

Joaquin "Chino" Berdugo (1850-1931)

By Gregory P. Shine

Joaquin "Chino" Berdugo was a prominent vaquero leader and stockman in southeast Oregon during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For over a decade, he served as the foreman and "buckaroo boss" for cattle baron Pete French, managing the skilled vaqueros who worked the cattle and horses on French's vast ranching empire.

Berdugo was born on October 25, 1850, in San Juan Capistrano, California. He was of Mexican descent, described as tall, dark-skinned, and curly-haired. He arrived in Grant County (now Harney County) by 1881 (and possibly as early as 1872) and became a key figure at French's P Ranch. As foreman, he supervised the ranch's vaqueros, known for their exceptional skills in horsemanship, herding, and roping. The term buckaroo, a regional term used throughout the American Pacific West, is derived from the Spanish word *vaquero*.

Many vaqueros led transient lives in order to take advantage of work opportunities, but Berdugo settled permanently in Oregon. In the 1890s, he homesteaded an 800-acre ranch in the Catlow Valley and established businesses in Burns. In 1901, he co-owned the Red Front Livery, Feed, and Sale Stable, which provided high-quality horses and equipment. In 1917, he purchased the Star Hotel in Burns, converting it into a rooming house. He sold it in 1926 to Felix and Cecilia Urizar, who converted it into Burns' first Basque boarding house.

In 1914, Berdugo married Clara Fleck in Winnemucca, Nevada. She died in 1921, and the couple had no children, though his nephew, Augustine Gilbert, lived nearby in the Catlow Valley. Berdugo was deeply involved in his community. In 1914, he co-chaired a Fourth of July celebration in the new settlement of Catlow, and supported the construction of a community hall. His support for dry farmers in the Catlow Valley inspired them to name a small community about ten miles south of Frenchglen in his honor. Like many dry-land farming communities, Berdugo, Oregon, was short lived; its post office closed two years after its 1915 establishment.

Berdugo continued ranching until 1930, living in his later years with the Ennis Gardner family, who helped him with his cattle business. He frequently visited Burns, where newspapers noted his meetings with old friends. Berdugo died on December 15, 1931, from pneumonia following surgery. He is buried in Burns.

Sources

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