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**COWBOYS - VAQUEROS**  
**Origins Of The First American Cowboys**  
*By Donald Chavez Y Gilbert*

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**Chapter 10**

**The History of Social Work; a personal perspective.**

**The Relationship of the Spanish Knight of the Middle Ages, the Cowboy and modern Social Worker**

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In 1973 they taught me all about the origins of Social Work rooted in the Elizabethan Poor Laws of jolly old England at the University Of Michigan School Of Social Work just as they taught my fellow social workers. However, having lived and studied a considerable amount of history myself since then, it is clear to me that the first social workers date back even further; back to the Knights of the Middle Ages in Spain.

In the Middle Ages knighthood was a very high station in society, and required swearing an allegiance, and vows of ethics. By his vows, the knight was required to swear to advocate justice and the protection of women, the innocent, elderly and the weak. He was in modern day lingo, a “protective services worker, and change agent.” The noble knight was a protector of the common people guided by a code of conduct and etiquette, an interesting parallel to the modern day social worker. As part of the knighthood ceremony, the knight was required to adopt an identifying coat of arms insignia, in ranching culture later evolving into the “brand.” He then rode to all villages in the kingdom, and publicly recited his vows of knighthood so that all would witness his devotion to the King and his people. This part of the ceremony was to enable all in the Kingdom to recognize the knight, and if the knight faltered in his duties, he endured public shame and dishonor. A knight’s honor was a virtue for which many knights defended to the death.

It should be noted also that the first cowboys/vaqueros and the whole American Western Ranching culture also evolved from the valiant Knights of the Middle Ages, a second interesting parallel to the culture we work with here in rural New Mexico. As a contemporary social worker and sheep rancher myself, it is clear now that these penchants to do social good have had about a thousand years to work into our DNA. I must say in closing, that my DNA misses the romantic old-fashioned version of making things better. There is little glory and fame for the change agent – protective services worker of today. We social workers do it because it needs to be done.

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**Bartolome de las Casas - the first American Social Worker.**

Bartolome de las Casas, (1474 - 1566) a Dominican Friar, and unwittingly the first American Social Worker emerged as a champion of the disadvantaged and abused indigenous Indian natives. De las Casas, in 1502 just ten years after the arrival of the Spanish in the New World, was granted an Encomienda on the island of Hispanola. An Encomienda was a grant of land and commission over the natives residing there. When it became clear to De Las Casas that the Encomienda system was subject to abuse against the Indians, he renounced his title as an encomendero in 1508, and began a lifelong crusade of defense and advocacy on behalf of the native Indians.

Local historian and Chicano activist, Gene Hill writes about De Las Casas in his bilingual book about Hispanics in America, Americans All/Americanos Todos, as follows:

“De las Casas wrote voluminously to the court of King Ferdinand about the chaos and disaster being visited upon his new subjects in the New World. He returned to Spain in 1515 to plead the Indian cause directly.” “De las Casas found a sympathetic ear in King Ferdinand and later with the Regent, Cardinal Francisco Jimenez de Cisneros. The King appointed a counsel to examine the matter. The council, upon review of de las Casas pleadings, recommended the suppression of all encomiendas; separation of Spanish towns from native towns; freedom for the Indians; and a clerical administration of the colony.

Bartolome de las Casas was bestowed the title of "Universal Protector of All the Indians of the Indies." According to author/historian Hill, "the nature of the title and the duties made him the first ombudsman in the Americas." However, any social worker who has done any advocacy at the grass roots level knows that this is social work, which has become a specialty onto itself and falls under the heading of Community Organization in many graduate schools of social work. "Spain adopted the practice and created a system of laws, courts, procedures and administration that attempted to provide justice for the Indians. All of this began in 1516, a mere 24 years after the discovery of the New World."

Thanks to the efforts of a social worker ahead of his time, Bartolome de las Casas, "the enlightened policy of Spain became one of inclusion rather than exclusion. The Kings through Royal Decrees attempted to open the avenues for Spanish justice through its institutions such as the General Indian Court and the Royal Court. In many areas, especially among the more sophisticated indigenous cultures, the native readily adapted to the Spanish legal system. There quickly emerged a proliferation of attorneys who specialized in representing Indians in litigation. They were known as "Abogados de Indios" and Procuradores de Indios", Indian Attorneys and Indian Prosecutors."

I differ with the author of this book only in so far as the label he places on de las Casas. He refers to de las Casas as the first ombudsman of the Americas. Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary defines an ombudsman as "a government official appointed to receive and investigate complaints made by individuals against abuses or capricious acts of public officials." Firstly, in America there were no public officials in 1508, and secondly, as is indicated in the definition, someone who receives and investigates complaints by nature has a "reactive" role. Bartolome de las Casas, as if a grass roots social worker, was motivated out of his own sense of moral imperative. He was a pro-active change agent who advocated for disadvantaged people, much as a modern social worker is trained to do. While some government employed social workers that for example work for a protective services agency do not initiate their own investigations. They receive complaints and react, as do ombudsmen. There are, however, no "pro-active" ombudsmen who initiate and recruit their own crusades for the social good of disadvantaged people. When an ombudsman becomes pro-active, he becomes a social worker. The same dictionary defines a social worker as "any person who engages in any of various services, activities, or methods concretely concerned with the investigation, treatment, and material aid of the economically underprivileged and socially disadvantaged." Ergo, Bartolome de las Casas was not the first American ombudsman, indeed, he was the first American Social Worker.

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