



Arabic in the Saddle

By Gary Paul Nabhan

Half a world away from where they originated, Arabic terms for horses, horsemen, home in the desert Southwest of the United States. These terms came from Arabic into Spanish, and then into American English when the Spanish and the "Anglo" traditions met.

In the early eighth century, a Muslim army of Arabs and North African Berbers conquered much of the Iberian Peninsula. In its south, a region the Arabs called al-Andalus, a Syrian Umayyad prince whose dynasty had been replaced by the Abbasids established a kingdom and a burgeoning civilization around the year 750. In 1492 came two important events: the discovery of the New World — opening a whole new hemisphere to Spanish and Portuguese colonization — and the final expulsion of the Muslims and Jews from Spain, who left a deep and permanent cultural imprint on the Spanish people.

As they colonized the New World, Spaniards — including Arab and Berber refugees — took along their horses, and the Arabic-origin words they brought with them for managing them are now deeply lodged in "cowboy lingo," the vernacular English and Mexican

Spanish of the desert borderlands of the United States and Mexico.

I began listening to cowboy lingo after I moved to one of the great old ranching communities of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands in 1975. My wife and I now keep horses, sheep, and turkeys, and we have frequent contact with working cowboys, ranchers, and large-animal veterinarians, all of whom use Arabic-derived terms, introduced into the region more than four-and-a-half centuries ago, as casually and nonchalantly as my children use computerspeak.

For instance, they refer to a rider of exceptional skill as "one damn fine jinete," a term that once referred to a fluid style of riding developed in North Africa for the battlefield and which now refers to the rider himself. The word came from the Sonoran Spanish



xinete , which was in turn derived from the Andalusian zanati, an echo of the name of the Zanatah tribe of what is now Algeria.

Sonoran vaqueros and the horsemen who've worked with them may still call their saddle an albardón , derived from the Iberian term albarda , which now means packsaddle and which came from the Arabic al-barda'a . Among the other tack such cowboys use is a leather belt they call an acion, from the Arabic as-siyur . A whip they call an azote — from the Arabic as-sut . Ringing straps are called argollas, from the Arabic allgulla . Perhaps my favorite Arabic-derived tack term is a widely used word for a headstall or rope halter: hackamore. It came straight from the Andalusian jaquima , which echoes the Arabic sakima , something worn on the head.

There are also many terms for the colors of animals that can be traced back to Arabic origins. Because I am color-blind, it took me a while before I even began to listen to the terms cowboys use for the hide colors of horses, cattle, and even sheep. But I could certainly pick out an almagre, a rust-colored stallion, and I knew that the term came from the Arabic al-magra , "red earth."



The color term that most puzzled me, however, was the use of the name Alice-Ann for a sorrel, a horse that is rusty brown from nose to tail. It took me some time to realize that it came from the Arabic al-azan, a kind of reddish wood, via the Spanish alazán . Recently, I read a limerick by a man named Jac that played on the apparent double meaning of " Alice-Ann ":

On the frontier a cowboy's best gal
Was called Alice Ann, and not Sal.
The trick is, of course,
That this friend was a horse
So an Alice could be a male pal.

*Gary Paul Nabhan is the author of 20 books, including **Why Some Like It Hot** (Island Press, 2004), on the co-evolution of communities and their native foods, and a forthcoming essay collection from the University of Arizona Press, **What Flows Between***

Dry Worlds: Culture, Agriculture and Cuisine in Arabian and American Deserts . He can be reached at gary.nabhan@nau.edu.