

From *The Ramona Diary of SRD: The Head Joaquin*

By Scott Russell Duncan

Is Joaquin real? Some say yes. Folk hero to the Chicanos of California, the Californios, yet murderous bandit leader to Anglos, he had his story told in an eponymous 19th century novel just like *Ramona*, the other Californio myth. Was Joaquin Murrieta beheaded in 1853 and put on display until lost in the Great Earthquake of 1906? Is either he or *Ramona* real? I asked that question when Grandma asked me to get *Ramona's* jewels, so central to her story. Grandma Mercy told me, "Por cierto, all us Californios are real." But I wasn't so sure then. Now, after reading both the *Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murrieta* by the reporter John "Yellow Bird" Rollin Ridge and *Ramona, a story* by the activist Helen Hunt Jackson, I have ideas:

My Theories About Joaquin Murrieta

1. Joaquin Murrieta is dead. Captain Harry Love really decapitated him. Or...
2. Joaquin Murrieta is a mantel, a title for a bandit lord. Or...
3. Joaquin Murrieta escaped his so-called capture. He'll be old, but California good weather keeps everyone going. And/or...
4. Joaquin is Felipe Moreno, supporting character and step-brother/husband to *Ramona*. Perhaps he inherited his mother's hatred of Americans and the disenfranchisement of Californios enough to turn to banditry. The man, after all, who put *Ramona's* jewels, my birthright, away for safety before they became lost to history, lost to us Californios. Felipe Moreno, Joaquin Murrieta, the man I need to see.

Every bandit wants his story told. Or in Joaquin's case, retold. I'll tell him I'm Yellow Bird the reporter, another half-breed like myself, doing a rewrite of *Life and Adventures*. An update. Hopefully, if I stay in the character of the nearly two-hundred-year-old writer well enough (and I'll practice here) I won't die.

My Audience with the Head Joaquin

I eventually caught up with the elusive bandido, the Robin Hood of California, Joaquin Murrieta after many inquiries, news reports, and by the method of last resort: shutting my eyes and placing my thumb on an antiquated map of California in a psychic remote viewing technique, which led to a burning hacienda. I should say I had caught up with his men who sat on the veranda drinking liquor and waiting on who-knows-what while the flames chewed at the back of the house and topped the roof.

I parked just before them and stepped out of my car with the smashed in side, my *Ramona Diary* at the ready. As I called out, "Hola, fellows," they used the famous Californio lariat and I was caught around the neck and yanked to the ground. In shock, I was unable to state my purpose and display my faux credentials as a man of letters. My shock compounded as they proceeded to prepare me for an unspeakable act, far too common out here on the western frontera. Spitting out

blood to state my purpose was ineffectual, so I resorted to swallowing blood and was finally able to shout, "I'm John Rollin Ridge! Yellow Bird! I'm here to write another story on Joaquin!"

After a short translation and deliberation among the merry band, I was released and my shorts returned to me. A man who had stayed on a rocker on the veranda and absently viewed my desperate perdition rose and came slowly down the steps. A headband under his hat, long black hair, sharp nose, and a wild Anglo-hating look, he was the Joaquin Murrieta of legend. He confirmed his identity as he stated, "Weak yanqui, I am Joaquin."

I struggled to stand, pulling up my drawers. "Dear sir! It is an honor to meet you! I am here to set straight your tale. Know that I am not a mere yanqui; as you are yourself, I am a true son of California, descendant of Spanish Rancheros. Well, also Scottish...."

"They're all the same," he said.

"Who are all the same?" I remembered his love of justice and equality.

"All those damn whites are the same."

This caused me to believe Murrieta was Indian after all. Or an angry, confused Mestizo (as if there are any other kinds of half-breed). My theories about him burned as fierce as the hacienda.

I remembered my cover as John Rollin Ridge. I pulled my Ramona Diary and pencil from the dust. "Sir, could you tell me your tale, starting from your encounter with Captain Harry Love?"

He looked at me. "I am not that Joaquin."

"What?"

"Which Joaquin do you mean? There are many."

Another man, the filthy and massive heathen who sought to assault my honor, said, "I am Joaquin, too."

A few other men assented in Spanish that they were also Joaquin and they pointed out a body on the ground, stripped of boots and pants, "That guy there, he was a Joaquin."

"So who do you mean, pendejo?" Rocking Chair Joaquin said.

"Mur... Murrieta. Joaquin Murrieta."

Rocking Chair Joaquin sneered. "Oh. Him. Yeah."

The men behind me all let out, "Oh, Murrieta."

Rocking Chair Joaquin turned from me and drew his machete.

"I will take you to him, Sr. Yellow Bird, after we are done helping the people." Here, he gestured to the bloodied, dying men and recoiling women I neglected to mention earlier. "But you pissed me off by not saying you wanted Murrieta up front, so you will have a c_____s." It is an abhorrent

word in Spanish, and I experienced the full depth of its meaning. It suffices to say I was beaten. Terribly beaten.

As Rocking Chair Joaquin had said, after his band had “aided” the people of the *hacienda*, we set off to see Murrieta. While blindfolded with a feed sack for days on the back of a mule, I could hear them rob liquor stores, brutalize and ravish ladies, torment a captured Highway patrolman, and have a prolonged shootout with a posse or SWAT in which several Joaquins fell. During the flight from this posse, no food, nor drink (water would be out of the question as these bandidos only quench their thirst with whiskey) came to me till the 4th day when Rocking Chair Joaquin stuffed some roasted beast in my mouth despite my protest of the cleanliness of his hands (which I knew were awful, blindfold or no) and my staunch vegetarianism and reliance on mainly grains, beans, and corn. I ate the gamey flesh, though. This dead animal, I mourn.

During this time a man with three fingers often prodded me, and though I thought it the same giant savage who assaulted me before, I recalled my Californio lore gained from *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murrieta*. I called out, “Three-fingered Jack, is that you?” The groping stopped, silence followed. Then I was kicked in the ear with a boot. Someone said, “Seven-fingered Joaquin, cabrón.”

Additionally, they had my digital camera that I wore for show to seem more like the reporter Yellow Bird. When they at once tackled me from the corner of my vision I saw the already dead batteries fly out. Yet a small crooked Joaquin wore the lanyard around his neck and snapped pretend photos with the dead camera at their many group posing and of their more degenerate activities, which I’ll overlook. It was during is these moments of pretend photo posing that I got to scrawl out some words as the Joaquins' attention was elsewhere and the small crooked Joaquin insisted I scribble down in this diary to provide further record of their good times.

Finally, after many days and panics, the feed sack was pulled off my head and I saw that we had arrived at the bandit palace—an entrance to a cave with an ornate oak door torn from some residence and affixed to a makeshift wall. The door depicted griffins in flight and bare breasted amazons in battle: a fantasy world for an equally fantastic portal. In the middle of the depicted melee someone had carved a “J.” To further seem more like a reporter, I quickly sketched it, pictured here:

J

Rocking Chair Joaquin to my surprise, explained:

“When he saw that movie about him, he made us put J’s on walls for a while. I tried to do it with a machete, but it don't work so good.” Rocking Chair Joaquin gripped me and drew me to his face. “If he asks, we still draw J’s.”

Soon, I was inside the cavernous gloom. My feet kicked through pizza boxes, empty whiskey bottles, crushed menudo tins, and the piled gold dust of a thousand robberies, the worth of which

could not match even one of Ramona's jewels due to their historical and cultural significance, including the promise I made to grandma to get them. Deep underground, a Joaquin parted decayed curtains and we entered the bandit emperor's chambers.

Splayed on tasseled cushions and broken down couches, mustachioed Joaquins pawed an array of gaudily painted women, some in low cut jeans exposing their midriff and others in frilly dresses that just showed a shocking amount of ankle. The sight of the women recalled to me my Murrieta and Ramona connection theory: The possibility that Murrieta was in reality Don Felipe Moreno, Ramona's own adopted brother and husband, excited my step, though later, due to unsavory circumstances, I forgot to ask.

"Well, there he is, yanqui." Rocking Chair Joaquin gesticulated towards a large glass jar on red velvet covered table. A dead man's head was inside the jar, filled with a sepia liquid.

The ne'er-do-wells lounging about grunted amusement in their fugue and the Joaquins who had brought me all this way, guffawed so roughly that I feared and wondered at their reasons to bring me to view this monstrosity. Was this to be my fate at the hands of these desperados, to become a head in a jar? Were the Anglo tabloids correct? Were my Hispanic brethren incorrigible ruffians, with no thoughts or concerns other than murder, torture, and buggery? More importantly, would I never find my illustrious ancestor-ess, Ramona? Would I never claim my inheritance of jewels, baubles, silks, and who knows what else? I slid to my knees in terror of the debauched laughter surrounding me and my presumed dark fate.

"*Shab-UB!*" the dead man's head sloshed in the jar and called out.

My brain twisted. I choked at the air, full of drug smoke and the scent of long unwashed flesh. The bandidos and harlots ceased their noise. Dust from the cave roof above us settled to the once precious and now tattered rugs below. What man could silence such lowlifes as these Joaquins, other than their chieftain? He was THE Joaquin among the Joaquins. Scourge of the Yankees, Mexican Robin Hood, Californio resistance fighter--nay savior. He was Joaquin Murrieta, and he was a head in a jar.

Though the truth of his appearance as an animate, swelled, gray head in amber fluid unsettled me, I introduced myself as Yellow Bird and slowly drew out my Ramona Diary and pencils, which like my theories, had broken into many pieces.

Head Joaquin interrupted, "*Bello Bab?*" through the fluid.

I told him I wanted to talk about rebooting the franchise. Head Joaquin banged against his jar. "*Borro! Borro!*" Joaquins drew their machetes and my life again was in peril as I swore I had nothing to do with Zorro, and in fact I meant to say, "Sequel." A sequel to let the world to know what came after *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murrieta*. The real Joaquin of today. The idea enchanted him, and me as well, so much so it was here I forgot to ask about Ramona. I instead asked him what liquid he floated in.

"*Wizbee,*" he grunted and bubbled.

I asked him to shortly state his encounter with Captain Harry Love, a roundabout way to address the blaring question on my mind, that is, how did he truly end up in a jar? I assumed the head

paraded around our state, much like defeated Vercingetorix before Rome, was not his, but some other unfortunate suspiciously Mexican. I believe he told me the truth, but the sounds he made, "*Swhoosh boosh wulb, gluk gluk, weeb mop gah,*" were more akin to the noises of a drowning man than words. I feigned a transcription and rose as I wrote, rising to one knee and then resting on the worn velvet of the table cloth. I was inches from the famous man. We have all seen the newsreels and wanted posters, describing a man 5'5" to 6'7", an Indio or Mestizo, along with conflicting reports that he was a red-headed Criollo (and hence my Don Moreno theory). Descriptions so vague that every Latin man of California is a suspected Joaquin Murrieta.

To ever learn about Ramona, to learn about Joaquin, the real Joaquin, I realized that I would have to pull him out of the whiskey to truly hear him. Head Joaquin continued his drowning man cacophony, "*Blurb, slup slup, woo bek. Ah ah!*" and the plan formulated in my mind which since has reshaped my life: the plan that caused me to live hated by both those within the law and those without it.

The desperados partook of the pipe or the low women, so my transcribing was sometimes halted by a drug induced night terror, or too loud an impassioned yelp. While they were thus busy and inattentive, I hefted up Head Joaquin's jar as he was lost in reminiscence, babbling and bubbling on and on. As I passed a couch where some sexed pumping was occurring, I bumped the supine woman's leg. My jacket button snagged upon her tattered stocking, pulling it off and fastening it to me. Her eyes turned from her criminal lover and I saw her blue eyes floating in her bronze face as I crept by. I wonder to this day if she was, if anyone ever was, the real Ramona, and that I gripped the wrong treasure in my hands as I left that cursed and ancient cavern. That said, I have no regret for my choice of Joaquin. As I passed through the heavy curtain she began calling, "Joaquin! Joaquin!" I made it to the main cavern alive and assumed that her screams for the Joaquin in my hands were taken for yelps of love for the Joaquin on top of her. I kicked up cans and gold dust with my inarticulate load unharmed and pushed through the fantastic gate to the mule outside, and a chance to hear the real story, the tale of California, the story of Joaquin.