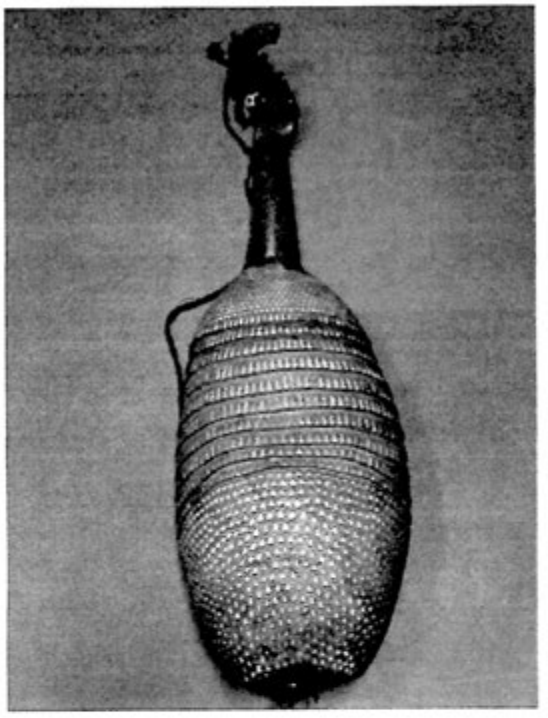

***Figure 2 (Left):*** *Back side of a* jaranga, *the most distinctive kind of Mexican and Central American small guitar, ancestral to the Hawaiian ukulele. Its body is made from the "shell" (actually the skin) of a nine-banded armadillo. Called* guitarritas, jaranas, jarangas, *or* charangas, *they were played throughout Pacific South America, Central America, Mexico, and as far north as what are now Texas, New Mexico, and southern Arizona. They date as early as the 16th century in some places, and are still played today by traditional musicians. This example is from present-day Guatemala. Less exotic versions, made and played in 18th and 19th-century Mexican California, had wood bodies. Internet photo, in the public domain.* ***Figure 3 (Right):*** *Our family's Kamaka koa wood ukulele, Model 700, a descendant of the Mexican and Central American* jaranga *like the one at left. It was played in Honolulu grammar school music classes more than 60 years ago. B. Dillon photo.*

# *Paniolos* and Jumping Fleas: Mexican California's Gifts to Hawaii

Brian Dervin Dillon

## Introduction

Almost exactly 60 years ago, I was an enthusiastic 8-year-old student of the ukulele. My father was teaching history at the University of Hawaii, Manoa, and we lived on campus in old, WWII-vintage military housing. My ukulele teacher was a big, lovable Native Hawaiian woman who taught me (the only *Haole*) and a handful of other kids—Hawaiian, Chinese, and Japanese—to plunk along with her in the afternoon. And after dinner we were welcomed back to her house for *ad-hoc* jam sessions where she and her musician friends honed their licks. Now guitars and a stand-up bass were added to the ukuleles, and all of the singing and conversation was in Hawaiian. My teacher and her friends made their living as entertainers down at Waikiki. One regular who came to play for us was the late, great Palani Vaughn (1944-2016).[1] I was not unique, for almost every kid in Hawaii in the late 1950s and early '60s took ukulele lessons as part of the regular, grammar school, curriculum. My Hawaii-born wife,

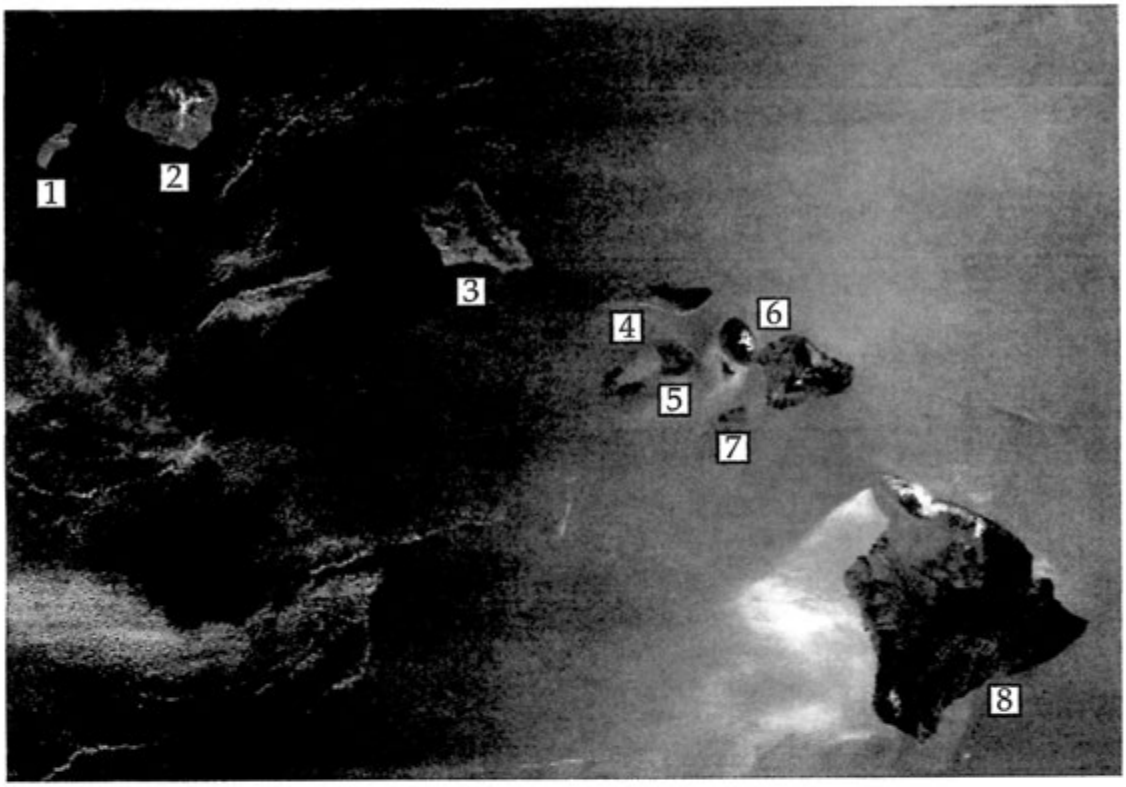


*Figure 4: The eight main Hawaiian Islands, from left to right, Niihau (1), Kauai (2), Oahu (3), Molokai (4), Lanai (5), Maui (6), Kahoolawe (7), and Hawaii (8), the "Big Island." Beef cattle were first introduced to the Big Island in 1793 from Spanish colonial California, and then to the other four major islands (Maui, Molokai, Oahu, and Kauai) only ten years later. Also in 1803 the very first horses were brought to Hawaii, once again, from Spanish colonial California. By 1815 wild cattle had become so numerous on the Big Island that the very first "cattle boss" was commissioned by the Hawaiian monarchy. A few years later vaqueros were brought over from California, now the northernmost province of newly-independent Mexico. They showed the Hawaiians how to ride, rope, and rodeo. These AmerIndian and* Mestizo *vaqueros all spoke Spanish, so the Hawaiians called them* Paniolos, *after their language,* Español. *Shortly afterwards those Native Hawaiians who had learned to run cattle from the Californios began to call themselves* Paniolos *as well. Satellite image courtesy of NASA.*

for example, did so with her Kamaka ukulele (Figure 3), which had been bought brand-new for about $20.00.

### The "Portuguese" Ukulele Origin Myth

Pick up almost any recent book on Hawaiian music, or watch almost any recent video on that same subject, and you will be told that the most distinctive Hawaiian musical instrument, the *ukulele* (Hawaiian for "jumping flea"-after the high, trebelly sound it makes) was brought to the Islands by three Portuguese immigrants in 1879.[2] These three musical heroes, according to popular mythology, taught the Native Hawaiians to play this "brand-new" instrument and also to sing "European-style" during the final two decades of the 19th century, just in time for the American annexation of the Hawaiian Islands in 1898.[3]

This is a nice story, repeated throughout the length and breadth of Hawaii, especially by people with Portuguese surnames,[4] but 100% untrue. It is incorrect *chronologically, geographically, ethnographically,* and *musicologically.* The ukulele was a gift from Mexican California, Hawaii's nearest neighbor, fifty years *before* the Portuguese trio stepped off the boat. The Portuguese did indeed bring

***Figure 5:*** *Idealized rendering of a* vaquero *at work in Mexican California, by a much later,* Gringo *artist. California cowboy culture was exported part and parcel to Hawaii in the 1820s and '30s, from a place where it was the dominant life-way, to islands where nothing like it had ever existed before. The* Californio vaqueros *brought not just their cattle, horses, saddles, and Spanish-language terms for every element of this brand-new way of life, but they took their music and their musical instruments to Hawaii as well. One of the latter became the ukulele, played first by Hawaiian cowboys, or* Paniolos. *Painting by James Walker (1818-1889), "Charros at Roundup," 1877, internet image courtesy of the Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, California.*

their own miniature guitar (nick-named the *machete*) with them to Hawaii in 1879, and then began making them for sale as early as the 1880s, but both the *people* and their *instrument* were Johnny-come-lately's. There is no doubt that the late-arriving Portuguese *popularized* the ukulele, nor that they might have been the first to *mass-produce* it. But any historian or archaeologist or, for that matter, any patent attorney will tell you that *popularizing* and *mass-producing* something are not the same as *inventing* it. The present study is an exercise in *forensic ethnomusicology,* or, in the vernacular, *myth-busting.* It demolishes long-standing musical *fakelore* and sets the record straight. Most importantly, it gives credit where credit is due—in fact, long *overdue*—not to Portugal, but Mexican California.

### *Guitarras* and *Guitarritas*

The musical instrument that was ancestral to the ukulele had already arrived fifty years earlier and Native Hawaiian musicians and singers had been playing their own version of "European" music for at least two human generations *before* the three putative Portuguese "fathers of the ukulele" came to the Hawaiian Islands. Hawaiian musicians became masters of both the full-sized *guitarra* and the smaller *guitarrita,* both of which were Spanish,[5] not Portuguese inventions. Guitars had been exported from Spain to Central Mexico perhaps as early as 300 years *before* the arrival of the Portuguese in Hawaii in 1879. Then they traveled northwards to Mexican California as early a:

*Figure 6: The fifteen different instruments used in an old-fashioned "string orchestra" in present-day Veracruz, Mexico. No fewer than six different* guitarrita *configurations exist alongside standard guitars, multi-stringed and four-string* guitarrones, *violins, and the big harp in the back. Similar "string orchestras" were common throughout Spanish Colonial Mexico during the late 17th and throughout the 18th centuries. They persisted after Mexican Independence in 1821, even as far north as California, from whence the* guitarrita *moved west to the Hawaiian Islands, in company with its big brother, the standard guitar. Internet image in the public domain.*

the 1770s, again, fully a hundred years *before* the putative Portuguese "inventors" of the small guitar that became the ukulele ever set foot in Hawaii.

The small guitar (*guitarrita*) was known as the *jarana, jaranga,* or *charanga* throughout all of Pacific Latin America as early as the 17th century. The diminutive *guitarrita* was just one of many guitar variants in common use in Mexican California, Hawaii's nearest neighbor across the water,[6] and it was likewise just one gift amongst many bestowed upon the Hawaiians by *Californio vaqueros.* Hawaiians began playing the small guitar from California (universally known as the *ukulele* today) before the *grandfathers* of the first three Portuguese who supposedly "first brought" that instrument to the Hawaiian Islands had even been *born.*

The instrument that became the ukulele arrived in Hawaii perhaps as early as the 1820s, and was certainly established by the end of the 1830s. The little four-string came as part and parcel of a behavioral, economic, dietary, and musical infusion, *vaquerismo* ("cowboy culture") that was characteristic of Mexican California, and the Native Hawaiians embraced this cultural infusion immediately and enthusiastically. The *Californio vaqueros* not only brought cow ponies, beef cattle, lassos, lariats, saddles, tack, sombreros, boots, spurs, and every aspect of cowboy technology, the product of more than 300 years of previous development in the New World, but they also brought *big guitars,* for playing around the campfire after work, and *little guitars,* which could be played on horseback or even in outrigger canoes. And so the Hawaiians learned to ride, learned to herd cattle, and they also learned to sing and to play guitars both large and small. They were taught by the *Mestizo* and AmerIndian cowboys from Mexican California who arrived with all of their skills, including *musicianship,* intact.

Everything the *Californios* brought with them was new and wonderful: the Hawaiians called these *vaqueros* from Mexican California *paniolos,*[7] not because they were Spanish *people,* but because they all spoke the Spanish *language.*[8] Each word for every last aspect of cattle ranching (Figure 5) was communicated to the Hawaiian apprentice cowboys in Spanish. Within a few years Hawaiian cowboys were proudly calling themselves *paniolos,* not because they had learned to speak Spanish (apart from terms like *riata, rodeo, remuda,* etc.)[9] but because they were proud of the skills they had learned from the Spanish-speaking *Californios.*

And these *paniolos,* when they sang, either from the saddle, or around the campfire after work, they sang Hawaiian lyrics, but used melodies, scales, and instruments introduced from Mexican California. The instruments they played were not just the little, tenor *guitarrita* but also its big-brother, full-sized six-string guitars brought by those same *vaqueros.* The *Californios,* for their part, were simply continuing the Spanish-Mexican musical tradition that had been exported to California a half-century earlier, in the 1770s.

***Figure 7:*** *A typical Mariachi* conjunto *where brass (4th from left) and woodwinds (2nd from left) have been added to the old stringed, standbys, violins (far left and 2nd from right), standard-sized six-string guitar (3rd from left), the six-string bass* guitarrón *(far right), and the little* guitarrita *(3rd from right), the direct ancestor of the Hawaiian ukulele. Photo circa 1940, internet image in the public domain.*

There were no stringed instruments in the Hawaiian Islands before European contact. The earliest ones that the Native Hawaiians were exposed to were probably violins, played by British sailors accompanying the Cook and Vancouver exploratory voyages of 1778-1793. Guitars of any kind, both large and small, so characteristic of the Spanish musical tradition, were considered exotic and alien in Great Britain and, by extension, aboard British sailing vessels until comparatively late in the following century. But in South and Central America, as well as Spanish Colonial Mexico, a very wide range of stringed instruments was common.

By the early 19th century, bands or *conjuntos* took the form of "string orchestras" with different-sized guitars (Figure 6), producing different tones at many points on the scale, employed alongside each other. In addition to violins and large, stand-up harps, the three main guitar variants were the standard, six-string *guitarra,* virtually identical to that of today, the deep-bodied *guitarrón* on which was played the bass line, and then the little *guitarrita,* often with only four strings, just like the modern ukulele, upon which the lead melody was played.

From the 1770s through the 1850s in California, the biggest and best string *conjuntos,* albeit only a few in comparison with the much more densely-populated south, had this wide range of instruments. And, regardless of what the "big bands" were doing, *vaqueros* continued to favor the guitar and the much more portable *guitarrita.*

Things changed in the 1860s, however, with the introduction of an entirely new form of music: Mariachi, the legacy of the French occupation of Mexico. Now higher-decibel horns and woodwinds were added to the much earlier and lower-decibel stringed-instruments, and the bulky, unwieldy, harp was discarded (Figure 7). Mariachi music only arrived in California long after the Mexican period was over, and the *AngloAmericanos* had made it part of the United States. As the new Mariachi music gained popularity, the old "strings only" orchestras preceding it went the way of the dodo in all but a very few parts of Mexico and Central America.

Only in Veracruz, on the Gulf Coast, did the old string bands still reign supreme after Mariachi music had conquered the rest of Mexico. These "old fashioned" *conjuntos* are still an important focus of local pride in "old time music," played on "old time instruments" even today. Traditional Veracruz *conjuntos* still employ the full range of stringed instruments that used to be found throughout Pacific Latin America, from Chile in the south, to California in the north. Selected from that same range of instruments was the *guitarrita* which was taken westwards as a gift from Mexican California to the Hawaiian cowboys, the *paniolos,* almost two hundred years ago.

***Figure 8:*** *Yes, Virginia, Hawaiian cowboys are different... For at least 140 years,* paniolos *were accustomed to not just herding, roping, and branding beef cattle on dry land, but also doing amphibious cowboying offshore. Unique to Hawaii within all 50 states were shoreline corrals, where cattle were driven knee-deep into salt water, and then swum out at the end of the* paniolo's *lasso (at right) to the cattle boats just offshore. There they were winched aboard, one at a time, via underbelly slings. Photo of Kailua Kona taken in the early 1930s. The two-pump Standard Oil gas station just beyond the corral is obscured by horses. Courtesy of the Hawaii State Department of Accounting and General Services, Paniolo Online Photograph Exhibition, PP-13-7-031.*

### Pigs, Dogs, Cows, and Horses

The Hawaiian Islands were most likely the penultimate place on earth to be settled by human beings, perhaps as early as 500 or 600 A.D., or as late as 1000 to 1100 A.D.[10] The only animal domesticates the Polynesians brought with them were the dog and the pig. Both were of a size that could be easily carried in the giant, double-hulled canoes that traversed thousands of miles of open ocean to reach the Hawaiian Islands. Both animals were important elements in the Hawaiian diet, and many early 19th-century Yankee missionaries commented unfavorably on the Hawaiian predilection for dog meat.

The first cattle in the Hawaiian Islands were brought by George Vancouver in 1793, and presented to King Kamehameha I on the Big Island. Many historians, especially English ones, take pains to point out that these earliest cattle were introduced by a *British* Naval Officer, but few mention where Vancouver got them in the first place: Spanish colonial California.[11] Ten years later, in 1803, the very first horses were put ashore in Hawaii. Before too long, the King, and other members of the *Alii* (nobility) were all mounted. Once again, too few historians remember to note that these *caballos* also came from Spanish

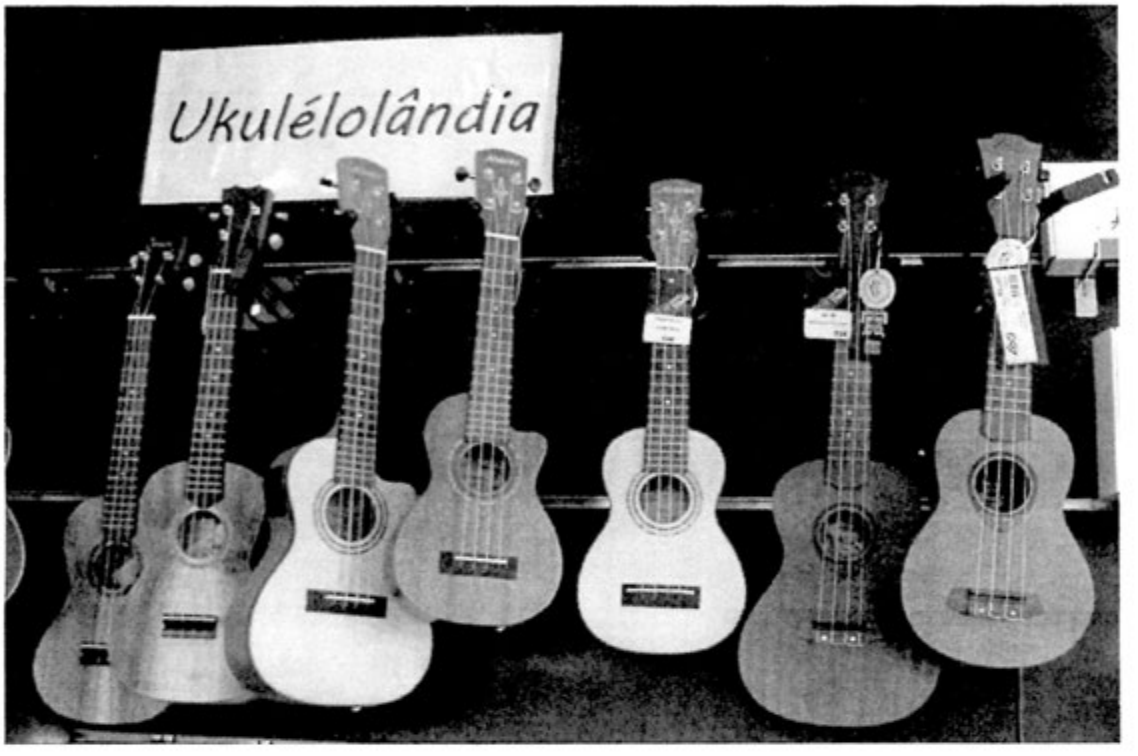


***Figure 9:*** *Portuguese-made ukuleles at the pre-eminent store selling this instrument on the Iberian Peninsula, in Porto, Portugal. This emporium was named "Garage and Stage" by its owner, as a nod to both professional musicians and those playing in "garage bands." After a long discussion with him in Spanish, he conceded that the first ukulele in Hawaii was imported from Mexican California, not Portugal. But I agreed that today the Portuguese make the very best ukuleles (and, perhaps the* only *ones) in all of Europe. B. Dillon photo, 2019.*

colonial California, Hawaii's *vecino*. Most people know the old story, that Vancouver persuaded King Kamehameha to put a ten-year moratorium on culling out any cattle from the first small herd of California *vacas*. Without any natural or human predators the cattle ran wild and multiplied on the Big Island and also eventually on Oahu, Maui, Molokai, and Niihau until they became both a nuisance to farmers (by destroying their crops) and an actual hazard to humans (by charging, goring, or trampling them).

So in 1815 the king commissioned the very first Hawaiian "Cattle Boss," Yankee-born John Palmer Parker (1790-1868). Parker's primary function was to kill as many wild cattle on the Big Island as necessary to keep the more aggressive ones away from the terrified islanders. Cattle had entered the Native Hawaiian psyche so much that by 1825 at least some were tattooing images of cows on their foreheads and cheeks.[12] But human-bovine interaction was certainly not all positive. As late as 1834 the famous Scottish botanist, Dr. David Douglas, after whom the Douglas Fir was named, was killed by a wild bull on the Big Island.[13]

Parker married one of Kamehameha's granddaughters. Their descendants developed the Parker Ranch, which became the largest cattle operation on any Pacific Island. But Parker was a Yankee, not a cowboy. He could shoot cattle, but he couldn't herd them. By the 1820s, not only were missionaries coming to Hawaii from the American East Coast, but an ever-increasing number of whaling ships were laying over in Hawaiian ports, especially Honolulu and Lahaina. Their hundreds, then thousands of sailors were hungry for fresh provisions. None of them had a taste for dog meat, so a growing demand for beef developed.

***Figure 10:*** *The showroom of the Kamaka Ukulele Factory in Honolulu, Hawaii with Fred Kamaka Sr., the second generation of his family making ukuleles, at center. The Kamaka brothers made our own family ukulele (Figure 3) 60 years ago. A portrait of Sam Kamaka Sr., Fred's father, who founded the company in 1916, is at upper right, and a "gag" ukulele with a cigar-box body is on the table-top in foreground. The Kamaka family is now proudly carrying the ukulele into its third century of existence in Hawaii. JoAnne Mow photo, July, 2013.*

Native Hawaiians had been working in the California hide trade since the time of Mexican Independence from Spain in 1821. The same vessels that carried the California cowhides back to Boston for conversion into shoe-leather also made regular round-trips between Mexican California and the Hawaiian Islands.[14] Hawaiians had been living in California for more than a decade, interacting with the best *vaqueros* on the face of the earth. So it was only logical that when expert cattlemen were needed in Hawaii they would come from Mexican California.

King Kamehameha III in 1832 formally requested that *vaqueros* be sent from Mexican California to his island kingdom, to teach his own loyal subjects how to do cattle ranching the correct way.[15] Before too long, as the old story goes, California cowboys were marrying the little sisters of the Hawaiian guys they were teaching *vaquerismo* to, while at the same time some of their wives' uncles and male cousins, who were muscling cowhides across the water in Mexican California, were marrying the little sisters of the AmerIndian cowboys who now made their home in the Islands.

The first "formal" levy of *Californio vaqueros*, at least a dozen men, came not only to the Big Island, but also to Oahu, Maui, and Molokai. The names, or at least nicknames, of three of them, were recorded: Ramón, Lozado (often garbed as Luzada), and "Kossuth," a humorous nick-name connoting the Hungarian mounted lancers of Napoleonic War fame.[16] Art Halloran, a retired U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist, has made a study of the original, wild herds of California cattle that multiplied and adapted so well to the Hawaiian Islands. He has mustered compelling evidence that they were selected for their black coloration, and were a longhorn variant, not unlike the remnant mainland American group now famous as "Texas longhorns."[17]

By the time of the California Gold Rush, *paniolos* were herding cattle on all of the largest of the Hawaiian Islands, and fresh beef had become a universal and welcome addition to the Hawaiian diet. The Hawaiian cow-

boys became as skilled as any others on the American mainland—more skilled, in fact, because they had to develop an island-specific adaptation: amphibious cattle herding (Figure 8). As Honolulu changed from a small town to the first true city in the Kingdom of Hawaii, it also became the No. 1 consumer of beef, and the No. 1 transshipment point for beef cattle "on the hoof." So the paniolos now not only herded cattle on dry land, they herded them into shoreline pens, then took them out to sea at the end of a lasso, one at a time, so that they could be winched aboard the inter-island cattle boats. These were the equivalent of the railhead termini of mainland cattle drives.[18] And thus was born the old *paniolo* joke, about one Hawaiian cowboy trying to sell another one his "second-string" cow pony, whose punchline is: "Yes, O.K., he's strong, good-natured, and nimble...but just how good a *swimmer* is your horse?"

## Conclusion

Why is the old, incorrect, story of the supposed "Portuguese" invention of the ukulele so firmly embedded in Hawaiian folklore? Simple: the wrong version of popular history is what people accept because they have not yet heard the correct one. Equally importantly, not all Hawaiians nor Hawaiian musicians have been fooled by the "Portuguese" ukulele origin myth. The late, great, ukulele virtuoso Kahauanu Lake (1931-2011) for example, was one Hawaiian musician who not only knew his history, but gave musical credit where it was due, instead of just repeating the old, incorrect, myth. Nearly fifty years ago, he said:

> ...We were all one family connected with Parker Ranch on the the Big Island. The music of Hawaii...comes from the Big Island, centered around cowboys, ranchers, and so forth...At four years old, I tried to play an ukulele, and I haven't stopped since.[19]

## Notes

1. ***Plunking Away on My Ukulele in 1962:*** B. Dillon 2017: 16.
2. ***The Putative 1879 Portuguese "Fathers of the Ukulele":*** Augusto Días, José do Espirito Santo, and Manuel Nunes are usually identified as the three "Fathers of the Ukulele" in Hawaii. They arrived with the "second boatload" of Portuguese immigrants in 1879 (Feher 1969: 398; Felix, et al, 1980; Martin, Lee and MacDonald 1987: 95). Much later Nunes' factory mass-produced ukuleles, especially after the turn of the century, and capitalized on the ukulele fad on the American mainland which hit its peak amongst college kids during the "roaring twenties." So it seems obvious that the "Portuguese origin myth" of the ukulele was in large measure an *ex post facto* marketing ploy.
3. ***The American Annexation of Hawaii:*** Although Great Britain, through Captain Cook, had both "claimed and named" the Hawaiian Islands as early as 1778, only the Limeys took this seriously. By the 1820s American Protestant missionaries greatly out-numbered the very few Britishers ashore in Hawaii, and were doing their best to make English the dominant written language of government and business, not just of religion. The Great Mahele of 1852, pushed through by the missionaries and their offspring, forced the Hawaiians to grant land ownership to *Haoles* (white people) for the first time, and then the "Bayonet Constitution" of 1887, forced upon King Kalakaua by the descendants of the original missionaries, made the Native Hawaiians minority landowners in their own country. Six years later, in 1893, the descendants of the original American missionaries deposed Queen Lilioukalani. They declared the Hawaiian Republic, in obvious imitation of the Texas Republic of 1836 and the California Republic of 1846. These *Haoles* immediately petitioned the American government to annex Hawaii, and make it a U.S. Territory. This action was refused for six years until the Spanish-American war broke out in 1898, and President McKinley, almost as an afterthought, finally annexed the Islands. They had suddenly become the