

# A Quiet Renaissance

AN APPRECIATION OF THE VAQUERO WAY OF HORSEMANSHIP IS A LIFELONG PURSUIT FOR PHOTOGRAPHER HEATHER HAFLEIGH.

By William C. Reynolds

**A** YOUNG MAN IN A FLAT-BRIMMED HAT IS trotting his horse 20 miles to where he will start his day working cattle. In contrast to those caught up in the accelerated pace of life brought on by technology, there are still some out there content to live without digital downloads and instead to live a rather basic life on horseback.

For these hearty, committed types the tradeoff is worth it. Theirs is a world of freedom: being outdoors, responding to the demands of the cow boss and nature's timetable, working their horses, and perfecting their skills—many still focused on the traditions of the California *vaquero*. These traditions are based upon competency and capability, self-reliance, and putting the well-being of the cattle they tend and the ranch they work for above all else. Whether it's I5 below or I05, the cattle and horses are their concern. It is work viewed with honor by those who have chosen to stay at it. It's a life many feel has disappeared. It hasn't, though—it's just a little hard to find.

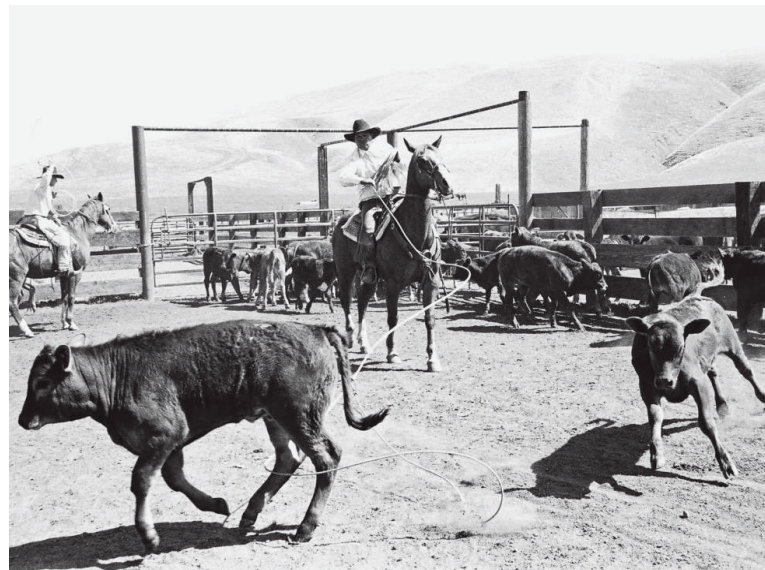
Berkeley, California, photographer Heather Hafleigh has been celebrating the living traditions of the California *vaquero* in

her work since the late 1980s. She grew up in Arizona and began riding at age 4, gaining a real love of horses early on. When we spoke recently about her passion for the *vaquero* traditions she explained how she came to find her lifelong subject.

"I was raised horseback, and after we moved to California I seemed to always have horses around," she says. "I had started seriously taking pictures in the late 1960s, but I suppose the real moment for me was going to one of the early Cowboy Poetry Gatherings in Elko, Nevada, in the mid-1980s. I walked in the door and the first person I met was Randy Reiman."

At that time, Reiman was cowboying on a ranch in Tres Pinos, California. He had come to Elko to recite some of his poetry. During this time, he was also learning to braid rawhide from Bill Dorrance.

"Later [Reiman] invited me to my first branding and it happened to be on Bill Dorrance's ranch. Back then, I really didn't know that much about the traditions of *vaquero* horsemanship and cattle work, so I pretty much figured this was the way everybody did it—that all brandings were handled in such a graceful and



**Buddy Montes throws his reata to catch two heels—the "perfect loop."** Rancho San Emigdio branding, 2000.

exemplary way," Heather says. "I didn't realize at the time what a special thing I was seeing—and photographing. After I got around a little bit, I realized I had found my subject—as well as a way of life worth celebrating and encouraging."

What she had found was a way of handling horses and cattle based on a kind of mutual respect, founded upon ways that transcend time. In fact, worry about time has little to do with it. The *vaquero* way of handling horses is all about taking enough time and believing that each horse will progress at his own pace. So it is not unusual for horses to take many years before they can carry the bridle correctly and be considered a "straight-up" bridle horse.

"It really takes seeing it," Heather explains, "it takes seeing some of these horses that maybe a friend or a parent or a grandparent has raised for it to sink in just how amazing these horses are and just how well they can do their job, with such seemingly effortless grace."

Many of Heather's photographs are centered on the activity of branding and try to capture the action itself. "I have photographed people forever, and yet it took some real watching and understanding early on to learn how to photograph the art of *reata* roping and to get the point across as to how amazing the skill level is with some of these hands."

Heather agrees that there seems to be a true renaissance occurring around the *vaquero* style of horsemanship and roping. Many riders today, men and women both, are seeing that taking the time—six, seven, 10 years of training—can make an exceptional horse. "Additionally," she adds, "there's an aesthetic that is being re-appreciated, in many cases because of the legacies of people like Bill Dorrance and his brother Tom and their contribution to this way of handling horses and stock."

There is a unique feel to both the activities and the fine gear used in the *vaquero* tradition. "The gear is not just pretty—it works well," Heather says. "The horses like the bits in their mouths because the bit maker understands, just as a fine custom saddle really fits because the saddle maker understands. I think both from the maker's and user's perspective one can see the pride in



**TOP: Deeth and Jay Harney, spring roundup at the Goram Ranch, Copperopolis, California, 1998. ABOVE: Arleah Fields at her branding, 2004.**

the work: pride in the way the horses work—the ease and responsiveness—with the rider and horse of one mind. It shows in the way the cattle are worked, and ultimately it shows on the land. If you don't run the cattle and are easy on them at the branding, they'll do better at the sale. If you're respectful of the land and easy on it, it will last longer."

That pride in a job done right and with care shows in Heather's photographs as well—both in her subject and in her execution. Her images celebrate the "big circle" of people and animals working within Nature's rules. "Considering the state of the planet today," she concludes, "I believe what we have [in the *vaquero*] is a group of people who have found something real, value based and time tested. Anyone who has dealt with Nature realizes

she is running the show. You can't hurry the rain just as you can't hurry the calves to be born."

Heather has devoted more than 18 years to documenting contemporary ranchers, horsemen, and craftsmen in California carrying on the *vaquero* tradition, and her work is widely exhibited and is in the collections of the Autry Museum of Western Heritage, the Oakland Museum of California, and the Western Folklife Center in Nevada. To find out more about Heather's work, visit [www.heatherhafleigh.com](http://www.heatherhafleigh.com).