

HORSEMEN OF THE TROPICS: A COMPARATIVE VIEW OF THE LLANEROS IN THE HISTORY OF VENEZUELA AND COLOMBIA*

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In his engrossing monograph, *The Colombian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, 1972), Alfred W. Crosby, Jr. suggests that the most characteristically Iberian figure in colonial American history was the rancher on horseback surveying his herds of cattle. Since many of the colonist were cattlemen in Spain, the quickly embraced the plains, the Llanos and the pampas of the New World, driving cattle into them and letting the multiplying herds provide the basis for an easy livelihood.¹ Known regionally as *vaqueros*, *chorros*, *llaneros*, *huasos* and *gauchos*, these cowboys all used techniques invented by medieval Iberians, such as the constant use of the horse, periodic rodeos, branding, and overland drives. At the same time, conditions peculiar to the American environment modified aspects of their culture, and the resulting differences were fundamental.²

This essay highlights some of these differences by focusing on perhaps the most fascinating but least studied cowboy subculture, the Llaneros of Venezuela and Colombia.³ Taking into account the geographical

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1. Alfred W. Crosby, Jr., *The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492* (Westport, 1972), pp. 85-86.

2. Richard W. Slatta, «Cowboys and Gauchos», *Américas*, 33 (March, 1981), 3.

3. For Venezuela, Raymond E. Crist, *Etude Géographique du Venezuela Occidental*

environment, it traces the emergence of the Llaneros as an identifiable group under Spanish rule and assesses their role in the Wars of Independence. Next, by contrasting popular conceptions of the Llaneros with the reality of their existence since 1824, it shows how their historical experience differed from the gauchos and the other horsemen of the Americas.

The Llanos are the plains that cross northern South America. Bounded by the Andes in the west and north, the lower Orinoco River and the Guiana Highlands in the east, and the Guaviare River and the Amazonian rain forest in the south, they comprise an area the size of Texas and equal one third of Venezuela's territory and one fifth that of Colombia. Flat as a billiard table, they stretch to the horizon like an ocean covered with seaweed, broken occasionally by rivers and lagoons, clumps of trees and strips of thick forest along the swift-flowing waterways.⁴

Like the pampas, the Llanos are classified as «natural grassland», but while the temperate Argentina plains are ideally suited to livestock and agriculture, the tropical climate and geographic isolation of the Llanos work against the development of these activities. Located near the equator at an altitude of less than one thousand feet above sea level, the region endures an uncomfortably hot climate and a vicious, annual cycle of drought and flood. No rain falls for weeks or even months between November and April. The grass parches, the rivers shrink, and the lakes dry up entirely. Dust covers the vegetation. The ground cracks as if there had been an earthquake. Thousands of animals perish from thirst or starvation. By May the rains return, falling without interruption for days and peaking in June and October. Accumulations of 160 inches are normal. The grass becomes green again, but as the swollen streams overflow their banks, they flood thousands of square miles of lowlands. The animals must seek refuge on the islands of dry land that remain or drown.⁵ Given this situation, it is not surprising that the nutritional value of the grass is low, and the soil is largely infertile. Moreover, there are hundreds of varieties of mosquitoes, sandflies, ticks, vampire bats, poisonous snakes, crocodiles, alligators, electric eels, carib fish and jaguars native to the region. Finally, in contrast to the pampas, the Andes Cordillera effectively isolates the Llanos from contact with the highland settlements and ocean trade routes.⁶ Taking into account these liabilities, that livestock was able to acclimate here at all is a tribute to the biological resilience of the Andalusian breeds introduced by the Spanish.

(Grenoble, 1937) and Rafael Bolívar Coronado, *El Llanero* (Madrid, 1919) are still useful but sadly outdated. There are no scholarly studies of the Colombian Llanero. M. T. Cobas, «Guía bibliográfica para los Llanos Orientales de Colombia», *Boletín Cultural y Bibliográfico*, 8 (1965), 1888-1935 is an excellent guide to published sources.

4. C. Langdon White, «Cattle Raising: A Way of Life in the Venezuelan Llanos», *The Scientific Monthly*, 83 (September, 1956), 122.

5. F. J. Vergara y Velasco, *Nueva geografía de Colombia* (Bogotá, 1901-1902), p. 683.

6. J. Fred Rippy, «Dictators of Venezuela» in A. Curtis Wilgus, ed., *South American Dictators during the First Century of Independence* (Washington, D. C., 1937), p. 394.

The first cattle and horses to enter the Llanos probably escaped in the 1540's from herds being driven from ranches near Tocuyo, Venezuela to the savanna of Bogotá.⁷ These pioneers found forage difficult and proved an easy prey to the jaguars and crocodiles. By the end of the century, however, the Spanish broke the resistance of the Indians and established permanent towns on the edge of the plains. Adaption of technology and animals to the difficult environment was made. By 1650 as many as 140,000 steers may have grazed on the plains of Venezuela, and Santiago de las Atalayas, the capital city of the Provincia de los Llanos of new Granada (present day Casanare), was dispatching 5,000 head a year to the highland city of Tunja.⁸

By the eighteenth century, natural selection had produced vast herds of creole cattle—small, long-horned, slow maturing and varicolored— «as hardy a bovine as ever lived».⁹ In New Granada, the Jesuits were the biggest producers. Before they were expelled in 1767, they controlled nine haciendas with 50,000 cattle and nearly 4,000 horses.¹⁰ Private enterprise also played a role. Many *hatos* (ranches) lay in a zone one hundred miles wide along the Andes between the Pauto and Arauca Rivers. Cattle drives from Casanare to Sogamoso via the town of Labranzagrande were famous.¹¹ Yet despite modest growth, it would be wrong to portray the Llanos of New Granada as a «booming» frontier. Ranching was limited because the high land cities could obtain better quality animals from the savanna of Bogotá or the coast. Merchants of Cartagena blocked serious consideration of proposals to permit communities in the Llanos to trade directly with Guayana and Spain via the Meta and Orinoco Rivers.¹² Few Europeans ventured out to a region that offered so much hardship and so little reward.

In Venezuela, on the other hand, Bourbon policy in the late eighteenth century fostered a spectacular growth of ranching south of Caracas Province. Legalization of the export of hides and live animals to the Antilles reinforced the already steady demand for salted meat, leather and hides in the central highland valleys and the coast. Creole landowners began to acquire ranches in Guárico, Apure and Cojedes.¹³ Historian Frederico Brito Figueroa has estimated that by 1810, cattle raising covered an area of 150 leagues between El Pau in the east and Mérida in the west. Under the control of absentee owners were 1,200,000 cattle, 180,000 horses, 90,000

7. Pablo Vila, «La iniciación de la ganadería llanera», *El Farol*, 22:194 (1961), 2-7.

8. Crosby, Jr., *The Columbian Exchange*, pp. 88-89. Marcelino Ganuza, *Monografía de las Misiones Vivas de Agustinos Recoletos (Candelarios) en Colombia* (Bogotá, 1921), I, p. 178.

10. Jane M. Loy, «Forgotten Comuneros: The 1781 Revolt in the Llanos of Casanare», *Hispanic American Historical Review*, 61 (May, 1981), 252.

11. Dieter Brunnschweiler, *The Llanos Frontier of Colombia* (East Lansing, 1972), p. 43.

12. Francois Depons, *Travels in South America* (London, 1807), II, 313.

13. Miguel Izard, *El miedo a la revolución: La lucha por la libertad en Venezuela: 1777-1830* (Madrid, 1979), p. 51.

mules along with innumerable lams and sheep.¹⁴ For the entire Venezuelan Llanos, the figure of 4,500,000 cattle in 1812 is commonly cited.¹⁵

Like their cattle, Spaniards slowly adapted to life in the Llanos. The first cowboys probably worked on ranches in the higher elevations and journeyed out to the plains to hunt wild cattle and enslave Indians. As miscegenation took place, the whites adopted Indian ways. They began to live in the plains proper, building houses out of palms and bahareque. They tamed the wild horses and killed cattle for meat. Gardens of yucca, bananas, and corn supplemented this meager diet. They hunted deer, tigers and crocodiles, and learned to navigate the rivers in canoes. Along with the familiar cowboy garb of sombrero, poncho and leather belt, they wore hemp sandals or went barefoot, for a man who might have to swim a river on a minute's notice, did not want to be weighed down by heavy boots.¹⁶

Africans also made their way to the plains. They worked as boatmen, household servants and cowhands. Others were slaves who had escaped from the interior. In 1785 an alcalde of San Juan de los Llanos reported that a palenque of ex-slaves was menacing public order in this little outpost southeast of Bogotá, but in New Granada such complaints were the exception.¹⁷ A census taken of the Provincia de los Llanos in 1788 revealed that of a population of 20,892, only 119 were slaves and less than 3 % or 4,027 were classed as «freedmen and various colors».¹⁸ It is clear that the Andes Cordilleras which lay between the principal slave centers in Antioquia and Cartagena and the Colombian plains constituted a formidable geographic barrier that prevented large numbers of blacks from seeking refuge there. As a result, from colonial times until the present, the ethnic mixture of the Colombian Llanero has been predominantly mestizo.

In Venezuela, on the other hand, there was a substantial slave population on the coast and easier access for runaways to the Llanos. In the seventeenth century, workers on the *hatos* included slaves, free blacks, and Indians who earned salaries. Slavery was not vital to the economy because as cattle ranching was practiced, it needed few laborers. Slaves, when they were not manumitted, fled their owners to join the shifting towns of Indians and free blacks that sprang up all over the plains.¹⁹ In 1789 it was estimated that there were over 24,000 such people who lived as outlaws, attacking towns and stealing cattle. The creole landowners made repeated attempts to control this group by requiring all inhabitants to live in fixed towns and by establishing harsh penalties for rustling and contra-

14. Frederico Brito Figueroa, *La estructura económica de Venezuela colonial* (Caracas, 1978), p. 191.

15. Leonard V. Dalton, *Venezuela* (New York, 1912), p. 247.

16. Manuel Zapata Olivella, *El hombre Colombiano* (Bogotá, 1974), p. 356.

17. Jaime Jaramillo Uribe, «Esclavos y señores en la Sociedad Colombiana del Siglo XVIII», *Anuario Colombiano de la Historia Social y de la Cultura*, 1:1 (1963), 42.

18. José Caicedo, *Provincia de los Llanos: Padrón formado en el año de 1778*. Morcote. Oct. 14, 1778. Archivo Histórico Nacional, Bogotá.

19. Brito Figueroa, *La estructura económica*, p. 191.

band trafficking.²⁰ Such laws were unenforceable. On his trip through northern South America in 1799-1804, Baron von Humboldt noted that there were a great many robbers who infested the Llanos, committing their depredations on horseback in the manner of Bedouins, and assassinating whites with atrocious refinements of cruelty.²¹

The burgeoning number of bandits were only part of a striking population increase that took place in the Venezuelan Llanos. Along with the endogenous growth which was tied to the general economic prosperity and to the adoption of hygienic practices such as vaccination against small pox, the area was attractive to peninsulares and foreign planters fleeing social and political instability in the Antilles. Between 1800 and 1807 the population more than doubled in the province of Barinas and grew substantially in Cojedes, Guárico and Apure.²²

Unlike the term «gaucho» which was commonly used in Argentina in the eighteenth century to refer to outlaws in the pampas, the term «Llanero» does not appear in manuscripts until the nineteenth century and frequently included not only the fugitive slaves but also the cowboys who worked on the ranches, slave and free. One of the first to use this word was Baron von Humboldt who stopped at a cattle *hato* on his way to Calabozo. Humboldt wrote that the *hato* consisted of a solitary house surrounded by smaller huts covered with palms and skins. Men naked to the waist and armed with lances tended the cattle, oxen, horses and mules that wandered freely without benefit of fences.

These mulattoes who are known by the name of *peones llaneros*, are partly freedmen and partly slaves. There does not exist a race more constantly exposed to the devouring heat of the tropical sun. Their food is meat dried in the air, and a little salted, and of this, even their horses sometimes eat. Always in the saddle, they fancy they cannot make the slightest excursion on foot.²³

Clearly by 1800 a cowboy subculture had emerged. In New Granada where the remote plains were of little importance, the Llaneros were marginal to the life of the Viceroyalty. In Venezuela, the expanding trade in hides, the demand for land and an exploding population heightened tensions between the creole ranchers and the peons with every passing year. When independence was declared in Caracas in 1811, the Llaneros demonstrated

20. Manuel Lucena Salmoral, «El Sistema de Cuadrillas de Ronda para la Seguridad de los Llanos a fines del período colonial», *Memoria del Tercer Congreso Venezolano de Historia* (Caracas, 1979), II, pp. 191-225.

21. Alexander von Humboldt, *Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equinoctial Regions of the New Continent during the Years 1799-1804* (New York, 1966), VI, p. 56.

22. Izard, *El miedo a la revolución*, p. 175.

23. Von Humboldt, *Personal Narrative*, IV, p. 319. For background on the use of the term «gaucho», see Madaline Nichols, *The Gaucho: Cattle Hunter, Cavalryman and the Ideal of Romance* (Durham, 1942), pp. 7-10.

their fear and hostility toward the creoles by joining with the pardo majority in defense of the Spanish Crown.

José Tomás Boves, a renegade Asturian who had been insulted by the patriots in 1812, was the first to recognize the plainsman's potential as a guerrilla fighter. When the creoles approved a law which would have required the Llaneros to register, carry an identity card and to belong to a ranch, Boves skillfully inflamed the cowboys' resentment. Fashioning them into a ferocious cavalry, he led his mounted hordes against the creoles and on June 15, 1814, routed the combined forces of Bolívar and Mariño. The Llaneros destroyed the Second Republic, but the death of Boves in December 1814 left them temporarily without a leader.²⁴ The emergence of José Antonio Páez as the Asturian's successor and his decision to support Bolívar meant that the Llaneros now would become the determining factor in the eventual patriot victory.

Built like an ox, suspicious and cunning, Páez was an unrivaled guerrilla leader, expert in cavalry warfare and in fighting in tropical conditions. Like Boves, he knew how to cajole the Llaneros with the prospect of plunder, land and hard cash.²⁵ In 1818, he brought over to Bolívar a superb lancer force which would clear the plains of royalists and break the Spanish hold on Venezuela at the Battle of Carabobo (June 24, 1821). Colonel Gustavus Hippiisley, a British officer in Bolívar's service at this time, vividly described a Llanero contingent:

[They are] mounted on miserable, half-starved jaded beasts, whether horse or mule, some without trousers, small-clothes or any covering except a bandage of blue cloth or cotton round their loins... In their left hand, they hold the reins, and in their right, a pole from 8 to 10 feet, with an iron spear, very sharp at the point and sides, and rather flat... a blanket of about a yard square, with a hole or rather a slit cut in the center, through which the wearer thrusts his head, falls on each side of his soulders... sometimes he will have an old sawed off musket, and a large saber hanging by a leather thong to his side...²⁶

With this primitive equipment, the troopers were ready for action, but Hippiisley cautioned that their ragtag appearance did not detract from their courage. «They have a ferocious, savage look and are brave to a fault», he wrote. «They want only judgement and discretion, and officers of information and experience to lead them.»²⁷

24. John Lynch, *The Spanish-American Revolutions, 1808-1826* (New York, 1973), pp. 204-205.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

26. G. Hippiisley, *A Narrative of the Expedition to the Rivers Orinoco and Apure which Sailed from England in November 1817 and Joined the Patriotic Forces in Venezuela and Caracas* (London, 1819), pp. 415-416.

27. *Ibid.*

In 1818 Bolívar sent such an officer, Francisco Paula de Santander, across the Apure River to organize the Llaneros in Casanare for a daring offensive against the Spanish in highland New Granada. Once Pablo Morillo crushed the independence movements in Bogotá, Tunja and Cartagena, the patriots took refuge in Casanare, where the resistance movement disintegrated into a kind of happy anarchy. The arrival of Santander introduced order and a new sense of purpose. By May 1819 this able administrator had molded the rough plainsmen and the creoles from the interior into a disciplined, well-equipped force. Joined by Bolívar, who had led his men from the upper Apure in a grueling march across the flooded grasslands in the midst of the rainy season, the combined armies, wearing only their light uniforms, left the tropical plains to climb the granite trails of the Andes. Lashed by rain, sleet and icy winds, they picked their way through rugged mountain passes over 12,000 feet high. Many died of exposure. All were sick and exhausted when they reached the plains near Tunja, but on August 7, 1819, the brave soldiers rallied to defeat the enemy in the battle of Boyacá.

The victory ended Spanish control of New Granada. It cemented Bolívar's authority over the other patriot chiefs and marked the beginning of the functioning of the Republic of Gran Colombia.²⁸ Historians have compared the arduous trek over the Andes with Hannibal and Napoleon crossing the Alps.²⁹ Ever since Boyacá, the Llanero has come to symbolize the patriotic spirit of Colombia and Venezuela. His horse appears on the Venezuelan national shield, and images of the freedom-loving Llanero have characterized nineteenth and twentieth century perceptions of the plainsmen.

Representative is the following portrait composed by José María Samper in 1861 as part of a long essay on Hispanic American society and politics:

The Llanero is the Colombian gaucho but a gaucho infinitely more poetic, more accessible, less barbarous. He is a type from a comic opera *par excellence*, in which are allied the heroic and pastoral, the dramatic and the very humorous in a most unusual mixture. Shepherd of the immense, free herds, rider, bullfighter, celebrated swimmer, fabulous cavalry soldier, poet of the pampas and of savage passions, a galant artist in his way, the Llanero is the union between civilization and barbarism... between society with all its more or less artificial conventions and the imposing solitude of the deserts, where only nature rules with her immortal grandeur and solemn majesty.³⁰

28. Camilo Riaño, *La campaña libertadora de 1819* (Bogotá, 1969), p. 293.

29. Hiram Bingham, *Journal of an Expedition across Venezuela and Colombia, 1909* (New Haven, 1909), p. 223.

30. José María Samper, *Ensayo sobre las revoluciones políticas y la condición social de las repúblicas colombianas* (Paris, 1861), p. 91. The authors quoted here are all Colombians but Venezuelans take a somewhat similar approach. For example, Daniel Mendoza

No longer the half-naked savage of Hippisley's day, Samper's Llanero wears a felt hat, poncho (*bayetón*), short pants, a colorful neckerchief, goatskin chaps and hemp sandals. Instead of a lance, he carries a saber and a huge knife. Close at hand is his *triple* or *bandola*, types of guitars that are indispensable for singing songs called *galerones*. Samper maintains:

The Llanero has never served the cause of oppression nor of any dictatorship. When liberty is in danger, he responds enthusiastically to the first call... and after the war is over, the Llanero does not ask for salaries nor pensions, nor any gratification, because in combat, he is an artist of death who loves art for art's sake as any other.³¹

These same themes reoccur in countless descriptions of Llaneros published after Samper's time. In 1904, for example, a North American minister exclaimed, «Give the Llanero a horse and a lance, a gun, a poncho; and a hammock, and he is at home wherever the sun may find him».³² In 1935, when Liberal journalist L. E. Nieto Caballero toured Casanare, he reported that the plainsmen were true descendents of the soldiers of the War of Independence. «Men of action, if the Country needs them, they will answer the call. They hear with their hearts».³³ In 1963, a special issue of the Colombian *Revista de Policía Nacional* was devoted entirely to the Llanos. On the cover was a colorful picture entitled, «An intrepid Llanero riding through the limitless pampas in search of bood», while inside, one writer rhapsodized:

The Llanero is free as the air, as the birds, as his own cattle which do not have fences. He dances happily to the sound of a good *joro-po* while the meat is roasting. The lands belong to him. He rides all day on his inseparable companion, his horse, on which he loses himself in the horizon of grass and marshes.³⁴

If, it is this picturesque cowboy who lives in the public imagination, other individuals, observing the Llaneros at first hand, have left a more realistic view. In 1909, Hiram Bingham retraced Bolívar's expedition from Apure to Casanare. He was deeply impressed by the poverty and misery of the plainsmen whom he described as being «rather wild, restless and

in his classic work, *El Llanero* (Madrid, 1919) states that after fifteen years of research, he is convinced that «this inhabitant of our pampas has nothing to envy in force, skill and heroism of any of similar types in other latitudes» (p. 13).

31. Samper, *Ensayo sobre las revoluciones políticas*, p. 93.

32. H. J. Mozans, *Up the Orinoco and down the Magdalena* (New York, 1910), p. 130.

33. L. E. Nieto Caballero, *Vuelo al Orinoco* (Bogotá, 1935), p. 141.

34. Aliro Paulo, «Estampas de viaje: El Llanero», *Revista de Policía Nacional*, 98 (marzo-abril 1963), 14.

shiftless —not caring to work except on horseback».³⁵ Four years later, Phanor James Eder agreed, adding that from what he could tell, the old-style Llanero, «half-Spanish half-Indian, wild, brave, restless, devil-may-care cowboy, Cossack of the Colombian steppes and boastful Tartar full of poetic fire», was rapidly disappearing, if he had ever existed at all.³⁶

Emiliano Restrepo went to the Colombian Llanos in 1870 with the dream of establishing a modern cattle ranch. Among the many obstacles confronting him was the local practice of letting cattle graze where it would without the owner having legal title to the land. The horizons of the Llaneros are limited, Restrepo wrote, and they are willing to abandon in a moment one location for another. «Like other nomadic peoples, they acquire a certain degree of civilization, culture and industrial development, reaching which, they remain stationary without moving further.»³⁷ Geographer Raye Platt, who visited the Llanos in the 1920's, came to much the same conclusion. He observed that, isolated from interior markets and lacking the incentive of cash crops, the Llaneros were living as their ancestors lived, under essentially permanent frontier conditions. «Pioneers in fact with pioneer ambitions and hopes, they, for the most part, settle into a state of content quite foreign to the true pioneer.»³⁸

This concept of the Llanero as a «permanent pioneer» is more helpful to the historian who is trying to understand his fate in the national period, than the more appealing vision of freedom fighter and poet. The Wars of Independence, in which the Llaneros covered themselves with glory, plummed the plains into a depression which only in the last thirty years has shown signs of lifting. Moreover, modernization, which in the late nineteenth century revolutionized ranching in the pampas, in Colombia and Venezuela, transformed the highland and coastal regions and left the Llanos far behind.

The intense fighting in the Llanos between 1810 and 1821 turned the region into a wasteland. Patriots and royalists alike consumed or destroyed the crops and livestock, and devastated towns and missions. There was a drastic drop in population as many were killed or were recruited to fight far away from their homeland. Of the 4,500,000 cattle in the Venezuelan plains in 1812, only 256,000, survived in 1823.³⁹

Santander, as Vice-President of Gran Colombia, tried to foster the economic recovery of the Llanos, but his decision to impose a high tariff on hides and to prohibit the export of live animals, made it virtually impossi-

35. Bingham, *Journal of an Expedition*, p. 223.

36. Phanor James Eder, *Colombia* (New York, 1913), p. 235.

37. Emiliano Restrepo, *Una excursion al territorio de San Martín* (Bogotá, 1957), pp. 174-177.

38. Raye Platt, «Opportunities for Agricultural Colonization in the Eastern Border Valleys of the Andes», in *Pioneer Settlement*, American Geographical Society Special Publication, No. 14 (New York, 1932), p. 84.

39. White, «Cattle Raising», 126.

ble for Venezuelan ranchers to regain their pre-war prosperity.⁴⁰ Creole legislators frustrated Bolívar's plan to distribute national lands to the Llaneros, who, in mid-1821, were placed on indefinite, unpaid leave. In 1828, General Páez stipulated that in Venezuela, they could not be subjected to forced labor nor have any restrictions placed on their personal liberty, but beyond these grudging concessions, the socio-economic conditions of the Llaneros was the same or even worse than before the war.⁴¹ The creoles in Venezuela consolidated their hold on the new republic. Freed from the constraint of Spanish bureaucracy, they used their power to keep the *pardos*, slaves and Llaneros in a state of dependency. In 1827, the Governor of Casanare resigned and accurately predicted that the province was moving toward its ruin.⁴²

In Venezuela, the Llaneros became pawns in the struggles of regional caudillos to gain national control. Páez and Joaquín Crespo were sons of the great plains. The Monagas dynasty drew its wealth and prestige from the Llanos, but political involvement did not win for the cowboys a shade of the spoils.⁴³ Branded by succeeding governments as *cuatrerros* and *bandoleros*, they were plunged into a dreary cycle of civil wars.⁴⁴ After the Five Years War (1866-1870), many families left the Llanos to seek peace in the highlands or in Colombia. The cattle herds which by 1858 had increased to 12,000,000, dropped in 1873 to 1,389,802, and remained in 1910, a scant one and a half million.⁴⁵

Modernization of the highland economy sparked by the coffee boom in Colombia after 1880, and the exploitation of oil in Venezuela after 1916, only exacerbated the depression. Though prosperity grew in the core settlements, there was little demand for the tough, stringy meat of the plains cattle. No railways or highways penetrated the region. To reach markets of any size, the herds had to be driven long distances. Some ranchers planted artificial pasture, installed wells and windmills, and tried to crossbreed their stock with zebu cattle, but most were absentees who regarded such efforts a waste of time. The first meat freezing plant built in 1910 by the British, was shut down by dictator Juan Vicente Gómez. Beyond subsistence plots, agriculture was neither extensive nor profitable, for centuries of systematic grass burning, soil erosion and deforestation had depleted the land's fertility.⁴⁶ The Llanos languished, plagued by insects, heat, disease and isolation, abandoned by all but the hardy plainsmen.

40. Miguel Izard, «Período de la Independencia y la Gran Colombia 1810-1830», in *Política y economía en Venezuela 1810-1879* (Caracas, 1976), p. 24.

41. Lynch, *The Spanish American Revolutions*, pp. 221-223.

42. Salvador Camacho to Francisco Paula Santander, Nunchía, January 25, 1827, *Archivo Santander* (Bogotá, 1913-1932), XVI, p. 189.

43. Rippy, «Dictators of Venezuela», p. 391.

44. Miguel Izard, «Tanto pelear para terminar conversando, el caudillismo en Venezuela», *Nova Americana*, #2 (1979), 52.

45. White, «Cattle Raising», 126.

46. *Ibid.*, 123-128.

In 1929, a young Venezuelan writer, Rómulo Gallegos, dramatized the continuing struggle between the «barbarous» plains and «civilized» Caracas in a brilliant novel, *Doña Bárbara*. On one level, the plot consists of melodramatic encounters between the mistress of the plains, Doña Bárbara, a mestiza rancher who incarnates the savage lawlessness and independent courage of the Llaneros, and Santos Luzardo, the city-educated man who is determined to redeem the Llanos through the rule of law. On another level, the book is a series of lyrical portraits extolling the natural beauty of the plains. Gallegos admired the bravery, physical strength, loyalty and creativity of the Llaneros whom he first encountered on a trip to Apure in 1927. He described the daily life on a ranch with realistic accuracy. Yet, along with his hero, Santos Luzardo, Gallegos believed that the plainsman, for all his indominability, was worsted in the contest with life. Only by enforcing laws, fencing the plains and adopting modern ranching techniques, would it be possible «to kill the centaur» in every Llanero and bring progress to the plains.⁴⁷

Gallegos' dream of «civilizing» the Llanos has been realized to some extent since World War II. In a continuing effort to «sow the petroleum», recent social democratic governments in Venezuela have used a portion of oil revenues to reduce infant mortality and disease in the plains. Particularly in the western area near the mountains, automobiles, trucks and bicycles are replacing the horse, and asphalt roads and bridges link isolated communities into the national communication network. Attempts have been made to upgrade the herds with Brahman or Santa Gertrudis stock, and new immigrants have been encouraged to settle.⁴⁸ Similar developments are occurring in the southern Colombian Llanos, where in 1972, the Department of Meta was cited as «one of the most active pioneer settlement and colonization zones in Latin America».⁴⁹ Yet, scholars surveying these developments remain pessimistic about the extent of growth that is possible. Geographer James J. Parsons has written that if the opportunities for the Llanos are greater in 1980, so are the ecological uncertainties. Despite the unleashing of powerful forces of modernization, stock-raising in the heart of the plains remains more a way of life than an economically motivated activity, and the physical and chemical characteristics of the soil, in most cases are unfavorable to any intensification of use. The past still hangs heavy over these lands, and the traditional Llanero way of life gives way but slowly.⁵⁰

It can be seen from this brief historical review, that the experience of the Llaneros parallels that of the gauchos in several respects. Both groups

47. Rómulo Gallegos, *Doña Bárbara*, trans. by Robert Malloy (New York, 1948), pp. 90-91.

48. James J. Parsons, «Europeanization of the Savanna Lands of Northern South America», in David R. Harris, ed., *Human Ecology in Savanna Environments* (London, 1981), p. 274.

49. Dieter Brunnschweiler, *The Llanos Frontier of Colombia* (East Lansing, 1972), p. 1.

50. Parsons, «Europeanization of the Savanna Lands», 287.

were the products of miscegenation between Spanish, Indians, and Blacks. Both were horseriding, cattle-hunting peoples. By the eighteenth century, each was an important sector in the economy of their respective Viceroyalties, and each formed a powerful cavalry which swung the momentum of victory in the Wars of Independence to the patriot side. More so in Venezuela than in Colombia, the Llanero, like the gaucho, participated in the nineteenth century struggles between national and regional caudillos. In all three countries, the cowboy, admired for his courage and love of liberty, occupies a prominent position in national sentiment, literature and folklore.

Despite these similarities, it is the differences that seem most significant. The gaucho was an outlaw, a member of a «class» that existed in Argentina approximately one hundred years between 1775 and 1875. The very name, «gaucho» as it was used in the eighteenth century, was synonymous with «loafer», «tramp», «thief», and «bandit». Llaneros, on the other hand, worked on *hatos* as early as the sixteenth century where they were called *peones* or *peones concertados*. By the end of the eighteenth century, they were joined in the Venezuelan Llanos by thousands of fugitive slaves, mulattoes and zambos, who created small communities based on herding wild cattle, and who were regarded as a threat to the established *hatos* by colonial authorities. Both these «outlaws» and the legitimate cowhands were included in the term, «Llanero», which was not used until the era of the Wars of Independence and literally means, «inhabitant of the plains». Traditionally, then, «Llanero» has been a more general classification than «gaucho», similar, perhaps, to the word «vaquero». Finally, there are distinct ethnic, cultural and historical differences between the Colombian and Venezuelan Llaneros that have yet to be seriously investigated.

The gauchos lived in a temperate region, richly endowed by nature to become the breadbasket of modern Argentina. The Llanero made his home in a tropical plain, hostile to human and animal life. As a result, he had to be more versatile than the gaucho. He became a competent swimmer and boatman as well as a skilled horseman. He supplemented his meat diet with yucca, bananas, rice and corn grown in subsistence plots.

The pampas are easily accessible from the sea and from Buenos Aires. The Andes so isolate the Llanos that, with the exception of battles fought there during the War of Independence, the War of a Thousands Day (1899-1902), and the era known as the *Violencia* (1949-1953), they have remained peripheral to political and economic developments in Colombia. In Venezuela, the plains form a more substantial part of the territory and are less remote geographically. Nevertheless, after the brief economic boom of the late eighteenth century, they have been excluded from the infrastructure of the national economy. Modernization, which transformed stockraising and agriculture on the pampas and brought the disappearance of the gaucho by 1890, is only beginning to have an impact on the Llanos —a contrast reflected in the literature about the two groups. Of two novels written in the 1920's, Ricardo Güiraldes in *Don Segundo Sombra* (Buenos Aires, 1926)

provides a nostalgic look at a gaucho world that has disappeared, while Rómulo Gallegos in *Doña Bárbara* offers a contemporary description of a vital cowboy culture.

Perhaps it is the Llanero's perseverance that makes him unique among the horsemen of the Americas. In a delightful book, *The Criollo: Spanish Cattle in the Americas* (Norman, 1977), John Rouse maintains that the Llanos are one of the few places where it is possible to find cattle which continue the line of pure descent from the original Spanish herds—the result of four centuries of natural selection without any crossbreeding. These animals are a priceless asset for they have lived and multiplied where no other bovine could exist, yet they are little appreciated by either cattlemen or animal scientists. The same might be said of the Llanero, who has survived within an environment that would crush a less hardy people, and who, astride his horse in the wild plains of Casanare or Apure, continues in the twentieth century, the traditions of his medieval ancestor, the Iberian rancher.

51. Rouse, *The Criollo*, pp. 283-284.