

# Alexander F. Harmer

## Images from the Glass Photographic Plates of the Artist of the Californio

By William Reynolds

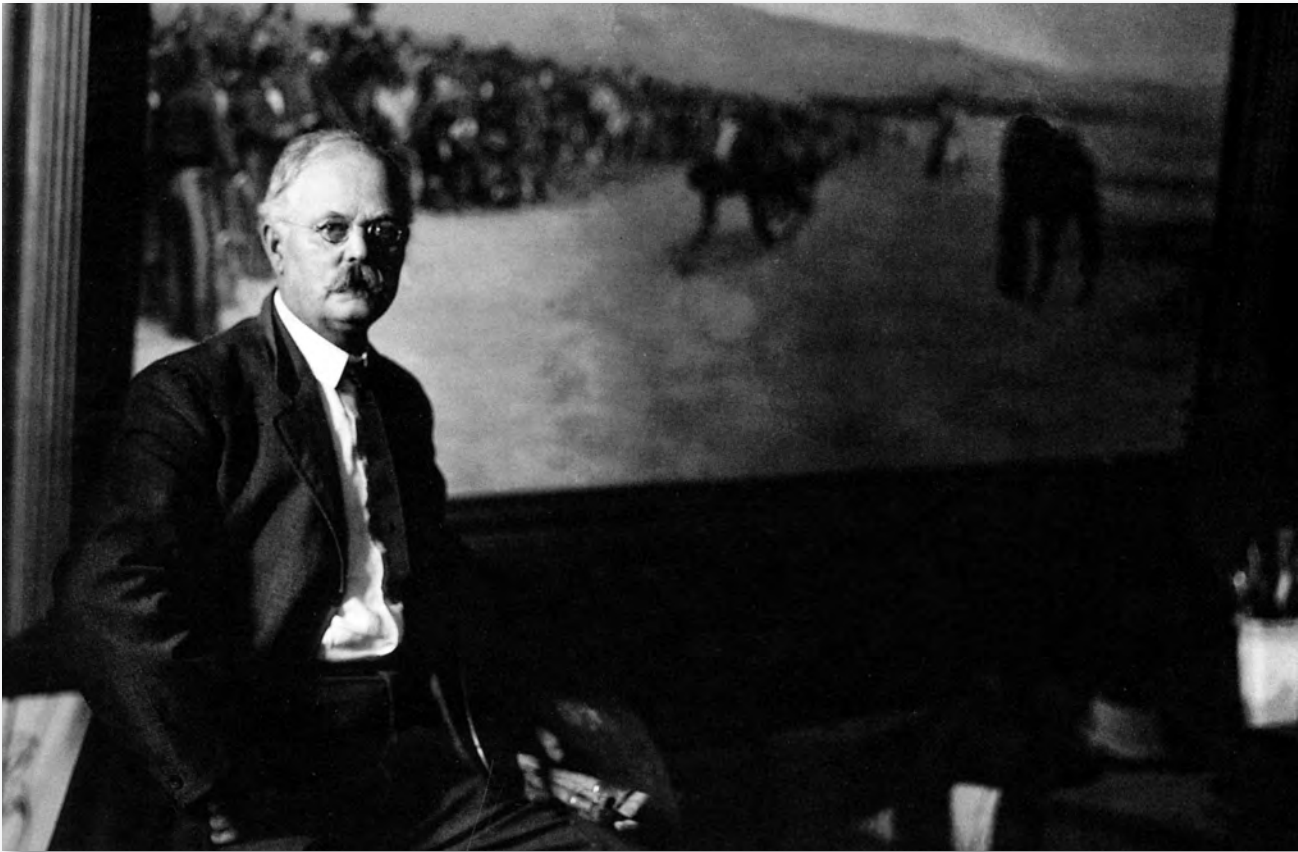


Image from glass plate negative of Alexander Harmer standing in front of *The Chicken Pull*

In July of 1899, the renaissance publisher, editor and artist, Charles F. Lummis wrote of a new artist he was using to illustrate his magazine of the southwest, *The Land Of Sunshine*,

*Whether by shrewd deliberation or by natural gravitation, Alexander Harmer has made a field (of art)*

*peculiarly his own. No other painter has given so much attention to the Californio of the old times – and for that matter, no other painter knows the subject one-half as well.*

Those words aptly describe a special person in the history of early California and vaquero art and only begin to introduce the artistic and social contributions





Image from glass plate negative of the Harmer children

made by Alexander Harmer (1856-1925), an artist considered to be the first important painter of the West and a leader in California's art community of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Harmer was a pioneer in the portrayal of the fantasy of the West and his most

popular contributions must lie within his collected works that celebrated the memories and visions of the people and ways of the early California vaquero.

Alexander Harmer was born in 1856 in Newark, New Jersey, and joined the army at a too-young age by lying to the military, so he could take part in the Indian wars of the 1870s. He was only sixteen and he had found he needed to be at least twenty in order to enlist. Even then he listed his occupation as painter and though he planned to fulfill his five-year enlistment, he requested to be discharged after only a year in order to attend the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts. In 1874, after already



Image from glass plate negative of the painting, *Roping Los Olas*

being recognized as having significant talent, he started a two-year term at the Academy. One of the main reasons he was so set on attending that particular school was to study under the big-dog of the time, Thomas Eakins.

Harmer would venture West and return with fresh ideas and sketched work but ultimately would have to re-enlist in the army when his funds ran low. He joined Troop L of the Sixth Cavalry in 1881 and was assigned to Fort Apache, Arizona and later joined a field expedition after the Chiricahua Apaches and their chief, Geronimo. His travels West during the 1880s were in the opposite direction of most of his peers, most who were heading off to Europe and points east. Harmer

settled in Mexico in the late 1880s after his stint with the military, then traveled north to California. He became familiar with the California coastline and briefly established a studio in San Francisco. His time in San Francisco led to an interest in the California's mission period and he ultimately would leave on a personal journey to study the Franciscan mission trail, sketching feverishly along the way, many showing the missions in their current states of disrepair. One of his studies, which later became one of his most important oil paintings, depicts the Mission San Luis Rey. The painting was commissioned, supposedly, by Mrs. Juan Forster, a descendant of the Del Valle family and is purportedly the first commissioned painting Harmer was paid for. The Forster family was prominent in art circles of the time having participated in what would



Image from glass plate image of *The Chicken Pull*

become another significant painting of the era, that being the famous *Roping the Bear at Santa Margarita Rancho of Juan Forster*, an 1876 oil on canvas by James Walker. (The painting can be seen today as part of the permanent collection of the Denver Art Museum.)

Harmer's love of the early history of California led him to meet one of the most important people he would come across, ironically when he was about to leave California to study once again at the Academy in Philadelphia. In 1888, Harmer became fast friends with Charles Lummis. Lummis shared Harmer's love of the Hispanic culture of the past days of Alta California and they both held concerns for the restoration of the California Missions. Lummis would go on to be the center of that passion-play and create the "Landmarks Club of California" in 1894 dedicated to the task of rebuilding the missions – and the ethnic romance attached to them. Lummis called upon Harmer to assist him with the publication *Land Of Sunshine* – a magazine dedicated to the mission task that celebrated the focus on the area's prose, poetry and art. Harmer created numerous illustrations and paintings during this period and of his work Lummis said, "Harmer is particularly and undisputedly the artist of the Apaches and the old-time California."

It was Lummis, who early on, introduced Harmer to the Del Valle family, said to be among the last of the area's old Spanish families to have retained the "old ways" of their



Image from glass plate negative of *Indian Girl*



Harmer at right with his mentor, Charles F. Lummis in front of Harmer's studio in Santa Barbara, circa 1920s



culture. Their ranch, Camulos would be the inspirational setting for Helen Hunt Jackson's book, *Ramona*. The reenactments and settings would be the subject of many photographs joyously taken by Lummis and became the fuse that launched Harmer into his most important period, that of depicting the halcyon days of the ranchos and the *vaquero*. The subject of old California would become the new imagery that would fill Harmer's work and become an important window on the past that helped define the *vaquero* culture of California. Among his most popular scenes were depictions of fiestas or fandangos, such as his *A Day At Pacheco's*. The scene depicts the arrival of the Don



Image from glass plate negative of Harmer and his wife Felicidad enjoying the afternoon

of Casa Pacheco on a festive Spanish holiday or occasion. Harmer did a number of variations of this work – the first a large pen and ink and wash. The work speaks to the quality of the enjoyment people of the ranchos shared during this bucolic period of the Californio – after the secularization of the missions in the early 1800s and before the great draught of the 1860s. As Harmer himself described the dream like subject in his pen and ink:

*Men and women were thick as bees, swarming about the place in the honey-sweet air. Tall, handsome caballeros and pretty, plump senioritas, ninos that were as happy and*



Image from glass plate negative of Harmer and one of his children at home

*healthy as only children can be who breathe the salt air that comes in from the Pacific seas; old men and women with the fire of life shinning in their bead-bright eyes, though their skin was withered and shrunken; young men and girls, laughing and gay, and in love. These and the Indians – scores upon scores of them – and the horses, such as you never see now on the rancho, these, I say, made up a mass of moving, glowing life that day at Pacheco's.*

Harmer would produce scenes that depicted the *vaquero* at work and play – such as *The Chicken Pull* – a large oil that showed the *vaquero* from various ranchos of the region involved in sport. The painting's name comes from the sport of burying a chicken in the soft sand at the seashore – the rider would race by, pulling the chicken from the sand. It is a recreation of the era that today would probably not receive widespread acceptance. The same could be said for Harmer's *Roping Los Olas*. Whether it is the action of *vaquero* sport, the glorious depiction of fiesta, or pastoral images of people simply living their lives, Harmer's works give great insight into and era long gone, but fondly remembered. The black and white images shown in this story were made from the glass negative plates used by Harmer to record the various paintings he created.

