



This bronze bas-relief mural by Jo Mora, the "Bret Harte Memorial," was commissioned in 1918 and installed in 1919 on the southwest exterior wall of the Bohemian Club— a private men's club in San Francisco, California. Founded in 1872, the club boasts a diverse membership of leading businessmen, artists, musicians and journalists.

The Homora Story — Part One

by Joseph Cowles

We've spent a couple of delightful hours with Carl telling funny stories and Garé showing me how she goes about blocking out her beautiful watercolor paintings. Now we are seated around the yellow Formica-topped dinette set in their small kitchen. In a large cage on the screened-in porch outside the back door, half a dozen mynah birds, Garé's "Beagle Boys," jabber and romp. We spoon instant coffee powder into our cups, which Garé fills from a saucepan of boiling water. Carl lightens his spoon coffee with a slosh of Loma Linda Concentrated Soy Milk; it pours from the can in viscid yellowish globs. Noticing my wrinkled nose, Garé reminds me, "He's allergic to dairy. Would you like regular milk for your coffee?"

"Um, no. Just a little sugar, thanks."
"Still thinking about a career in cartooning?" Carl asks.

"Maybe. There are other things I enjoy; especially journalism and printing. But I've been drawing since I was a kid and everyone says I should do something with it."

The rough draft of this piece was written in June 2004, in an email sent to Geoffrey Blum. I'd been doing some bird-dogging for him in and around the old San Jacinto Valley hangouts of Carl Barks, looking for materials to be included in the 30-volume *Carl Barks Collection* published in Europe by Egmont. Geoff kindly quoted some of this text in one of the many articles he wrote for that monumental collection.

"It's a hard way to make a living, kid," he says. "The deadlines are hell, and your personal clock gets all messed up."

"What do you mean?"

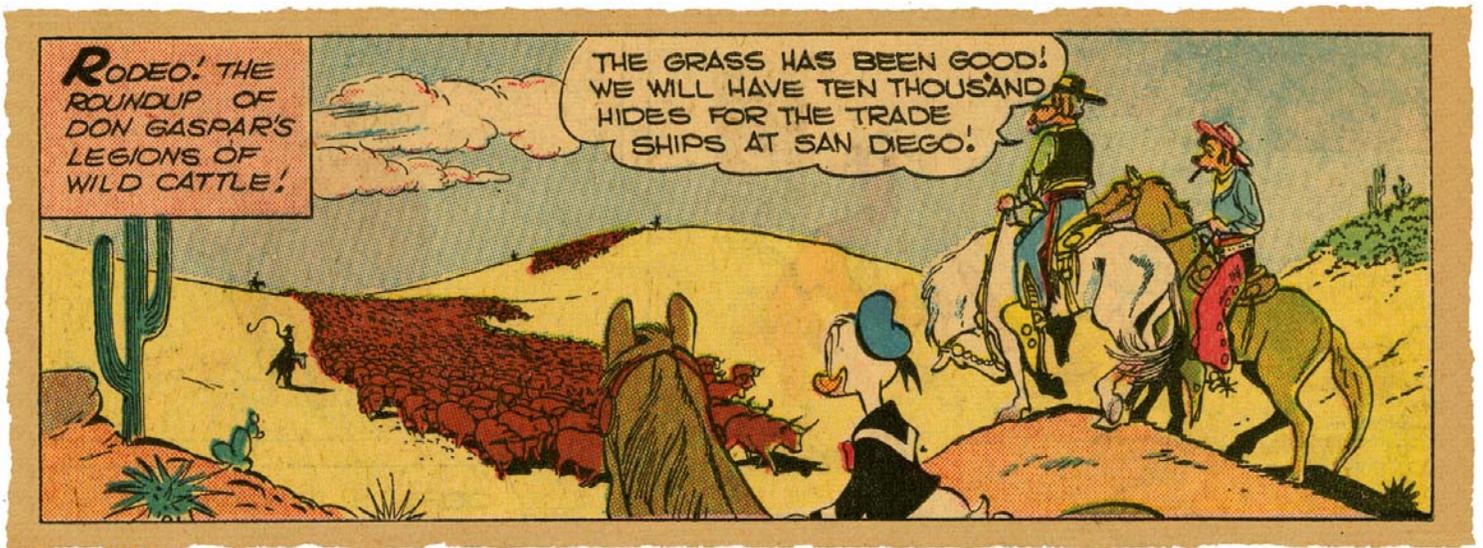
"Everything's produced six months in advance. In the winter when it's chilly, I have to write summer stories. In July I'm sweltering and trying to come up with a cool Christmas tale. After a while the holidays sort of lose their meaning."

"It's difficult to go on vacation, too," adds Garé.

"Why is that?"

"Because the pay is so damned lousy," laughs Carl.

"Because of Carl's schedule. In order to take time off, he has to double his work load. Otherwise, he'll miss his deadlines."



Carl's panoramic wild steer roundup drawing for the 1951 Disney comic book, *Donald Duck in Old California*. See next page for the Jo Mora illustration that inspired Carl's illustration.

"How long does it take to do your stories?"

"Right now I'm cranking out about forty pages a month. I'm not at the drawing board every day, of course. I usually write two or three days a week, draw three or four days a week. The seventh day I catch up on what I didn't finish the first six. Oh, think twice young man. Cartooning is a harsh mistress."

"When we wanted to take a nice vacation a while back," Garé adds, "we worked double-time for nearly a year—Carl writing and drawing, me inking the lettering and finishing the backgrounds. We needed to average two and a half pages a day for nine months in order to take off for just a few weeks."

"It was hell," Carl adds. "I was a nervous wreck and the quality of my work suffered. That experience ended my vainglorious dreams of basking beneath a big umbrella on a hot sunny beach with bikini-clad maidens fetching an endless supply of icy beverages with tiny umbrellas."

We all have a good laugh.

Garé asks, "What artists do you like?"

"Other than that duck guy all the kids call 'The Good Artist'?"

Carl smiles broadly. "Yeah. Whose work influences you?"

"Well, I learned a lot from Bruce McIntyre at Disneyland. And I've taught

myself to draw and ink with a brush—sort of like Walt Kelly. I think Jules Feiffer's strips are fabulous. And Virgil Partch. And Milt Caniff and Bill Mauldin. Heinrich Kley, for sure. Who's your favorite?"

"Garé, of course. She's the best artist I've ever known."

"Oh, Carl. Joe wants to know about cartoonists."

"Hal Foster would be at the top of my list. His work is excellent. Every one of those Sunday pages is a piece of fine art. For outrageous sight gags, I always liked Segar's Popeye. He's long dead now, but his son-in-law, Bud Sagendorf, has done a great job of carrying on the strip. And of course, Homora."

The name is unfamiliar to me. "Homora?" I ask.

"Marvelous talent," says Garé. "Writer, painter, illustrator, sculptor, photographer. Spent a few years as a newspaper cartoonist. Created huge murals, too. Originally from Uruguay, I believe. Had a studio up near Pebble Beach. He died in the late 40's."

"Oh. That's too bad," I say.

"Well, he made it to seventy or so," says Carl. "That's a good long life. Loved western stuff. Cowboys—*Vaqueros*, he called 'em. Lived with the Hopis awhile."

"You should learn about Homora," says Garé. Next time you're at the library,

look him up. You will enjoy his work."

"I'll do that. *Rolando* was a vaquero," I say. "*Old California* is one of my favorite duck stories. My friends all liked it, too. I bet I've read it twenty times."

Barks laughs. "You've had too much free time on your hands, lad. But I'm happy to know you've enjoyed it. It's one of my favorites, too."

"Carl never knows how his stories go over," says Garé. "In all these years you and two or three others are the only readers who've ever contacted him."

"What?" I am astonished by Garé's statement. "How can that be?"

"The kids probably think Walt Disney does the stories. Carl isn't allowed to sign his own work, you know. And if there are any fan letters, the editors at Western sure don't pass 'em along to us."

"They gave me your name and address."

"Maybe," Carl replies, "when you told them you might want to become a cartoonist, they thought you'd turn into a future candidate for their grist mill. Really, we've seldom heard from any comic book readers in all these years."

"Everyone loves your work," I exclaim. "*Everyone!* Adults, too—not just kids. You have millions of fans! All over the country. All over the world!"

Garé questions me. "How do you know this?"

“There’s a store at Disneyland, the Bell, Book and Candle Shop at the Emporium. They sell copies of Disney comics published in Europe and Latin America and Australia. Your stories are translated into Spanish and French and German and lots of other languages. Their printing’s better than ours, too.”

The two are staring at me in disbelief.

“Even here in the U.S., you have fans everywhere. Carl, I grew up reading your Donald Duck stories. I learned to read from my parents reading your stories to me. Many of my friends learned to read in the same way. YOUR stories, not those dull things by the other guys. We could tell by the drawing style when you didn’t do them. All through school, my pals and I would always talk about the latest Uncle Scrooge adventures. *Christmas for Shacktown* was the best holiday story ever. Who do you think was buying those three million copies of *Walt Disney’s Comics and Stories* every month? Kids AND their parents. And why? It was for YOUR fabulous duck stories. It sure as heck wasn’t for Bucky Bug and Bo.”

Carl’s jaw has dropped and Garé’s eyes are wide open.

“Three million copies a month?” says Carl. “Who told you that?”

“The guy at Western. I asked which comic was their best seller and he said they print three million copies of *Walt Disney’s Comics and Stories* every month. He said its sales are head and

shoulders above all other comic books in America, with Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge next in line.”

Carl turns to Garé. “Three million a month,” he says. That’s a hell of a lot of twelve-cent pieces.”

“Isn’t it?” she replies, staring back at him with a puzzled expression on her face.

The conversation dies off and we finish our coffee. Outside, the Beagle Boys are chattering. Garé goes to the screen door. “A wind’s come up,” she says, “and those clouds blowing in from the northwest look as if they have some storm to them.”

“Time for me to go,” I say. “That old sports car I borrowed to drive out today doesn’t have a top. I’d better get on the road ahead of the rain.”

“Just drive between the drops,” Carl quips.

We say our thank-you’s and how-nice’s and good-byes and soon I’m headed home. It takes more than three hours to work my way from Hemet, west

through the mountains to San Juan Capistrano, then northward along the coast to Newport and on up to Anaheim. I do catch a little rain in the mountain pass, and get well soaked from a brief squall near Laguna, but all in all it’s a safe trip.

As I drive, I hash over the day in my thoughts: the delight at getting to spend several hours with the Barkses; our interesting conversations, and their treating me almost like an adult, which is different from how most elderly folks interact with people my age. Then there was Carl and Garé’s sudden and almost somber quietness at the end of our visit. *I hope I haven’t said something to offend them. They didn’t imply that I had. We don’t really know each other very well yet. This is only my second visit. I sent that long, rambling letter to Carl a few weeks ago—“spewing it out” as he calls it—about knowing I have to*



“Juez de Campo at the Rodeo” by Jo Mora, from his posthumously published Californios: the Saga of the Hard-Riding Vaqueros, America’s First Cowboys.

apply myself if I want to become successful. It ought to have been clear to him that I'm sincerely thinking about getting into cartooning. I'm not sure he believed me about how many copies they print of his comic books. Or maybe it's supposed to be some sort of trade secret. It's odd that the Barkses didn't seem to know about the foreign language comics. I'll mail them some from Disneyland. And how can he not have received any fan mail in all these years? Either they're pulling my leg or his publishers have been keeping him in the dark. I'll look up Mr. Homora at the library. If Carl and Garé think Homora's great, I sure ought to learn about him. Three million comic books at twelve cents each; that's \$360,000 a month! Just for that one title. Times twelve? Over \$4 million! And what about the Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge comics? And the Gyros and Wood-chucks and Grandma Ducks and Christmas Parades and Vacation Parades and all the others? Western must be selling more than \$10 million a year in comic books with Carl Barks stories. Because of the Barks stories. I'm sure people don't buy them to read the other stuff they publish. I wonder how much Carl gets paid? Next time I'll come right out and ask him. He said he was getting about \$12.50 a page when he first started, back in the Forties, and that it was real good money for the times. How much do you suppose it costs to print and distribute a comic book? They're only 36 pages now, including the covers. They have ads, too. Once they were 52 pages, all comics. And 68 pages before that. What if their profit is just ten cents on the dollar? That'd still be a million bucks a year. Maybe Carl and Garé are rich. They don't seem to be. Their house is new, and nice, but it's what people call modest. He said he makes house payments. That station wagon they drive must be six or seven years old.

No, I don't think they have all that much money. Carl said the pay is "damned lousy." But his work is so good! And three million copies a month. That's just in the U.S. and Canada. What's going on here? I sure have a lot to learn. And on and on, my mind chattering and rattling in tune to the vibrations of the little red convertible.

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There is nothing at the library about an artist named Homora. I even have the Anaheim librarian contact the big library in Los Angeles to see what they might have, but they draw a blank, too. I decide maybe Carl and Garé were having a little fun with me after all. I don't bring up the matter on subsequent visits, or in our correspondence, and neither Carl or Garé ever again mentions the name to me. After a while I forget all about it.

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In early 2004, I am doing some research on California's Gold Rush era at the Palm Springs library, when one book virtually calls to me from its shelf. Its title is *Californios: the Saga of the Hard-Riding Vaqueros, America's First Cowboys*, written and illustrated by Jo Mora. Its cover features a wonderful line drawing. I leaf through the book and one page in particular grabs my attention. It is an illustration of a cattle roundup. Although the drawing style is entirely different, I remember a similar panoramic picture in the Donald Duck story, *Old California*. I wonder if this author was inspired by Carl Barks. And then I see on the dust jacket that the book was printed in 1949, more than a year after Jo Mora's death. The Barks story was published in May 1951, which means Carl was working on it in late 1950. *Is it possible Carl's model for Rolando came from this book? I need to find out about this Jo Mora fellow.*

I check out the library book and hurry home to dig out my venerable copy of *Old California*. Sure enough, there at the top of the page is the panoramic panel. I

compare Carl's drawing with Mora's. Similarities, definitely. But is it only coincidence?

I go online to learn the author's full name: Joseph Jacinto Mora. He was born in Montevideo, Uruguay, on October 22, 1876, and died in Monterey, California, October 10, 1947, just two weeks short of his 71st birthday. A "favorite artist of the west." I see by the many web sites and samples of his work that he was hugely popular, yet I don't recall ever hearing of him. Shows how little I know.

My thoughts churn. *What is this man's connection to Barks, other than Carl's love of Western stories and art? Joseph Jacinto Mora. Named for Saint Joseph and Saint Hyacinth, no doubt. Suddenly I have an epiphany. In Spanish the "J" is pronounced as an "H." So he was called "Ho-seph Ha-cinto." Jo Mora sounds as Ho Mora . . . HOMORA!* In a flood, the memories of that day, more than four decades past, come rushing back to me. *This is the guy Garé and Carl Barks told me about!*

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I email a scan of one of Jo Mora's drawings, and one of a panel from Carl's *Old California* story, to Geoffrey Blum. Geoff immediately sees the connection. Before long, he has turned up copies of Mora's books and identified drawings which are clearly inspirational to Carl's work. Some Geoff includes in the CBC set.

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In recent months, thinking about a new article for the Carl Barks Fan Club's newsletter, I decide to dig out and dust off the email I'd sent Geoff. Still not knowing much about Joseph Jacinto Mora and hoping to come up with something new, I go to newspaperarchive.com and key in his name. Pay dirt! In his day, Jo Mora was an all-star: cartoonist, illustrator, fine artist, designer, sculptor, muralist, photographer and author. No wonder Carl and Garé Barks were huge fans!

To be continued next issue. For more of Cowles' articles about Carl Barks, please visit www.thegoodartist.com.