

Constructing Heritage: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1930-1954

By

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
HIST 5220: History Research Seminar—The American West
Oklahoma State University
Professor McCoy
Spring 2010

On May 6, 1938, over three hundred horsemen rode down the Santa Ynez Valley in Southern California. The men—and the group was made up of all men—were dressed as if they had stepped out of a Western film. In cowboy hats and spurs, with handkerchiefs tied ‘round their necks, they rode on Paints, Quarter horses, and Palominos. Some men drove surreys, others stagecoaches. In a long line they paraded through the chaparral, laughing and joking with one another.

One might think these men were driving cattle down from the hills, but there were no cattle, only prime cuts of steak with all the trimmings waiting for them at their next camp. One might think these men actors, playing parts in an epic Hollywood western. But that, again, would be wrong. Though there were moving pictures taken of the ride, they were made for consumption by the group itself, not for an external audience.

This display of cowboy camaraderie on parade was the ninth annual ride of Los Rancheros Visitadores—Spanish for “the visiting ranchers”—, an elite American men’s club. In 1938, Los Rancheros was growing in prestige. Within their first nine years of existence, they counted among their ranks Walt Disney, actors Clark Gable, Lewis S. Stone and Tim McCoy, western artists Ed Borein and Joe DeYong, humorist Irvin S. Cobb, Senator T. M. Storke, acclaimed saddle maker Edward Bohlin, and “gum chewer” Philip K. Wrigley.¹ The group was composed of businessmen and artists, horsemen and ranchers; it brought together “captains of industry with masters of the land.”² They met once a year in early May for a multiple-day trail ride, and camped at member-owned ranches in the area around Santa Barbara.³

¹ Los Rancheros Visitadores, *1939 Roster*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1939,) 63-81.

² Domhoff, G. William, *The Bohemian Grove and Other Retreats*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 71-72.

³ A note: I write in the past tense here, because I am only investigating Los Rancheros Visitadores up to the year of their twenty-fifth ride, 1954. The group is still in existence, but I eschew the present tense for my preferable domain.

Los Rancheros' annual ride was, in many ways, a summer camp for upper-class men. During the trek, the members and guests drank from the "beer wagon" and ate elaborate rustic dinners. They played pranks on each other, raced horses, performed skits, participated in rodeos, and reminisced about previous years' shenanigans. But the principal bond, which drew these men together more than mischief, networking, and revelry, was a sense of heritage. Los Rancheros linked themselves to Spanish California, the Old California of vast *ranchos* and magnificent *caballos*. They co-opted the images of the Californian *ranchero* and *vaquero*.⁴ They prided themselves on making their rides as authentic looking as possible, and emphasized the group's ties to the ranching lifestyle. Though all of these men were white, and most grew up in the American East, they found something attractive in riding the trails in cowboy uniform, recreating (albeit in twentieth century luxury) the spirit of ranching life in Southern California from 1770-1860.⁵

This paper investigates Los Rancheros Visitadores' declaration of heritage, focusing on the first twenty-five years of the club's existence, 1930-1954. Los Rancheros claimed the Spanish Californian *ranchero* as their historic antecedent. They paid homage to these men in name and in action; their rides were full of reenactments and markers of Californio heritage. Underlying this was a connection to the club's direct forebear—the Bohemian Club's annual encampment at the Bohemian Grove. This paper analyzes both of Los Rancheros' claims to heritage. It asks why Los Rancheros chose *rancheros* to be their masthead, and what attracted twentieth century, white, upper-class American businessmen to Spanish California of *vaqueros*

Translation: "Ranchos" means "ranches" and "caballos" means "horseses."

⁴ Translation: "Ranchero" means "rancher" and "vaquero" means "cowboy."

⁵ Domhoff (1974), 61.

and *ranchos*. Additionally, it examines the similarities between the Bohemian Grove and Los Rancheros' annual ride. It argues that Los Rancheros Visitadores consciously constructed their heritage to simultaneously reaffirm their place in the upper echelons of American society and escape the burden that society placed on them.

This examination of Los Rancheros Visitadores' heritage is couched in the notion of a "sense of history," which historian David Glassberg explained in his 2001 book, *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life*. "Sense of history is akin to what environmental psychologists describe as sense of place—not quite territoriality...but a sense of locatedness and belonging. Sensing history, we explore fundamental questions concerning personal and group identity and our relationship to the environment."⁶ Using the guise of historical reenactment, Los Rancheros Visitadores asserted their identity within American society. Their sense of history, which emphasized the themes of Spanish Californian celebration, adventure, and camaraderie, allowed them to mingle with men who had similar interests and backgrounds. The annual ride bonded upper-class men with a shared experience, and provided them with a heritage myth that linked them to California's historic upper class, the *rancheros*.

Leisurely Preservationists

John J. Mitchell, Jr., son of the chairman of the Illinois Merchants Trust Company, founded Los Rancheros Visitadores in 1930. According to the sociologist G. William Domhoff, Mitchell had received the definition of an American upper-class upbringing.⁷ He spent his

⁶ Glassberg, David, *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life*, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 7.

⁷ Domhoff (1974), 60.

childhood at the Hill School in Pennsylvania, one of the elite Eastern boarding schools, attended Yale University, and was a member of both the Chicago Club and the Bohemian Club.⁸ In 1921 he married Lolita Armour, daughter of Chicago meatpacking mogul J. Ogden Armour. By any standard, Mitchell was a successful businessman and member of the American upper class.

While attending his first encampment of the Bohemian Club in 1928, Mitchell was struck by an idea for a similar type of gathering but with a different theme. His epiphany was documented in Los Rancheros' *Twenty-Fifth Anniversary* publication:

At the moment [Mitchell] was under the great redwood trees of the Bohemian Club of San Francisco, which holds an annual midsummer encampment on the shore of the Russian River. Impressed by the combination of friendship and forest trees, Jack asked himself: "Why don't we use the themes of fellowship, a lovely country and a lovely time of year down in Santa Barbara County, but make the *horse* the central motive of it?"⁹

A year later in Santa Barbara, Mitchell consulted with his friends, personal secretary Elmer Awl and cowboy artist Ed Borein. Awl and Borein, it emerged, had thought of something similar.¹⁰ Chronicled twenty-six years later by Los Rancheros, Borein's 1929 words allegedly were, "Elmer, it's riding weather. And I have a chuck wagon. What say?—let's go out for a few days with three or four of the boys."¹¹ Between Borein's historical bent and Mitchell's Bohemian vision, Los Rancheros began to take form.

⁸ Domhoff (1974), 60.

⁹ Rancheros Visitadores, *Rancheros Visitadores: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1930-1955*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1955), 16-18.

¹⁰ It should be noted that although Elmer Awl came from humble beginnings and worked first for the Armour family and then Mitchell, he soon rose to upper-class status when he married Alma de Bretteville Spreckels in 1939. Spreckels' first husband, Adolph B. Spreckels, was the head of the Spreckels Sugar Company.

¹¹ Rancheros Visitadores (1955), 18.

The quotation attributed to Borein, not Mitchell, exemplifies the cultural heritage Los Rancheros focused on. The quotation, which is most likely a mythologized version of what was actually said in 1929, reveals the macho cowboy image that Los Rancheros cultivated. Borein worked as a *vaquero* in California and Mexico from 1890 onwards, and his artwork derived from personal experience. Although Borein's style did not mature until he moved to New York, his past as a cowboy in the Old West was a factor in the popularity of his artwork.¹² Admirers continually noted the romance of his early life. One wrote, "[Borein] roamed from one bunkhouse to another capturing the life around him in his sketches. He sketched from the saddle in the daytime and polished these hasty drawings at night by the light of fires or a kerosene lamp."¹³ It was this sense of authenticity, of romance, and of a direct link the Old West that attracted collectors to Borein's artwork. Los Rancheros incorporated this same sense into the fabric of their social club.

By early 1930, Mitchell had the materials to build a men's club. He purchased a ranch on the Santa Ynez River in September 1929 and named it Juan y Lolita.¹⁴ It was there that he hosted a trek of sixty-five of "the boys" in April 1930. The ride was only one day long, and the men traveled to Mattei's Tavern, a historic stagecoach stop in Los Olivos, where they discussed what to call their new social club. T. Wilson Diblee, a Santa Barbara rancher, "suggested [a name] in salute to the Californios of old. Los Rancheros Visitadores!"¹⁵

¹² Davidson, Harold G., *Edward Borein, Artist of the Old West*, (Santa Fe, NM: The Gerald Peters Gallery, 1984. Introduction.

¹³ Woloshuk, Nicholas, *Drawings and Paintings of the Old West*, (Flagstaff, AZ: The Northland Press, 1968), 2.

¹⁴ Collinson, Thomas F., *El Diario del Viaje de los Rancheros Visitadores*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1935), 10.

¹⁵ Rancheros Visitadores (1955), 18

It is apparent that Mitchell, Borein, and the other men who participated in the April 1930 ride had not already decided to base their riding club on the historic Californian *ranchero* prior to Diblee's suggestion. Certainly some of the elements found in later rides were there: Borein had both a cowboy background and Old Western props like a chuck wagon. All of the men invited to the April 1930 ride were horsemen, and many were ranch owners. The organizers had already attached a historical element to their ride: the destination of Mattei's Tavern. Additionally, Mitchell's decision to purchase a ranch and give it a Spanish name indicates his personal affinity for California's Spanish ranching past. However, these disparate parts indicate only that the organizers nursed a love for the romance and history of the Old West in California. They had not yet melded these parts into the heritage myth of the visiting rancher, which Los Rancheros Visitadores used to define themselves.

The first ride of Los Rancheros began on May 9th, 1930, with ninety men in attendance. Each rider had received an invitation in April 1930 that explained the logistics of the trip, including the types of meals served and on which ranches they would camp. It also emphasized the historical disposition of the ride: "There will be at least three stage coaches...There will also be a covered wagon to haul the bedding, as well as a chuck wagon...Purely western costume of the days of fifty years ago should be worn."¹⁶ However, despite the markings of historical reenactment, the first ride did not promote Californian heritage and history to the extent that later rides did. Indeed, the group paid little attention to the Mission Santa Barbara and the Mission

¹⁶ Rancheros Visitadores (1955), 87.

Santa Ines, two destinations that featured prominently in every subsequent ride and were the locus of historical reenactment.¹⁷

From 1931—the second annual trek—onward, Los Rancheros paid increasing attention to Old California heritage. Thomas F. Collinson reported that the 1931 ride brought “stirring scenes of the ‘roaring camps’ of ’49” as well as cowboy sports like roping, driving cattle, and riding contests.¹⁸ Later camps included “old ballads of Western America,”¹⁹ Western-themed entertainers like Roy Rogers and Gene Autry,²⁰ and even (staged) Indian raids.²¹ Los Rancheros added stops to Mission Santa Barbara and Mission Santa Ines, where they contemplated the history of the buildings.²² Additionally, chroniclers of Los Rancheros’ rides gave greater consideration to the sense of history. For instance, Collinson waxed poetic about Los Rancheros’ geographical ties to historical figures: “The only people before us to share the beauties of this scene were venturesome scouts, seeking the heights from which to locate the enemy or to spot victims for the hunt.”²³ Chronicles of the rides from 1931 onwards show that Los Rancheros incorporated heritage into not only the trek, but their identity as a group.

By 1934, history and heritage had been cemented into the club’s very purpose: “Once again...Los Rancheros Visitadores assembled to dramatize the history of Old Santa Barbara

¹⁷ Rancheros Visitadores (1939), 9. The Mission Santa Ines is only mentioned in passing: “The next morning (Sunday) they rode by Mission Santa Ines to Rancho Alisal.”

¹⁸ Collinson, (1935), 14. Collinson might be referring to Francis Bret Harte’s *Luck of Roaring Camp*.

¹⁹ Collinson, (1935), 16.

²⁰ An interesting note: Roy Rogers was welcomed by Los Rancheros, but his membership to the Bohemian Grove was rescinded after “he told a reporter the encampment was ‘a form of week-end divertissement for tired business men from which it took them about two weeks to recover.’” see Domhoff,(1974), 57.

²¹ Domhoff,(1974), 66. and Collinson (1935), 30.

²² Collinson (1935), 144.

²³ Collinson (1935), 35.

county.”²⁴ In 1939 Los Rancheros went even further, and portrayed themselves as the modern version of the historic *los rancheros visitadores*. Mitchell greeted the 1939 riders with this message:

The spirit that has ridden with Los Rancheros Visitadores for almost a century rides with us today. For we are the modern Los Rancheros, dedicating each springtime to broadening friendships and spreading good will. May we forever preserve the grand old California tradition of those riders who gave their time and effort to a neighbor, asking nothing in return but friendship.²⁵

From 1929 to 1939, Los Rancheros transformed from a loose bunch of “the boys,” who had a penchant for the romance of the Old West, into a prestigious club that sought to preserve the heritage of Spanish California.

Other groups, similarly concerned with California heritage, became involved with Los Rancheros. Members of El Rancho de Los Amigos, “a group of devotees of the western traditions” from nearby Buellton, joined the annual ride.²⁶ Los Amigos were similar to Los Rancheros but met more frequently. They leased a “private dude ranch where, on weekends, they assembled to rope and ride.”²⁷ Their purpose was to be weekend cowboys, paying homage to the Old West. Los Rancheros were also involved with a more established preservationist group. In 1932, the Reina del Mar parlor of the Native Daughters of the American West “provided a joyous and fitting welcome for Rancheros at Mission Santa Ines.”²⁸ The Native Daughters were the first

²⁴ Collinson (1935), 17.

²⁵ Rancheros Visitadores (1939), 5.

²⁶ Rancheros Visitadores (1939), 15.

²⁷ Collinson (1935), 16.

²⁸ Collinson (1935), 15.

active preservationists in California. As early as 1898, the group committed to preserving local history and landmarks.²⁹

The preservation efforts of Los Rancheros fell squarely between those of the Native Daughters and those of Los Amigos. Los Rancheros had started their club with a focus on the romance of old California, but proceeded to become tied to the history. Not only did they preserve the memory of nineteenth-century California ranching life, they also became historic preservationists.

In 1938 Los Rancheros acquired two adobe buildings, the Covarrubias and Fremont Adobes, which they turned into the organization's office and an exhibition space. Casa Covarrubias was built in 1817 by Domingo Carrillo and was named after General Jose Maria Covarrubias, who married one of Carrillo's daughters and raised his family in the *casa*.³⁰ The Fremont Adobe was a reconstruction, from original material, of a building that allegedly housed General Fremont's headquarters in 1846.³¹ Los Rancheros stocked both buildings with Californian artifacts and art.

Los Rancheros initially funded their preservation efforts with contributions from members and guests totaling \$5,733.40—approximately \$87,300 today.³² The rest of \$15,000 purchase was paid off by 1946 by deducting \$5 from every membership fee. In order to take care of the buildings in perpetuity, Los Rancheros founded Los Adobes de Los Rancheros, a non-profit corporation. Though the corporation was not legally tied to the club, its Board of Trustees

²⁹ Glassberg (2001), 177.

³⁰ Rancheros Visitadores (1955), 139.

³¹ Rancheros Visitadores (1955), 140.

³² Rancheros Visitadores (1955), 140. Currency converted using the website <http://www.measuringworth.com>

was made up exclusively of members of Los Rancheros.³³ By 1954, Los Adobes de Los Rancheros accumulated forty acres surrounding the buildings and “maintained a policy of improvement such as grass planting, planting of native shrubs, soil conservation, and general upkeep.”³⁴ In addition to fostering architectural preservation, Los Adobes also loaned 4-H members money to purchase and raise calves and provided the Old Spanish Days Fiesta Committee its headquarters. Los Adobes de Los Rancheros have cared for the buildings to this day.

In their first twenty-five years, Los Rancheros’ purpose evolved. Initially, the club was created to celebrate horsemanship and friendship. Adopting the heritage myth of *los rancheros visitadores* gave the club a theme and purpose. From 1930 onwards, Los Rancheros transformed from a group that loosely based their revelry on the romance of the Californian Old West to a club that promoted Spanish Californian heritage and was a force of historic preservation. Not a bad effort for “three or four of the boys” and a chuck wagon.

What’s in a Heritage Myth?

Los Rancheros Visitadores’ heritage myth resulted from Diblee’s suggestion for the club’s name. According to the *Twenty-Fifth Anniversary* book,

In the Mission days of California there existed a custom — a tradition if you will — of rodeoing cattle in the spring in a certain manner. The Rancheros from the whole countryside would gather at the nearest Mission. They would then advance toward the next Mission, working the cattle as they went—branding the calves, cutting out the beef and animals for hides and tallow, castrating the calves and old bulls, sending the sickly or injured cattle back to

³³ Rancheros Visitadores (1955), 141.

³⁴ Rancheros Visitadores (1955), 141.

their respective ranchos. When they reached the next Mission they would be met by a group from the countryside between the two Missions and the original group would return to their home Mission. This return was a festive journey.³⁵

A similar tale was told in other Rancheros publications.³⁶ Los Rancheros provided no sources for their assertion that Californio *rancheros* rode from mission to mission, herding cattle in a neighborly fashion. I found no mention of the historic *rancheros visitadores* in primary sources, nor did I find secondary sources that mentioned these visiting ranchers. Indeed, the only times the historic *rancheros visitadores* were mentioned was in relation to the modern Los Rancheros Visitadores club. Yet the twentieth century Rancheros painted the history of *rancheros visitadores* as if it was indisputable.

The beauty of Los Rancheros' heritage myth was that the annual trek was not based on the herding and branding; it was based on the "festive journey" homeward, after the work was done. Their focus, therefore, was not preserving precise *ranchero* traditions, but rather preserving the spirit—that sense of history—of Spanish California. This allowed not only for the celebratory nature of the ride, but also for the lack of detailed historical accuracy.

It is significant that Los Rancheros chose *rancheros* rather than *vaqueros* for their name. In his *California Heritage*, Oscar Lewis explained the distinction: "The *ranchero* ruled over his thousands of acres with all the power of a feudal baron. He was the owner of immense herds of cattle, attended by scores of *vaqueros*, and at the home *hacienda* he had a retinue of Indian retainers to serve his needs."³⁷ In other words, a *ranchero* was a landowning *vaquero*, a

³⁵ Rancheros Visitadores (1955), 2.

³⁶ See: Collinson (1935). and Rancheros Visitadores, (1939) Rancheros Visitadores, *Rancheros Visitadores: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1930-1955*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1955).

³⁷ Lewis, Oscar, *California Heritage*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1949), 43-44.

horseman of wealth and influence. This provides insight into why Los Rancheros were keen to adopt Spanish Californian heritage: the historic *rancheros* appeared to the twentieth century Rancheros as equals. Los Rancheros Visitadores were made up of men of industry, who could all be counted as members of the upper echelons of American society, and who considered themselves horsemen. Indeed, many were also landowners. By 1939, 95 out of 300 members listed ‘rancher’ as at least one of their occupations.³⁸ In residence as well as social status, the members of Los Rancheros Visitadores equated themselves with the *rancheros* of old California.

The location of the rides in Southern California mission country provided additional links to the spirit of the historic *rancheros*. According to Glassberg, this was only natural, since “a sense of history and sense of place are inextricably intertwined; we attach histories to places.”³⁹ The geography around Santa Barbara and Santa Ines, the Missions, and Los Adobes established physical links between Los Rancheros and the Spanish Californios.

The scenery evoked romantic tendencies in Los Rancheros, and their publications frequently noted that their annual rides took place over the same “grey-green mountains,”⁴⁰ seeing the same *vistas* as the Californios of old.⁴¹ The physical location of the annual treks played a large part in Los Rancheros’ decision to co-opt the heritage of Spanish California, and reinforced their decision to claim *rancheros* as their predecessors.

Despite an absence of sources that verify the existence of the historic *rancheros visitadores*, there are a number of accounts of nineteenth century California that paint a picture,

³⁸ Los Rancheros Visitadores, *1939 Roster*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1939,) 63-80.

³⁹ Glassberg, 8.

⁴⁰ Rancheros Visitadores, *Rancheros Visitadores: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1930-1955*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1955), 15.

⁴¹ Translation: “vistas” means “sights.”

in which visiting ranchers would be a normal occurrence. The spirit of friendship, horsemanship, and celebration, as well as the centrality of the missions that the twentieth century Rancheros espoused, were reflective of the spirit and activities found in chronicles of ranching life from California during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Carlos Hajar, who came to California from Mexico as a boy in 1834, recounted some of the customs of the Santa Barbara ranching communities in a record for the Bancroft Library in 1877. He explained that Californio men “spent their lives on horseback,” and that each year brought roundups and hunts, during which the men would be gone for weeks and sometimes months at a time.⁴² These strenuous activities culminated in a celebration like the one that ended the annual roundup. Hajar remembered, “when [*los vaqueros*] returned from the expedition, friends welcomed them with music, and they went to some house to dance until the following day.”⁴³ Rodeos were held for entertainment as well as practical purposes. Once a year “a big rodeo was held at each mission, not so much for the purpose of branding, marking or segregating as to make the cattle recognize some one place and thus prevent them from becoming wild.”⁴⁴ The types of activities that Hajar assigned to the Californio *vaqueros* were similar to those incorporated in the Los Rancheros’ annual ride. The emphasis on horseback riding, on rodeo and on community, and the festivities that followed long rides are congruent with the activities that Los Rancheros highlighted a century later.

The missions provided a central link between Los Rancheros and the Californios they emulated. Mission Santa Barbara and Mission Santa Ines provided both the physical and the

⁴² Hajar, 13.

⁴³ Hajar, Carlos N., “California in 1834,” *Three Memoirs of Mexican California*, (Berkeley, CA: The Friends of the Bancroft Library, University of California Press, 1988), 28.

⁴⁴ Hajar, 17.

spiritual connection to *rancheros* of old. The *Twenty-Fifth Anniversary* publication explained the depth of Los Rancheros' esteem for the historic adobe buildings:

Rancheros Visitadores ride to do homage to the Mission of Santa Barbara at the beginning of our trek, and to pay salutations to gentle Mission of Santa Ines at the end of our joyful week. We lope, five hundred strong, into a mellow past. The pastoral days are far away. But the mission bells are sweet...They tell us to stop and think a moment of this region's fascinating past.⁴⁵

Visits to both missions included traditions and rituals. Los Rancheros were blessed by the *padres*, they remembered Rancheros who had passed away, they gave speeches and sang songs.⁴⁶

This performance was a mark of their reverence for the heritage and history of the area, but also served as a public spectacle.

Collinson recounted the town of Santa Ines as Los Rancheros made their way to the Mission in 1934: "Our arrival has been anticipated for several days...This is reflected by the dais erected here in front of the mission; the 12 charming señoritas in characteristic Spanish garb, and the hospitable reception committee that awaits us."⁴⁷ In both Santa Barbara and Santa Ines, townspeople turned out in droves to watch Los Rancheros parade by. This parade was intricately tied to Los Rancheros' heritage myth.

During the visits to the missions, "caballeros [lined] up before the facade of the adobe mission; and in back of them, stagecoach and surrey [were] strung out."⁴⁸ Los Rancheros sat atop their horses, facing the mission. In stature they were much taller than the people who gathered

⁴⁵ Rancheros Visitadores, *Rancheros Visitadores: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1930-1955*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1955), 12.

⁴⁶ Translation: "padres" means "fathers" or "priests."

⁴⁷ Collinson, Thomas F., *El Diario del Viaje de los Rancheros Visitadores* (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1935), 142.

⁴⁸ Collinson, Thomas F., *El Diario del Viaje de los Rancheros Visitadores* (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1935), 142.

around to watch. Additionally, a welcoming committee put together entertainment, including dancers and a choir, for the benefit of Los Rancheros. There was no mistaking that the horsemen were important. The parade to the missions and subsequent rituals demonstrated Los Rancheros' social prestige to the local audience. Los Rancheros were ostensibly celebrating the heritage of Spanish California and the spirit of *los rancheros visitadores*, but the presentation was hierarchical and authoritative.

Presenting themselves in such a manner at the missions was the most authentic part of the annual ride. Though certainly the rest of the weeklong trek embodied spirits of friendship, horsemanship, and celebration that were also found in the culture of Spanish California, it was the spirit of the historic *rancheros* that Los Rancheros specifically sought to emulate. The historic *rancheros* were landowners of influence—the upper class of mission-era California. When Los Rancheros presented themselves as the upper class of twentieth century California, they reified one of the main tenets of their heritage myth, and thus reenacted history.

Bohemian Heritage

Los Rancheros Visitadores' ties to the Bohemian Club—specifically the Bohemian Grove—were undeniable. John van der Zee called the Bohemian Grove “the greatest men’s party on earth.”⁴⁹ The club was—and still is—the most exclusive American men’s society, whose membership has included some of the most prominent men of industry, government, entertainment, and art.⁵⁰ Though the membership lists are officially kept secret, sociologists and

⁴⁹ van der Zee, John, *The Greatest Men’s Party on Earth: Inside the Bohemian Grove* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1974).

⁵⁰ Domhoff, G. William, *The Bohemian Grove and other Retreats* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 1, 15.

historians have identified many of the more distinguished members, including every Republican president since Calvin Coolidge.⁵¹ Since 1874, the Bohemian Club has held its annual camp beneath the California redwoods, sixty-five miles outside of San Francisco.⁵² Its weekends included the ritual Cremation of Care, entertainment in the form of plays and music, fine dining, and general revelry.

It was in the best interests of Los Rancheros to promote their affiliation with the Bohemian Grove. The story of Mitchell's epiphany at the Bohemian Grove and subsequent founding of Los Rancheros gave Los Rancheros clout within higher social circles. The similarities between the two clubs went beyond Mitchell's initial decision to base Los Rancheros on the Bohemian Grove. The clubs overlapped in membership, social structure, and above all, their goal. Los Rancheros co-opted the Bohemian Grove's defining aspect: its purpose to rid members of care and worry for the duration of their stay.

The central goal of both the Bohemian Grove and Los Rancheros Visitadores' annual ride was to allow important men to throw their cares to the wind. The Bohemian Grove ritualized this with their Cremation of Care, a ceremony in which the Grove's High Priest burned Care in "mummylike effigy."⁵³ For Los Rancheros, the same sentiment was built into the fabric of their retreat through their heritage myth: "In those days, even as now, men would go through 51 weeks of the year, performing their routine duties and living their normal life, but soul starved for the

⁵¹ van der Zee, John, *The Greatest Men's Party on Earth: Inside the Bohemian Grove* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1974), 5.

⁵² Domhoff, G. William, *The Bohemian Grove and other Retreats* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 1.

⁵³ van der Zee, John, *The Greatest Men's Party on Earth: Inside the Bohemian Grove* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1974), 10.

companionship of men that they saw only once a year.”⁵⁴ Los Rancheros equated the 52nd week—the week of the ride—with disregard for care and normal life. For how much more can one show disregard for the present than by stepping back in time and fetishizing history? Los Rancheros were eager to go back to a time when “there were no clocks, calendars, offices or banks, no schools to bother a youngster, nothing much to do but get on a horse and ride.”⁵⁵

The social structure within both clubs emphasized exclusive camps within the encampments. Camps functioned as a kind of fraternity. They dictated where a member slept, with whom he primarily socialized, and how he was identified to other club members. Camp membership varied according to geography, profession, and influence. For instance, The Bohemian Grove’s Monkey Block, named for an old San Francisco artists’ colony, was made up of artists,⁵⁶ while Mandalay, the most exclusive of the camps, brought together businessmen and politicians.⁵⁷ Los Rancheros’ camps included Los Bustardos,⁵⁸ which “attracted a number of incorrigible airmen,”⁵⁹ and Los Chingadores,⁶⁰ which was made up of the members of Los Amigos, the Buellton riding group. Often, groups promoted themselves through absurd humor. Los Chingadores described themselves thus: “Los Chingadores...is composed of the most

⁵⁴ Rancheros Visitadores, *Rancheros Visitadores: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1930-1955*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1955), 2.

⁵⁵ Rancheros Visitadores, *Rancheros Visitadores: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1930-1955*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1955), 12.

⁵⁶ Domhoff, G. William, *The Bohemian Grove and other Retreats* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 34-35.

⁵⁷ Domhoff, G. William, *The Bohemian Grove and other Retreats* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 35.

⁵⁸ Translation: “Los Bustardos” is a combination of two Spanish words: “bastardos,” which means “bastards,” and “buitres,” which means “vultures.”

⁵⁹ Rancheros Visitadores, *Rancheros Visitadores: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1930-1955*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1955), 103.

⁶⁰ Translation: “chingadores” is slang for “fuckers.”

hospitable, disreputable, generous, arrogant, talented, low brow, intellectual group of non-conforming public spirited members of any camp of Rancheros.”⁶¹

Unlike the camps in the Bohemian Grove, Los Rancheros’ camps were put together more loosely, and their purpose was often pure fun. By 1954 Los Cholos only had three members,⁶² and the author of the *Twenty-Fifth Anniversary* book pokes fun at them, saying that they “claim to [be] the smallest, driest and snootiest of them all.”⁶³ Most of the camps brought pieces of furniture, pianos, bars, and an array of alcohol to taunt other camps with. Los Borrachos, whose name— “the drunkards” in Spanish—was an apt choice, held an annual “tiger milk” party at 7 a.m.⁶⁴ Drinks were served to the rest of Los Rancheros from Los Borrachos’ bar, on which was painted a “mural of an all-feminine oil-drilling crew.”⁶⁵ It should be noted that the women were dressed the way one might expect, sporting only hardhats and boots.⁶⁶

The camps were the perfect excuse for practical jokes and boyish rivalries. In 1941, Mitchell moved his camp across a river and built a bridge to the main camp, complete with an electrically charged handrail. Members of Los Chingadores, plied with alcohol and mischief, set fire to the bridge in the middle of the night.⁶⁷ The next day, the arsonists “donned old-fashioned

⁶¹ Rancheros Visitadores, *Rancheros Visitadores: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1930-1955*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1955), 111.

⁶² Translation: “cholo” can be translated as “mestizo” or “educated American Indian.”

⁶³ Rancheros Visitadores, *Rancheros Visitadores: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1930-1955*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1955), 113

⁶⁴ Rancheros Visitadores, *Rancheros Visitadores: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1930-1955*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1955), 99.

⁶⁵ Rancheros Visitadores, *Rancheros Visitadores: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1930-1955*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1955), 99.

⁶⁶ Domhoff, G. William, *The Bohemian Grove and other Retreats* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 70.

⁶⁷ Rancheros Visitadores, *Rancheros Visitadores: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1930-1955*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1955), 58.

flannel nightshirts, formed a Parade of Repentance, [and] marched back over makeshift repairs to the Gringo camp...where all was forgiven with the mixing of fizzies at the bar.”⁶⁸

Like the Bohemian Grove, Los Rancheros fixated on entertainment, though Los Rancheros’ entertainment was far rougher than its forefather’s. The Bohemian Grove emphasized “lakeside talks,” concerts, scenic walks, and theatrical performances.⁶⁹ Los Rancheros’ entertainment also centered on performances by famous entertainers like Gene Autry and Bob Hope, but went on to include horse racing and a rodeo. All of the entertainment at Los Rancheros’ encampment was laced with humor. The application to be in the rodeo was especially amusing:

I offer myself herewith, in all my obnoxiousness, as a sacrifice on the alter of Rancho entertainment...This is entirely my own idea —nobody wants me in the damn thing, so just to be ornery, to enjoy myself and to disgust everyone, I herewith forcefully enter myself in the events checked.⁷⁰

However silly, the rodeo and horse races were taken seriously. Rodeo legends Tex Austin and Monty Montana took part in the annual festivities, as did championship roping and cutting horses.⁷¹ The horse races took place on a specially made track at Rancho Alisal and featured some of the most expensive and finest horses in California.⁷² Though Los Rancheros were

⁶⁸ Rancheros Visitadores, *Rancheros Visitadores: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1930-1955*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1955), 59.

⁶⁹ Domhoff, G. William, *The Bohemian Grove and other Retreats* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 7-24.

⁷⁰ Rancheros Visitadores, *Rancheros Visitadores: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1930-1955*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1955), 84.

⁷¹ Rancheros Visitadores, *Rancheros Visitadores: Twenty-fifth Anniversary, 1930-1955*, (Santa Barbara, CA: Los Rancheros Visitadores, 1955), 86.

⁷² Domhoff, G. William, *The Bohemian Grove and other Retreats* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 65.

enamored of high jinx and jokes, above all they revered demonstrations of quality horsemanship displayed during the rodeo and horse races.

Bohemian heritage was apparent in many of the fixtures of Los Rancheros' encampment, but its legacy was especially evident in Los Rancheros' exclusivity. Like the Bohemian Club, a man had to be invited as a member's guest for a certain number of years before he was eligible to join. In Los Rancheros, a guest had to be accepted by committee and had to be present for three out of the five preceding years' rides before he was granted membership. Like the Bohemian Grove, Los Rancheros was made up of members of the American upper class, though they tended to focus on the men who were involved in business and husbandry. Membership was also open to men with a distinct and authentic Western background, like Borein, McCoy, Montana, and Austin. Domhoff contended, "Sociologically speaking, the Rancheros Visitadores is an organization which serves the function...of helping to integrate ranchers and businessmen from different parts of the country into a cohesive social class."⁷³

Though in setting and entertainment Los Rancheros were far rougher in taste than the refined Bohemian Club, they were still quite similar to their forbear in the redwoods. Each club promoted exclusive fraternities, and both incorporated entertainment that was far and beyond what an average American in the mid-twentieth century could expect to behold. Both clubs were exclusive, and both functioned to maintain and strengthen the American upper class. Men whose names still ring with importance—Walt Disney, Ronald Reagan, Clark Gable—were members of one or both of the Californian clubs. These men came to the encampments to get away from their

⁷³ Domhoff, G. William, *The Bohemian Grove and other Retreats* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 72.

day-to-day worries. And while the Bohemian Grove put on an elaborate ritual to banish care, Los Rancheros let it vanish into the swirls of the Santa Ynez River as they rode back in history.

Conclusion

Los Rancheros constructed their heritage using the Bohemian Grove's structure and exclusivity combined with the lore and history of Spanish California. Though their heritage myth was not definitively factual, it still provided both an escape from society and the means to reaffirm Los Rancheros' place in the American upper class. The heritage myth of *los rancheros visitadores* allowed Los Rancheros to step back in time and appreciate the history of southern California while still keeping their place on the twentieth-century social ladder.

Despite the rather whimsical beginnings of the group, Los Rancheros grew into a force of both historical reenactment and preservation. By 1954 they had ties to other preservation groups, purchased Los Adobes Covarrubias and Fremont, and set up a corporation to care for the buildings in perpetuity. They provided space for other organizations with a historical bent, and they stocked the *casas* with relics of Old California.

Within twenty-five years of existence, Los Rancheros became a group that could actually say that they had reenacted history. Unlike Civil War battlefield reenactments or 'living history' at Plimoth Plantation, Los Rancheros succeeded in embodying one the defining characteristics of the historic *rancheros*: the social prestige of the ruling class. When Los Rancheros lined up in front of the missions, they reified this prestige, something that could not have succeeded if the members of Los Rancheros were not also members of the American upper class. It was at the

Mission Santa Ines, not in the mountains and valleys, where *los rancheros visitadores* lived again.

A Note

Los Rancheros Visitadores are a piece of the phenomenon I call “the gentlemen ranchers,” those elite American men who tie their name to vast swathes of land in the Western states, though they are generally titans of industry from Eastern families. These men include media mogul Ted Turner, Presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, and fashion magnate Ralph Lauren. I believe that further research into Los Rancheros Visitadores will provide insight into this phenomenon.

Although Los Rancheros have written a number of histories of themselves, I found only one secondary source book that mentioned the club, G. William Domhoff’s *The Bohemian Grove and Other Retreats; A Study in Ruling-Class Cohesiveness*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974. There is still a lot of research that can be done into this topic, especially into the club’s early years. But no matter the research, I hope that any and all historians will respect the jovial nature of the subject matter. It is, by and large, just good, plain fun.

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