

Paniolo and Pau'o Riders of the Way-Way West

Betsy Olsen-vanden Bosch
San Diego, CA

This paper examines the history of Hawaiian cowboys and their rodeos. In 1793 Captain George Vancouver presented to King Kamahameha Mexican Longhorn cattle as a goodwill gesture. Somewhat seasick from their arduous journey they soon regained their equilibrium and took over the beach. A ten year kapu was placed over them allowing for adjustment and increase. They did...with a vengeance. Horses came a little later, bestowed upon Kamahameha in 1803 as a gift from Captain Richard Cleveland. Same kapu. Same results. There now were wild cattle and wild horses and they were eating everything in sight The solution would have to come in the form of cowboys.

A high Chief was sent to Mexico and Vaqueros were invited to come the Hawaii. In 1832, three Vaqueros, with their own trained horses, saddles and families came to the Islands. Known as Paniolos, a derivation of Espaniol, these experts trained the Hawaiian natives for this arduous and dangerous work. Paniolos and their descendants developed into expert cattlemen and riders and soon established their own communities of saddlemakers, rawhide wakers and blacksmiths. Special saddles, with wooden bases, were made to accommodate the weather which was either very wet or very dry. In the hot and humid climate, "If Da Hos Get Sore - Da Saddle No Good."

All work and no play could result in a rather dull Jose so cowboys would come to town and perform their roping and riding skills in makeshift arenas. This soon grew into mini-rodeos. The first publicized mainland competition was held in Honolulu in 1903 and during World War I. Many marines were sent on R&R and encouraged to participate. Fritz Truan a world champion and-all-around cowboy, participated in many rodeos held on Oahu. An honoree in the National Rodeo Hall of Fame, he was killed on Okinawa.

Women were participants from the very beginning of the popular sport of horse-back riding. Queen Emma was one of the early enthusiasts. Women have their own rodeos and are participants in round-ups. They have their distinctive and unusual riding habit when participating in parades and are know as Pau'o riders.

Despite the addition of jeeps and helicopters to some of the larger ranches, the Paniolo is alive and well and always needed on today's cattle ranches.