

Packing in the Sierra

By Henry M. Brown
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I have never packed professionally but I admire those who have. Like most professions it calls for real expertise—in this case with animals and people, along with chat, add general sobriety and some financial experience and, according to John Crowley, the ability to deal with, or at least tolerate unreasonable people.

But I wish to speak of packers (arrieros) who may or may not meet all these requirements but who compensate for them in other ways. This topic is appropriate in Lone Pine where packing reached a peak only equalled in Mineral King. Fortunately Clarence King left us an excellent description of the 1871 visit on his climb of Whitney.

The American residents of Lone Pine outskirts live in a homeless fashion; sullen, almost arrogant neglect stares out from the open doors. There is no attempt at grace, no memory of comfort no suggested hope for improvement

Not so the Spanish homes; their low, adobe, wide-roofed cabins neatly enclosed with even fence, and lining hedge of blooming holly hock.

We stopped to bow good morning to my friend and stage companion, the donna. She sat in the threshold of her open door, sewing; beyond her stretched a bare floor, clean and white; the few chairs, the table spread with snowy line, everything shone with an air of religious spotlessness. Symmetry reigned in the precise, well-kept garden, arranged in rows of pepper plants crisp heads of vernal lettuce.

Under the eaves above her, quite around her, and quite around the house, hung, in triple row, festoons of flaming red peppers, in delicious contrast with the rich adobe grey.

It was a study of order and true womanly repose, fitted to cheer us, and a grouping of such splendid color as might tempt a painter to cross the world.

The Olivas Family came to Alta California in the same manner all early settlers did - by pack train. The Overland Trail from Sonora or Baja California required good packing technique over an unforgiving desert crossing. From Caborca, Sonora to Temecula was actually the first route of the California Gold Rush. The Sonora Miners were in California before the news reached the East Coast. That was also the route where Joaquin Murietta drove San Joaquin wild horses to Mexico.

Most of these early arrieros were called to other activities in California but there was still the roadless desert which was gaining in importance with the increase in silver mining as it moved from Western Nevada to Owens Valley. People who followed silver mining north from Zacatecas, Mexico. We can also credit Zacatecas for the start of the Rancho System that gradually covered all of the west.



VAQUERO

I rode with Pete Olivas across the Alabama Hills (in a car) and he told of his father and grandfather in the packing business. He also told of his experiences in the movies, helping shoot Westerns and he described it in relation to certain landmarks and natural features there.

Pete's own career was mainly as a vaquero and as a mountain packer together with his brother, Henry. They were among the early packers hired by Ike Livermore to pack the Sierra Club during the 1940s.

I have known and packed with arrieros and vaqueros in their native Mexican Sierra who knew no other way of life—some on mountain ranchos that had never seen a vehicle. In the 1960s and 1970s they were making the transition from mules to pickups.