

Memories of Meliton

By Sherry Reynolds



Thank you to Camarillo Family,

Camarillo Ranch Families and Friends

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Meliton Ayala Ortiz

March 10, 1919-July 19, 2010



Meliton was born in Beeville Texas on March 10, 1919 to Francisca Ayala Ortiz and Pablo Ortiz during their search for a better life after leaving their home Mexico. In 1910, the Mexican Revolution broke out. Meliton came from a humble family of hardworking people. They spent their days laboring to keep body and soul together, but when the Revolution got under way, things changed drastically. The whole situation began when the people of Mexico were pushed so far into poverty, they banded together against the president, Porfirio Diaz Mori, who had become a dictator. The people suffered greatly under his attempts at

industrialization and modernization of the country. The worst horrors of his campaign were the new land laws. Diaz allocated land that had once belonged to the people to wealthy non-nationals. In addition, no Mexican was able to own land unless they had a formal legal title in writing. Small farmers were rendered helpless so there was no option but an uprising. Under these conditions, Pablo and Francisca found it impossible to raise their son Joe, and the new baby they were expecting. They trekked across the desert, sucked on rocks at times, to moisten their mouths. When they got to Texas they decided to stop in Beeville and look for work. While there, son number 2 was born. They named him Meliton. When Mel was about 6 months old, the jobs petered out in Texas so the family decided to move on. There was talk among the other workers that there was work to be had in California, in a place called Camarillo. They hopped trains by night when they could, just to keep moving, in hopes of finding work further on. Unfortunately, those train trips were few and far between so the couple and their children walked most of the way from Texas to Camarillo. When they reached Camarillo, they were exhausted and out of options. They asked directions to the Camarillo Ranch and proceeded there immediately. Pablo asked if they were hiring, and he got a job right away. Francisca also found employment, and they enjoyed their time living on the Ranch. While they were there, two more sons were born to them, Walter and Manuel.



Little Boy, you want a ride?

One day when Meliton was around 7 or 8 years old and walking home from school, and a car came up alongside him and the driver asked him if he'd like to learn to ride a horse. Meliton said yes, while shrugging his shoulders, then Mr. Camarillo told him to get in the car. Mr. Camarillo took him to the round corral behind the house and the walnut shed, where he kept some ponies. Mr. Camarillo gave him a leg up on to the pony who promptly dumped him off. Meliton got up 5

or 6 more times and was summarily thrown to the ground again. Finally, Mr. Camarillo asked if he had had enough and Meliton, shrugging his shoulders, said yes. Mr. Camarillo told him that if he really wanted to learn to ride a horse, to come back after school, do some work around the ranch and then the cowboys would teach him how to ride and to become a cowboy. At age 11 or 12, Mr. Camarillo hired Meliton on permanently, and by the time he was 15 he had moved into the bunkhouse with the cowboys! (to his mothers chagrin)!



Very young Meliton

Mr. Camarillo discovered early on that Meliton had a real gift for horses, he knew and understood them. As his time with the horses continued, Mr. Camarillo realized that Meliton was very talented and entrusted his prized White horses to his care. Meliton's starting pay at 11 or 12 years of age was \$.10 a week. That was the beginning of Meliton's career on the Ranch.



Mellie said it took lots of practice to get this just right!



Working hard at the slaughter pens



Training, this is work???

Meliton met and married Felicitas Roman in St. Mary Magdalen Chapel and brought her to live with him at the Ranch. They were blessed with two wonderful children Reynaldo and Rachael, who were both born and raised on the Ranch. Both learned about horses at their father's knee and went on to a lifetime of horsemanship and a true love for horses. In fact, Rey Ortiz, Meliton's son still competes in team roping at the Santa Barbara Fiesta and the Ventura County Fair at 81 years of age!





Meliton and his family – l-r front Meliton and his son Rey, l-r back Rachel his daughter and Feliz his wife

Meliton wore many hats during his career on the Camarillo Ranch, everything from mucking out stalls to being the butcher, readying the meat for the family table, to horse breeder and trainer, to Ranch foreman, you name it, he did it!

During the 1940's Meliton entered the Army and served his country. When he was assigned at a Post in Texas, he got orders to ship out to Europe. He was very excited about this, but unfortunately, shortly before he was to leave, he had an accident where he broke his foot, and his orders were cancelled. I guess a GI in a cast in a war zone was out of the question!

During this time he was often visited by his family so he didn't feel so alone.



With daughter Rachel and son Rey



With his brother Manuel and his mom.

Meliton went to work for Mr. Camarillo when he was about 12 years old. During his career graduated from the maintenance work to horse breeding, to training. When the new babies started their training, Meliton would lay boards in the corral and had the horses walk along the boards so that they would not shy at the lines on the streets. As their training progressed, he would bring in some children with pots and pans and spoons, and have them “line the street” banging on the kitchen utensils simulating crowd noises so the horses would not be afraid when they appeared in a parade. Meliton even went to the extreme of wearing a red dress, just like the women wore in the parades, so that the fluttering of the skirts would not scare the horses. In his later years he got a kick out of telling this story, and when available, he proudly showed off “his” dress!



“Working Clothes”



Growing the corn



Prepping the ears of corn



Removing the kernels from the cob



Mixing the masa



Lets eat, the tamales are ready!

Right around Christmas time, it was tradition at the Ranch to make tamales. The whole family, the Camarillos and the Ortiz of multiple generations would participate. It was great fun and they had loads of tamales for everyone to celebrate with their meal on Christmas eve.

These tamales were special and a long standing tradition for the Camarillo family.

The process started in late spring or early summer when the special white corn was planted. You can see above who's job it was to grow, cultivate and harvest this special variety of corn. The family said that this special corn was what made the Camarillo tamales so special and tasty. Carmen and the group would set up outside to make the tamales. It was all hands on deck, everyone participated! If other family members were around, they were enlisted to help out, too. After the corn had been picked, Meliton would trim off the ends of the ears so the process of making the masa could continue. Others worked on the filling and preparing the corn husks for wrapping the tamales when all was ready.

After the corn was cut off the cob, and ground up, it was then mixed with the rest of the ingredients to make the masa. When that step was complete, the members of the group would set up an assembly line to make the tamales. First they took a soaked corn husk, put a couple of tablespoons of masa on the corn husk, then a generous spoon full of the filling was placed on the masa, then the masa was rolled up around the filling, then the husk was rolled over this mixture and tied with string or a strip of corn husk to hold it together. These tamales were usually stacked in a roasting or on a big tray until time to steam them. The Camarillos made multiple hundreds of these tasty treats so everyone could have a Merry Christmas Eve. Yummy!

The tradition of his which gave him great delight, was to butcher a pig on New Year's eve to make carnitas. With his wife at his side, they prepared a homemade feast, including, mmmmmmm, homemade flour tortillas, which was shared with family and numerous friends at their New Year's celebration.

He spent much of his time on the ranch breeding and training the horses or chauffeuring Mr. Camarillo. Often Meliton would take Mr. Camarillo to destinations in Ventura County, like for meetings at many of the organizations that Don Adolfo need to attend such as Lima Bean Assn., Knights of Columbus, The Walnut Growers Assn. and many others. Sometimes Mellie would take Mr. Camarillo to Hollywood to visit Bohlin Saddlery. The went to have repairs done on the silver parade saddles and tack, or to window shop for new saddles to make a better showing during the appearances and parades. Occasionally, he would drive Mr. Camarillo to San Diego and take the ferry across to Coronado Island.



One of Meliton's prize possessions, his chauffeur's cap.

Meliton had worked with Frank Camarillo, Mr. Camarillo's son, for years, and after Frank's untimely death, Mellie was given the job of Ranch foreman.



Frank Camarillo



Mommas and babies

Meliton spent much of his time over the years preparing and training the Camarillo White Horses for appearances in parades, including the Santa Barbara Fiesta Parade, The Camarillo Christmas Parade, Ventura Fair Parade, Hollywood Christmas Parade and the Rose Parade in Pasadena. This involved lots of extra work. Starting 2 weeks before an event or parade, Mel would scrub the horses down real good. The horses don't know that white gets dirty so easily! Then the week before the event, Meliton would check their hooves and keep them in good condition, then around Tuesday for an event on the weekend, the horses would be shampooed once again to get out all the dirt and grime from their coats. Then, 2 days before the parade, they would be washed one more time, and then kept on the concrete wash pad so they didn't get dirty again. After the washing as they dried, their whiskers were all trimmed off so they looked sleek and lovely for those head shots, they had to look their best. Depending on distance, the horses were then loaded into the trailer, and Mellie would whisk them off to the event, but his work didn't end there! The horses had to be unloaded at the site and have another clean up with a spray bottle and a clean rag. Horses can get a bit nervous on the freeway, and have "accidents" which leave either yellow or green stains on their hind quarters, not cool for a White Horse. The manes and tails of the horses were also groomed with braiding or flowers or just combed out to blow in the wind. Then Meliton and his helpers "dressed" the horses in their shiny silver parade wear! Saddles, bridles, collars, the whole deal! They looked so beautiful the way their pearl like coats gleamed in the sun. Then there was one final task to make them look beautiful. They already looked wonderful so you might ask what was

left to do. Well of course, they had to “have their nails done”! The tradition for 70 years or more was to paint the hooves of the horses silver. This tradition remained the same until the 2012 Christmas Parade, our 50th celebration of Christmas in Camarillo. That year the horses sported Gold hooves for the occasion. After this was all done, and the riders were mounted, Meliton had one last task before he could take a break. The trailers had to be driven to the end of the parade route. Then he got the chance to kick back for a while, before having to reverse the process and load the horses back into the trailer to go home. Parades are wonderful, but I am amazed at how much preparation was involved!!! He also prepared and transported the horses to San Francisco for the Opening of the Golden Gate Bridge and the Oakland Bay Bridge in the 1930’s and to Sacramento many years for the State Fair.



Meliton between tasks

Above, see Meliton and one of his workers resting up after getting the horses ready for their appearance somewhere. The Camarillo family always did everything with a touch of class! Just look at the luxurious trailer designed especially for transporting the horses to their destination.



L-R, Martina, Carmen and two guests



And... Beautiful from the Back, too!



Martina on Pilon



Carmelita on Diablo



Ynez Parker LaDow, Lupe and Carmela LaDow Santa Barbara 2014



Martina, Susana, Meliton and Mary (Carmelita's Girls)



This bull doesn't seem happy



Hang on Cowboy



That's what you call a Good ride, and a great photograph!

Meliton worked hard all of his life, but loved his recreation time too. He was passionate about bull riding and team roping, where he teamed up with his son Rey on many occasions. Meliton won the buckle for bull riding at the Ventura County Fair in 1947, a feat that he and his family were justifiably proud of. He also won the buckle in team roping with his son at the Santa Barbara Fiesta 1972. In the same year, they also won another team roping buckle at the Ventura County Fair. Bowling was another passion and he maintained a high average for many years. The proof of his love for the game is that the only bowling alley around at the time was in Thousand Oaks, so he commuted there every week. He and his team bowled every Tuesday night and did quite well every season.



Just one more, he really loved his bull riding!

We early Docents were lucky because Meliton would come to the Ranch every Thursday and for some Docent Meetings and share stories of the Ranch with us. Good stories like the one about the camel!

After a parade on Ventura Blvd sometime in the 1950's, Meliton and his assistants were removing the silver saddles that White Horses wore during a parade when all of a sudden he noticed that a camel, named Moses, which had also been the parade, bolted from its keepers and started running south toward Ventura Blvd. The camels were brought from Goebel's Jungleground in Thousand Oaks.

Meliton jumped on Rico, Carmen's horse and the fastest of the White Horses and started chasing after the camel. As the camel turned up Ventura Blvd near the Buckhorn Saloon, Meliton could see the camel jumping and weaving between cars

and in the process breaking taillights and doing other damage to cars that were in his way.

The camel continued galloping west on Ventura Blvd. He passed Joe Hernandez's Richfield Station, he paused for a moment by Pleasant Valley School the continued on determined to evade capture.

The camel continued all the way to the lima bean fields belonging to Dick Hughes where the In 'n Out Burger and the Outlet Mall now sit. Meliton was by this time able to get close enough to rope the camel. He tossed the rope hoping to catch the camel around the neck, but instead caught it too deep around its front shoulders. This presented a problem. Meliton couldn't control the horse because the rope was too low on the camel and the shiny silver horn on the saddle was too slippery to hold the rope tight enough so that he could tie a knot.

Recognizing that he could not corral the camel from his horse, he jumped off Rico while the camel, in his anger and distress began to spit at him! He dodged the spit as best he could, and while pulling on the rope proceeded to wrap the rope around a telephone pole which was nearby. This brought the camel to a sudden halt and he was able to hold on until help arrived, adding camel handling to his repertoire of skills.

It is not known if camels were ever invited to participate in Camarillo parades again!"



Moses before the Chase - October 3, 1955

Moses Lends Excitement To Festival

"Moses," the camel, liked being in the Camarillo Lima Bean Festival Parade so much that he ran an unscheduled repetition of the route down Ventura boulevard with half the township at his heels Saturday afternoon.

Moses' owner, Eugene Goebel, was loading the camel into a trailer after the parade when Moses got away and started running. Milton Ortiz, foreman of the Camarillo Ranch who was still on his horse, rode after the camel with his lariat swinging, but Moses was too swift.

In his rapid course down the boulevard he leaped the rear of a parked car, delicately kicking out a tail light, and smashed a street barricade. None of the 7,500 parade spectators made the mistake of getting in the camel's way.

Ortiz finally roped Moses, but to no avail. The beast was too strong and pulled both horse and rider after him. Ortiz had to turn Moses lose again.

The adventure finally ended when Moses stopped in a bean field west of Camarillo and someone tied him to a telephone pole.

Moses' temperament could be blamed on fame. He's a movie star, you know, and helped make Paramount's new film, "Ten Commandments."

Meliton was also fun and full of mischief. Harmless practical jokes abounded. He always had that cute twinkle of mischief in his eyes.

I teased him about his companion in the following picture, asking if it was a family member?



Meliton's life was filled with excitement and lots of hard work. During his life on the Ranch there was a steady stream of celebrities and important people who came to visit and to work. Many movies, TV programs and commercials were shot on the Ranch over the years. Meliton even did cameo appearances in some of them and he was a featured "Star" in some commercials. Dignitaries often visited the Ranch and Meliton met them and worked hard to make their stay comfortable.



In this Ford ad, Meliton is on the left relaxing on his horse



Meliton's 90th Birthday Party with the Docents

In his retirement, Meliton did not stop working, he just picked the tasks he wanted to do. Sometimes he was busier in retirement than he had been during his working years. He remained active in the horse world, and helped anyone who need him with advice and counsel. Even into his 90's he still worked 5 days a week caring for his great pal, Paloma II, one of the Camarillo White horses. She was a white mare who belonged to Laura McAvoy. Mellie would feed her, muck

out her stall, exercise her, and give her a bath on Fridays. Paloma was smitten with Meliton and would follow him when he beckoned to her. He continued working for Laura until a few days of his passing.



Mellic and Paloma



He also continued to drive his truck and go wherever the whim struck him. In his 90's he was frequently asked for his opinion on how to deal with a horse, or cure an illness, or what is the best way to train one. He was the expert and everyone knew it and valued his opinions. Meliton really enjoyed his life. He always had something going on, and had a zest for life. He was happiest during the baseball season and tried to never miss a Dodger game. He was an avid fan of the sport. He also loved being an armchair bowler, and he and his friends would cheer the good shots, and groan at the bad ones together. But his special excitement came during the PBR season, Professional Bull Riding. One didn't dare make a statement, nor ask a question while the cowboys were riding the bulls. He wanted to witness every moment and relive the experience so many years later.



Meliton's Last Ride

Meliton was blessed even in his later years. He was sound of mind and full of enthusiasm for life. It was at this time that he and I became friends. We loved going out to eat, visiting the horses at various locations. We had fun trips to the Chumash casino, where he once won \$900 at the slot machines. He was on a cloud for months over his great victory! At other times, we would be invited to spend holidays with family, and every so often we'd travel to his daughter's home in El Cajon for a visit. On one of these trips, he got to meet his first great great grandchild, Giovana for the first time. Look at his face he is just tickled pink. That day, as you can see, Giovana was not amused!

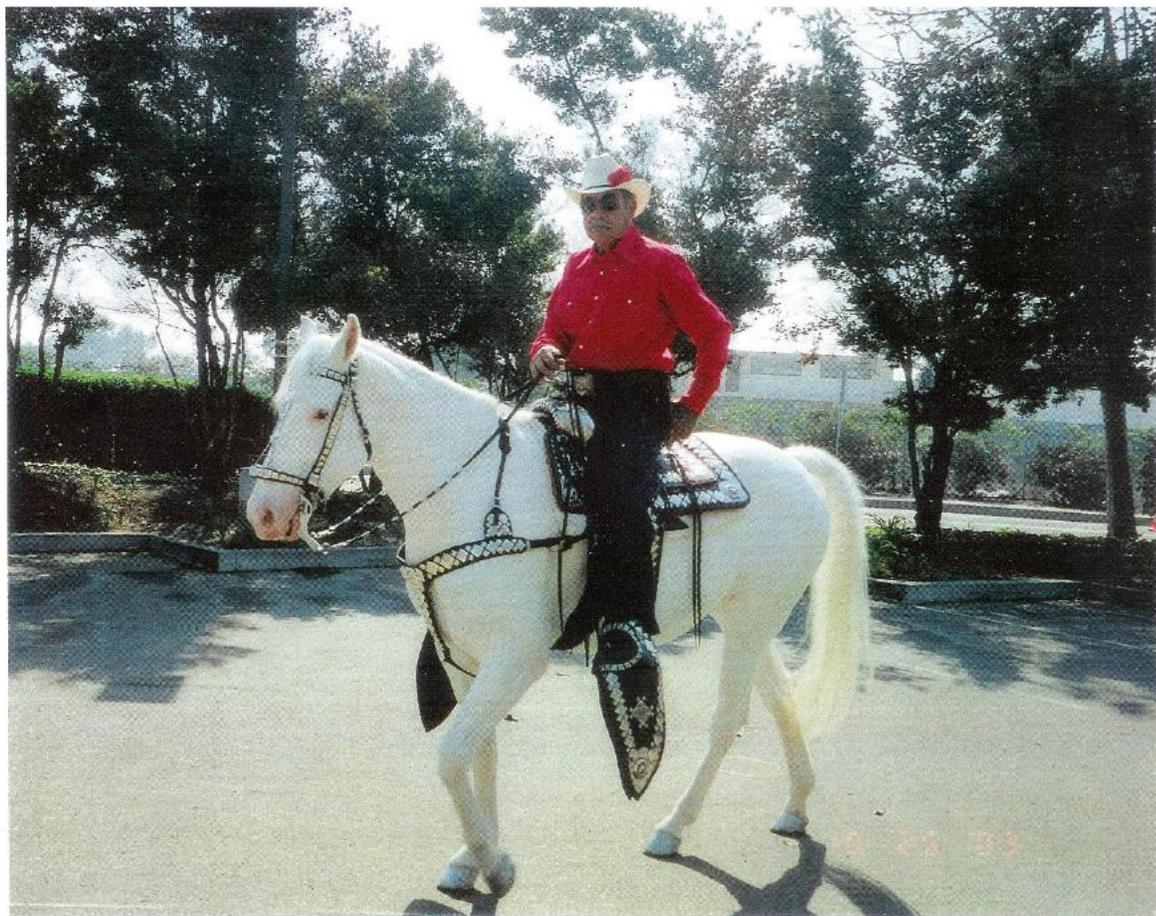


Meliton and his first great great grandchild, Giovana

Meliton and I had some great times together. We liked to explore, and on the evenings when we went out to eat, we liked to count the bunnies. One night we found 27! Simple pleasures for simple people. Family was tops, but the beauty of life was not lost on our Meliton. We simply enjoyed each other and had fun!



Mel and Mg



Meliton's last ride...

Our Cowboy took his last ride on a horse the day of the Dedication of the Arneill Bridge on October 25, 2003. He proudly rode Paloma across the bridge and enjoyed this final ride. He once told me that he could still ride just fine, but could no longer mount a horse because his arthritis had really slowed him down.

Meliton was the patriarch of a large family of many generations. His children gave him 5 grandchildren, 9 great-grandchildren, and 1 great-great grandchild during his lifetime. Meliton taught each of his children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren to love and how to ride horses. He was a great teacher. In fact, he taught many of the children, past and present, in Camarillo to be good and competent riders. Meliton was very proud of his progeny and maintained a loving relationship with each of them though some live at a distance. All of the family loved to have "Grandpa" come to all the family celebrations. He was a real treasure to them all.

Meliton was much loved by all and will be dearly missed. But he is and will always be a part of the Camarillo Ranch, and when you see one of the Camarillo White Horses, think of Meliton and know that he is the Patrón of them all.



Gene Autrey & Roy Rogers, you got nothing on me!