

SADDLES, SPURS, AND BOOTS;
A Southwestern Heritage

By H. Gordon Frost



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The Devil in hell, we're told, was chained,
A thousand years did he there remain.
He neither complained, nor did he groan;
But was determined to start a hell of his own.

Where he could torment the souls of men
Without being chained in the prison bin.
So he asked the Lord if He had on hand
Anything left when He made this land.

The Lord said, "Yes, there's plenty on hand,
But I left it down by the Rio Grande.
The fact is, old boy, the stuff is so poor,
I don't think you could use it as a hell anymore."

But the devil went down to look at the truck
And said if he took it as a gift he was stuck.
For after looking it over careful and well,
He said, "This place is too dry for hell!"

But in order to get it off of His hand
The Lord promised the devil to water this land.
So the trade was closed and the deed was given
And the Lord went back to His home in heaven.

The devil said, "Now, I've got all that's needed
To make a good hell," and he succeeded.
He began by putting thorns all over the trees,
And mixed up the sand with millions of fleas.

He scattered tarantulas along the road,
Put thorns on the cactus and horns on the toad.
Lengthened the horns of the Texas steer,
And added a few inches to the rabbit's ear.

He put a little devil in the bronco steed,
And poisoned the feet of the centipede.
The rattlesnake bites you, the scorpion stings;
The mosquito delights you with his buzzing wings.

The sand burrs are there and so are the ants,
And if you sit down you'd better half-sole your pants.
The wild boar roams on the black chapparal;
It's a hell of a place that he has for a Hell.

The heat in the summer is a hundred and ten;
Too hot for the devil - too hot for men.

The red pepper grows on the banks of this brook,
And the Mexicans use it in all that they cook.
Just dine with one of them, and you're bound to shout:
"I've hell on the inside as well as out!"

My hands are calloused July to July;
I use the big dipper to navigate by.
Drive off the wolves to drink from my well,
So I have to be as mean as hell.

A sheepherder came to put up a fence;
I saw him one day, but I ain't seen him since.
But if you need mutton, we've got mutton to sell;
We're cow punchers, and we're mean as hell!

Neither me nor my pony has got a pedigree,
But he takes me where I'm wantin' to be.
I'll ride him to death, and when he has fell,
I'll get me another one as mean as hell.

The above-quoted poem called "Hell in Texas," written by a now-unknown-and-long-dead author, was probably composed for one of several reasons; he could have been a humorist; he could have been telling the truth; the author could have been disillusioned with the southwest and was trying to discourage his friends from coming out here; or, perhaps he was trying to emphasize in his own way the great influence of the southwest on immigrants and what they must expect when they came to this vast area.

No matter what the reason, the author was, in his own way, proving a point: The southwest has many different facets; some of which are quite attractive, and a few unpleasant ones. It matters little in what light one views them as they are all fascinating and are the result of change.

As we who are privileged to live here know, the southwest has a great influence of change on those people who, by one means or another, have migrated to this area. For the so-called "tenderfoot" from the East, the "prune picker" from the West, the "blue belly" from the North, and the "rebel" from the South, this area slowly insinuates its very own way into the newcomer's blood, causing him to change his way of speech, customs and dress.

To better understand the area of which we are talking, it is necessary to give the physical limitations of the southwest. This area may be defined as being bound on the north by the Colorado border, to the south by Mexico, to the west by the Pacific Ocean, and to the east by a line beginning at the south with the Pecos River of Texas and extending up through the eastern part of New Mexico. The southwest stretches from Beezlebub to Breakfast - - "The worst," some call it; these people feel that all it lacks to be Paradise is water and society, which, of course, is all they lack in hell.

To illustrate how the southwest so greatly influences those who come to this area - let us examine the first Europeans to this region - the Spanish Conquistador.

In the early 16th century, tales of great riches reached the ears of King Carlos. Some of his Spanish Conquistadores had returned from the new world, and told his majesty about the seven cities of Cibola, and the Gran Quivira. No, they hadn't seen these fabled cities, but they heard of their existence from Alvar Nunez Cabeza de Vaca, the conquistador who had been shipwrecked off the Texas coast in 1528. Along with three companions, de Vaca had been made prisoner by the cannibalistic Karankawa Indians. Finally escaping after years of slavery, the four resourceful Conquistadores walked across the deserts of the southwest for nearly ten months, covering three thousand miles, until they encountered a group of Spaniards on the west coast of Mexico.

De Vaca and his friends were the first Europeans to come to this area, passing through what is now El Paso in 1536. This brave Conquistador told his rescuers a tale he had heard from friendly Indians encountered in New Mexico, that - according to the Indians - there were seven large cities with some buildings as high as eight stories. Imbedded in the adobe walls of these buildings were many precious gems: diamonds, rubies and emeralds, which reflected the sun's light in splendor befitting many Gods. Also, to the east, in what is now Kansas, was supposed to be the Gran Quivira, an area that had streets paved with gold!

The King listened to these tales and others which centered around the southwest, then sent large expeditions to find Cibola and Quivira.

Since the Spaniards knew not what to expect when they traveled through this area, they came prepared for the worst. Into the holds of their ships went such things as: small cannon, polearms, swords, knives, matchlock muskets, crossbows, and various pieces of armor. As a matter of fact, there were several complete suits of armor, along with many three-quarter suits.

Horses "went along for the ride," and armor for these equines was included in the first voyages over here. One must remember that the Spaniards were the ones to first introduce horses, cattle and livestock to the New World, and all this first came to the present-day United States right here at El Paso.

Landing in Mexico near present-day Veracruz, the Conquistadores were at first thought of as being Gods by the terrified Indians, for they had never seen horses before, and to them, these strange things were to be feared!

At first, there was no opposition. Tenochtitlan, Aztec capital upon which Mexico City is now built, was captured with little effort. The Aztec Indians were forced to give up their golden jewelry, idols, etc., to their greedy conquerors. Finally, they revolted, and many brave Spaniards were killed before this proud race was practically exterminated.

Having disposed of the local opposition, the Conquistadores started sending expeditions northward to New Mexico in a vain search for the seven cities of Cibola, and the Gran Quivara. The farther along on their journey, the more their ways changed due to the topography of their area.

At first, on leaving the cool mountains around Tenochtitlan, the Conquistadores immediately noticed the heat. The burning desert sun caused extreme discomfort to those who wore either complete or three-quarter suits of armor. There are several instances recorded in which some armor-clad Conquistadores died of heat prostration, due to the intense temperatures generated by the sun bearing down on them in these mobile iron stoves, which gave them near-perfect protection from the Indian's obsidian arrowheads and war clubs.

The iron pants and armguards were the first to be discarded. Next, a stiff, thick leather jerkin - or vest - took place of the breastplate and backplates. These latter two items did accompany the soldiers on their journeys, but most of the time were kept in convenient carts, and were worn only in time of imminent battle.

Since the powerful, dray-type horses were most important to the Spaniards, their armor was either quickly modified or disposed with. In most cases the chanfron - or head protector - of the horse was retained, but was seldom worn. The heavy saddle was greatly modified, and in order to reduce weight, the high fork and cantle were - by the time they reached this Pass of the North - almost eliminated. As a matter of fact, this early southwestern saddle looked like a large English riding saddle.

Polearms were shortened also. Originally being as long as twenty feet, the Conquistadores found that every inch cut off the shaft meant just that less amount of weight to carry across the desert.

Finally, the first wheellock muskets and pistols were brought to the new world by the Spaniards. These worked quite satisfactorily until they got to the El Paso southwest. An urgent message was sent back to Mexico City, requesting that the various groups in this area be immediately supplied with the old matchlock muskets, as sand from the desert quite often got into the delicate mechanism of the wheellock, rendering it inoperative.

Jackboots - those hot, hip-high boots worn by the early explorers to this area - were quickly cut down to just below the knee, affording more relief from the heat, and greater maneuverability while climbing the mountains of the southwest.

Encountering a vastly different type of land and Indians who fought in a different way, the Conquistadores also changed their tactics, discarding old methods and weapons, while occasionally adopting new.

It was found that their large, heavy spurs, which they first wore in their conquest around Mexico City, got in their way. The spurs often became entangled in their horse's trappings, and the Spaniards modified the design of these, too. Even today, if one compares a spur from, say, Oaxaca, Mexico, with one made in Chihuahua, some three hundred miles to the north, this is most evident. The Oaxaca spur is much larger and more bulky, reflecting the design so greatly influenced by the Conquistadores in the various areas along his march to the southwest, four hundred years ago.

It is said that the Spanish Conquistador conquered the southwest. This is true, but the southwest also conquered the Conquistador.

When Francisco Coronado and subsequent Spaniards came to this area, they brought with them Christianity and civilization, along with all the good and evil which followed. They also introduced technology, and made contributions of European customs, which are an important part of today's southwest. These contributions to this area are quite obvious, if one would give a bit of thought to the matter. This may be illustrated in three ways:

The first contribution is the truly southwestern "cowboy boot." From the long, clumsy, hot, jackboot the Conquistadores first wore to this area evolved our modern cowboy boot with its many variations, creating a most vital and lucrative industry.

Secondly - there is the spur. From the cruel, ugly roweled Conquistador's spur of the 1540's, we now have spurs that are true creations of practicality and works of art.

The once-bulky, uncomfortable, Spanish saddle has been greatly modified to a most comfortable seat for those who ride for work or pleasure. I'm sure that the tenderfeet who have forked a saddle will disagree with me, saying that the saddle is a tool of the devil, changing the word, "tenderfeet" to "tenderseat." But for those of us who have had the fortune to "ride before we walked," there is no greater pleasure than to climb on a saddle worn by an easy-gaited horse, ride out in this wonderful country, and perhaps do a bit of reflecting on those brave men, the Spanish Conquistadores, who greatly made it possible for us to enjoy this section of God's country, the great American southwest, a true land of enchantment.

I close this by thanking you for coming to El Paso, and joining with the other members of the El Paso meeting committee in extending all of you an invitation to come visit us once more, for there are no strangers out here.

As the Conquistadores would have probably said: "Buenas Noches, y Hasta la vista" or "good night, until we meet again."



SAN JACINTO MONUMENT - HOUSTON, TEXAS. WHERE TEXAS WON IT'S FREEDOM.