

THE OPEN RANGE

REMEMBERING JOAQUIN MURRIETA

This July, with temperatures well over the century mark, 150 riders, most of them members of charro groups dedicated to preserving the traditions of the Mexican cowboy, donned their best sombreros and silver saddles to take part in the annual 67 mile ride from Madera to the Arroyo Cantua, near Three Rocks, California. The pilgrimage honors the memory of Joaquin Murrieta, a controversial figure, who has been called an outlaw and a Mexican Robin Hood.

The Murrieta ride began in 1980 when Jess Lopez and Sigurdur Christopherson wanted to call attention to a modern-day injustice concerning the plight of migrant workers being forced from their homes in Three Rocks.

“Historically, it’s a link to our past, and spiritually, it’s a way we, as Hispanics and Latin-Americans, can honor the contributions of someone like Joaquin Murrieta,” says 2001 co-organizer David Austin.

This year’s pilgrimage drew more than 1,000 visitors. Following the ride, charro performers put their horses, a breed known as Azteca (Andalusian sire/Quarter Horse mare) through their paces doing various tricks and the Spanish Steps.

According to legend, Murrieta was born in 1832 in Sonora, Mexico. He went north during the gold rush to stake a claim in the California fields. There are several versions of why he



turned outlaw, but the general belief is that miners beat Joaquin, stole his claim, raped his wife, and hung his brother. Vowing an oath of justice, Joaquin lit out on the bandit trail. His daring deeds quickly became the stuff that legends are made of—quickly a \$5,000 reward for ‘Joaquin’s’ capture was posted. Captain Harry Love, a former Texas Ranger, led 20 men up and down California in search of the elusive bandit. And on July 23, 1853, Love claimed to have killed *El Famoso*, “the famous one.” There is still a question about who really died that hot summer day on the Arroyo Cantua. And if it wasn’t Joaquin, what became of him?

—Chelley Kitzmiller