

Ernest Morris

HORSEMAN, ARTIST, AND RIATA MAN

by William C. Reynolds

DOWN A NARROW COUNTRY LANE NEAR the little town of Templeton, California, stands the home ranch and studio of third-generation California cattleman Ernest Morris. Ernest, or Ernie as he is known, is a true Westerner. A horseman, a stockman, and an artist, at 79 he treasures and continues to live the ways of the California vaquero. His grandfather Jesse Wilkinson worked as a cowboy on the old Miller and Lux Company and was instrumental in helping Ernie learn one of the skills that have made him legendary: braiding riatas.

Like his grandfather, Ernie has worked on ranches all of his life. "My grandfather lived the life of the vaquero, and he was a master at making rawhide gear," Ernie says. "His work was highly sought after during the 1930s and 1940s and he always told me that he never made a piece of rawhide gear that he didn't hate to sell. When I asked him to teach me how to braid rawhide he said, 'I'll teach you the rawhide business from A to Z, if you'll make me two promises — not to cheat anyone and to do what I tell you.' I agreed. Then he said to me, 'If you can't get it, I want you barking at the hole.'"

One of the things that Ernie learned in carrying on his grandfather's artistic tradition was that a tough old Jersey cow is the best helper he could get. "Jersey hides make the best riatas in the world. A dried-up old jersey works is the ticket, when the fat goes out, the glue comes in, and that's what gives 'em strength." Like his grandfather's work, Ernie's work has been highly sought after by collectors over the years. More important to him is the fact that so much of his work is being used: "Doesn't do any good hangin' on a peg."

He is also pleased to see the resurgence of interest in the bridle horse culture. "Those horses of the old California vaquero mission trails were something. They [bridle horses] were responsive. When you picked up one of the bridle reins, the weight of them was all that horse needed for a signal. There



California cattleman Ernest Morris.

was no strong-arming them. Back then a hackamore horse was the same way. A good hackamore horse was broke. There was nothing finer than to go to sleep at night thinking of handling the reins of a hackamore horse or a bridle horse made along this mission trail country."

In addition to his rawhide work, Ernie is also known for his

"Paradise on earth is found in the pages of a book, the arms of a woman or on the back of a horse."

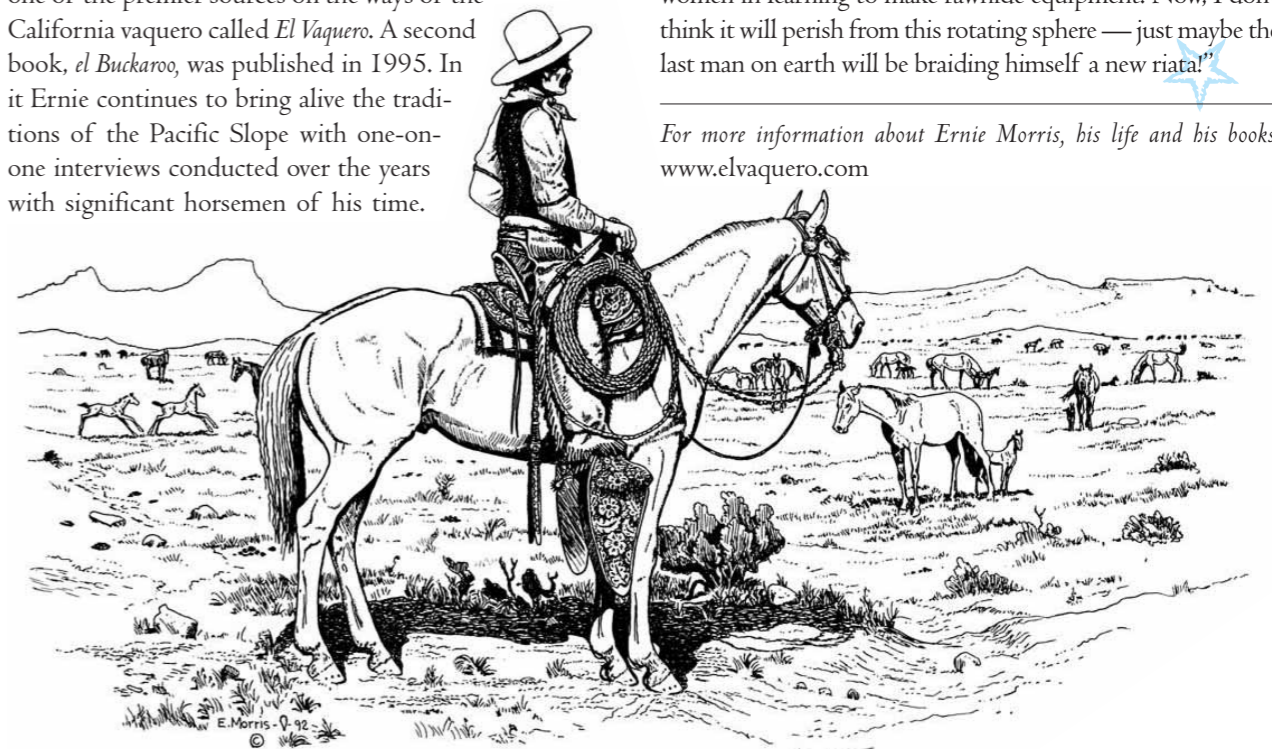
—Jesse Wilkinson, grandfather of Ernie Morris

art depicting the ways of the vaquero. "Horses, cattle, and horsemanship have been very important to me throughout my life, and my art has reflected that from day one," he says. "As a young boy, drawing horses and cattle seemed to come to me naturally and I did lots of it. It showed up on my schoolbooks, lunch pails, and whatever else I could find."

In 1964, with the support of his wife, Blanche, he embarked on a career in art. He looked to some of the masters for inspiration. "I have always admired the artistic talent of Charlie Russell, Will James, and Ed Borein," he says. "They left many beautiful pictures of ranch life as it was during their lifetimes."

He says an art career needs a good start — a good education and being very dedicated to the work. "A married person would need an understanding spouse to be part of the dedication necessary for a successful career!" Ernie has had that in spades: He and Blanche have been married 52 years and have worked side by side throughout his career.

In addition to his art, Ernie has published a number of books. In 1989 he wrote and illustrated what is considered one of the premier sources on the ways of the California vaquero called *El Vaquero*. A second book, *el Buckaroo*, was published in 1995. In it Ernie continues to bring alive the traditions of the Pacific Slope with one-on-one interviews conducted over the years with significant horsemen of his time.



In 1999 he published *Riata Men*, an intimate look at the cowboy's life through Ernie Morris' eyes. His latest book, *California Cowboy Creations*, is an interesting combination of handy "cowboy" inventions, ideas, and horsemanship information, along with "picture creation thoughts and techniques" that Ernie has is often asked about. It is an impressive bibliography for a man whose life's work has been the artistic preservation of a colorful cowboy way of life. "All of my art is my own creation as my love of the open range is such that I have wanted to preserve the memory of the West — and the California vaquero."

If you sit down with Ernie Morris in his little studio, you can feel the present mingling with the past and flowing toward the future. His respect for those horsemen of times past runs deep and clear. It is a river that continues to carry him along. He's encouraged that more people are interested in the old ways. "There seems to be a lot of interest among men and women in learning to make rawhide equipment. Now, I don't think it will perish from this rotating sphere — just maybe the last man on earth will be braiding himself a new riatas!"

For more information about Ernie Morris, his life and his books, www.elvaquero.com

