***Happenin’s ’Round the House***

*Rachel Barnes, Education and Volunteer Coordinator*

Amidst all the fun that is the 2015 Cowboy Festival, don’t forget to hike up to Bill Hart’s hilltop mansion… we are also planning a “herd” of activities for visitors. In addition to offering self-guided tours of the iconic home on the Saturday and Sunday of Cowboy Festival weekend, the kids will have a chance to make their own serape, sombrero, and horse pal (hours for all activities are on the Hart Museum website).

Wait. Serape? Sombrero?

Although the word “cowboy” often calls to mind the tall, dark, and rugged Texan astride his trusty mount, with his straight-sided-and-rounded-corner-crown Stetson planted firmly on head, the iconic Texas cowboy is not the only one to play a role in the history of cowboy-ness. In fact, California’s own cowboy history predates the famous Texas tradition by some 100+ years and has its very own distinct culture and look.

That history starts in the early 1500s, with the arrival of Spanish explorers in Mexico and Central America. They brought with them horses and cattle, and quickly established ranches on their new lands. The heat of the western sun prompted early ranchers to wear a large brimmed hat with a pointed crown, and a chin strap to hold it in place. The brim on the hat was so large in fact, it cast a shadow around the head of the wearer, and so the hat was called *sombrero* from the Spanish word *sombra*, meaning “shadow.”

The early Spanish explorers also took note of the blanket garments the Aztecs wore, which they wove from cotton and agave cactus, and dyed with juices pulled from insects and fruits. A simple and utilitarian dress for hard workers, it did not take long for the new Spanish settlers to adopt the style themselves. The Spanish and Indian cowboys took to the serape since it’s simple shape meant a variety of uses: body covering, blanket for sitting or sleeping on the ground, blanket for the horse’s saddle, protection from the elements, and even an impromptu sack should the need arise.

As Spanish exploration and conquest gave way to the rise of a Mexican identity, both the sombrero and serape stayed on as requisite tools for the Mexican vaquero (cowboy), a tradition and role that evolved from the earlier Spanish and Indian cowboys.

In the late 1700s, when Spain officially extended its reach into *Alta California*, the ranching industry, with the accompanying Spanish and Indian cowboys, was established on that land as well. Ships arriving from the east coast of the United States in the 1820s and 1830s prompted a surge in the California cattle industry, and the Mexican vaquero began his heyday (and “Mexican” since California was still Mexican territory at the time). He would become the symbol of Old West California as the Gold Rush of 1849 brought in hordes of new settlers, all of whom demanded meat and leather, and even inspired those Texas cowboys (who saw their rise in the 1860s after the American Civil War) with his roping, livestock handling, and saddle cinching techniques. In other words, the Mexican vaquero – the cowboy of California – really was the foundation of the American cowboy.

Which is why we are celebrating him, and his accomplishments, at the Hart Museum during Cowboy Festival weekend. For not only does cowboy movie star Bill Hart owe a debt of gratitude to the vaquero for inspiring those Texas cowboys he emulated in his films, but Hart’s own property was once part of el Rancho San Francisco, the 44,000+ acre cattle ranch owned by that proud Mexican vaquero, don Antonio del Valle.

So come and join us for some vaquero fun this Cowboy Festival weekend! More information can be found on the museum’s website at [www.hartmuseum.org](http://www.hartmuseum.org/).