, color photos would have made a significantly greater impact, and helped bring the sport to life for those who have not had the opportunity to see it in person.

Even without color photos, *Charrería Mexicana* is an excellent and important book. It provides gringos with the full range of information about the precursor to rodeo, in its own unique cultural context. Of particular importance to sport historians is information not previously available in English, including the history of escaramuza, and details about the various governing bodies in both Mexico and the United States. Anthropologists, ethnographers, and scholars interested in the Spanish borderlands are among the many who will find it an invaluable source of information. Sands writes with great enthusiasm about a sport and a people for which she has tremendous admiration and respect. Consequently the book is not only informative, it is a pleasure to read.

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