

RAMON AHUMADA

1868-1926

Ramon Ahumada was born in Batuc near Altar in the state of Sonora, south of the border community of Sasabe, on August 31, 1868. While he was still a small boy, his uncle, Jose Vega, who was mayordomo on the Arivaca Ranch, brought Ramon to Arizona to live with, and he was brought up with the Vega family, on that historic old Mexican land grant property northwest of Nogales. Jose Vega taught young Ramon on the cattle business. It was a case of a capable instructor training an extraordinarily apt and intelligent pupil with an instinct for cattle and horses. Ramon became, in the opinion of such long-time cowmen as Phil Clarke of Tucson and Harry Saxon of Willcox and many others who knew him well, one of the greatest cowboys ever produced in southern Arizona. These men not only speak admiringly of Ahumada's ability as a cowman and of his horsemanship but of his estimable and strong character, his almost fabulous generosity, the respect he commanded from his contemporaries and how well he knew that sun-drenched Altar Valley country, from the Baboquivari Mountains on the west to the Atacosas on the east between which nestled the Arivaca headquarters-for over a century. No animal moved, no blade of grass grew, no water hole filled, or went dry in that valley but that Ahumada knew it. John Kellner, of Tucson, Ramon Ahumada's nephew, and father of Alex Ramon Kellner, the Kansas City Athletics' famous pitcher, says that Ramon could follow a cow's trail over the rocks, through the gullies and up the arroyos with his horse on the run.

This Altar Valley country, straddling the border, has had a rich and colorful history. A full title to La Aribac land grant, or the Arivaca Ranch as it has long since become known, was issued to Tomas and Ignacio Ortiz on July 2, 1833, by the Pimeria Alta (northern Sonora and southern Arizona now) land department authorities. Application for this land, two leagues (17,000 acres) in extent, had been made, along with the cost price of \$30, by the Ortiz brothers' father in 1824, and he very likely had been running cattle there before that, as well as on the adjacent valley lands.

The Ortiz brothers sold out for \$2,000 in gold and 10,000 shares of stock to the Sonora Exploring and Mining Co. of which General Heintsleman was president and Charles D. Poston manager. The latter has often been called the "father" of Arizona by those with a predilection for loose language. The 1857 report to the stockholders of this Ohio incorporated company states, "... The Arivaca has much beautiful meadow land, fine pasture on the low surrounding hills for thousands of cattle; good oaks grow in the gulches, mesquite on the hills and on the lower ends of the stream, it is thickly lined for 3 or 6 miles with groves of cottonwood, ash, walnut and other useful woods for farming and mining purposes in sufficient quantities to answer all the demands of the two districts..... (the property) has 25 silver mines, the most famous of which are the San Jose, Santa Margarita, Basura, Blanca, Arenias, lost Tajitos, de Amado and la Purissima."

La Aribac land grant title was declared invalid by the Court of Private Land Claims around the turn of the century. All of this Altar Valley country became open for entry. But meanwhile settlers had moved in - miners, ranchers and so on, despite the "company's" efforts, and, unlike similar people on other grants to which the court did allow title, these Altar people did not become squatters who would eventually have to be moved off.

The Proceedings of the 13th Annual Convention of the Arizona Cattle Growers Association, published 37 years ago, states, "...the Arivaca Valley situated around the village of that name has had a most interesting history. Dr. Wilbur was one of the earliest cattlemen there and had about 200 cows. Pedro Aguirre had an immense flock of sheep consisting of 7,000 to 8,000 head, and also some

cattle..... In 1877 N. W. Bernard began in the cow business with headquarters at Arivaca, where he kept a small country store. Later, in 1878, John W. Bogan, who reports many of these details, also came in to the district and soon began a partnership with Bernard. This company later developed into the Arivaca Land and Cattle Company, with large herds over the country."

Bernard and Bogan became large operators and Ramon Ahumada became their foreman before he was old enough to vote. Bernard eventually owned a number of brands, each one of which was operated with different partners - the JNB, with Bogan; the BXP, with George Pusch; the JAC, with Bob Paul (one-time Pima sheriff); the NXA with Allen Bernard (later, a Tucson mayor); NCB with his son, J. Stewart Bernard; the V Slash Z with Virginia Sepeda Ahumada (Ramon's wife); the 76 with his own wife; the Heart K with John Kellner; and several others. In 1910 these were all merged to form the Arivaca Land and Cattle Co., Inc., with one share of stock going to each person for every three head of cattle with his brand on them. Ramon thus became a big partner in the outfit because some years before he had acquired 100 of the 76 brand cows by the will of Mrs. Bernard, and these cattle had multiplied greatly.

In the days before fences and land leases and federal control of so much of Arizona's rangelands, the Altar Valley round-ups were on a community basis. The various cattlemen would get together and elect a rodeo boss. Such early operators as Manuel King, W. B. Coverly, Bernabe Robles, George Atkinson, Rosario Brenna, Manuel Elias, Sabino Otero, Manuel Amado, Teofilio Aros, W. S. Sturges, Redondo Brothers and others would invariably choose Bernard's young foreman, Ramon Ahumada, to boss the round-up.

The drive would start about the middle of September below the unfenced boundary and sweep up the valley towards San Xavier Mission. Sometimes as many as 5,000 cattle would be sorted in one day, with a crew of from 70 to 80 men. Ahumada would break his crew down into 4 wagons, assigning one group to work certain valleys of the Baboquivari foothills, another towards the east in the Atacosas, and so on, covering and up-country sweep 40 miles wide over countless hills, arroyos, flats, and even mountains. As the sorted and gathered bunches were driven in the day's capsite, the confusion to almost everybody would seem complete. But as the sun went down, order would gradually emerge, the calves being driven off in one direction, various bunches of 2 and 3 year-old steers being merged into one driving herd, the mother cows, minus their calves, trailing off for their more familiar ranges, and other bunches going off under a little guidance from the cowboys to just where their owners wanted them. Old-timers still marvel at Ahumada's timing.

After the annual rodeo, the Arivaca's well-mounted cowboys would be sent out to ride the range. The Arivaca's horses were raised on that part of the ranch called the Tres Bellotas, on the Mexican line. The foundation mares were 20 Standardbreds that John Bogan bought on the coast. These were bred to Thoroughbred stallions. The caballada grew to some 200 mares, everyone of which had a name. Ahumada knew them all. The stallions would each have a manada of mares, and oldtimers still remember many of the great cow horses and polo ponies the ranch produced. The Arivaca's horses sold widely and were well trained. Ahumada used four caponeras, or bell mares, each with her bunch of young horses, so by the time the geldings were ready for breaking they were half gentle.

Like most Mexican vaqueros, Ramon Ahumada's horsemanship was superb. He rode with that easy grace and effortless dash which somehow inspires an

alert horse to extra effort. And he frequently rode the same horse all day. The Texans, who "invaded" the Altar Valley after 1914 or so, would express their disapproval of riding the same horse 60 or 80 miles in one day when others were available. But Ahumada and his Mexican cowboys' horsemanship, compared with the stiffly erect, somewhat strained, I-am-the-boss Texas style, left each Arivaca man's horsefresher after a day's work than those used by the Tejanos, relay fashion.

Ahumada had a knack for handling men, assigning jobs to the various owners and cowboys alike with such courteous tact that they seldom realized they were being "bossed."

"I remember his ability to handle unexpected situations," Phil Clarke recalls. One time Ramon and a cowboy were riding some of the rougher Baboquivari country. They topped a rocky divide and surprized a group of seven Yaqui Indians, all with rifles, butchering a company beef down in the arroyo. In those days discretion with armed Yaquis was the better part of valor. But instead of riding off, Ahumada slowly descended for a "parleta." After a few minutes of low-voiced conversation, several of the Yaquis smiled itself a measure of some accomplishment, and handed Ahumada the lomenta, the choice loin. Ramon talked to the head chief telling them they could eat the beef, but hang the hide to dry. He slowly walked away to his horse, knowing any minute he could be shot. Next day the hide was there.

Another time, the Arivaca had bought a bunch of Mexican cattle which were delivered unexpectedly on the Sonora side of the line, some 15 miles west of Sasabe, the legal port of entry. It just happens that the country where the cattle arrived, on this side of the line, is fairly easy going, while directly across it is rough going. It was getting late in the day. The cattle inspector was along so crossing them over for an easy drive to Sasabe was not possible. Herding them there on the Sonora side would have meant a slow drive in the dark, with chances of losing some of the wild, excited bunch. Ahumada assigned his men and then talked the cattle inspector into riding off to the west on some task that seemed plausible to him, a man not easily fooled. Naturally, the cattle were then driven, on the run, to the American side and crossed over again just before they reached Sasabe, to comply with the regulations and pay the duty. The inspector arrived just in time to sign the papers.

Ahumada stayed with the Arivaca until 1917 and had become quite wealthy. Years before he had married Virginia Zepeda, a descendent of don Jose Joaquin Moraga, co-founder with de Anza, of the city of San Francisco in 1775. They were an ideal couple, devoted, and, because they had no children of their own, especially fond of the numerous youngsters of the various owners who visited the ranch.

In 1917 ownership of the company was shuffled around and from it emerged the West Coast Cattle Co., with offices in Tucson. Ahumada stayed on at Arivaca. The fine herd of commercial Herefords which had gradually replaced the Arivacas early Mexican cattle were sold off. The business became largely concerned with buying and selling Sonora cattle and soon got into financial difficulties. Ramon Ahumada is said to have lost over a \$100,000.00.

A few years later he was out riding in the Baboquivaris with Luis Romero, one of his cowboys, when the latter's frisky bronc humped up. Romero was thrown and Ahumada roped the bronc (he always used an 80-foot reata), but his saddle turned and he, too, fell off, striking his head on a rock. With much painful difficulty he was taken to a hospital. After a stay of two weeks, he was released and told to take it easy for a long time. But he didn't. He

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went back to work and suffered some sort of attach from which he never fully recovered. He died two years later, on Jan. 13, 1926.

(Riding toward Jalisco north of Arivaca. When he roped the bronc, he dallied the rope and part of his horse's mane caught on the horn of his saddle which made his horse bolt.)