

Rope artist stays in the loop

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James Barrera performs at a recent folk festival.



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Trick roper James Barrera envelopes sisters Priscilla, left, and Ruby Sosa of Hanford during a recent performance in Sacramento.

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James Barrera loves telling kids that Batman started like them. "Batman," he said, "is actually a Mexican living out of Mendota, [California](#)." The lineage goes like this:

Batman was inspired by another masked character who preceded him: Zorro. Zorro, the character, was a 19th century [California](#) noble, an avenger of wrongs against the downtrodden.

(By the way, a zorro volador is a flying fox, a kind of bat. See, it's not that far from Zorro to Batman.)

Zorro, in turn, is thought to have been inspired by [Joaquin Murrieta](#), described by some as a bandit but by others as a Mexican-born avenger who attempted to right 19th century injustices – the Mexican [Robin Hood](#).

Murrieta's history is a bit fuzzy, but Barrera's appearances are always sharp as a whip – literally so, because he performs with a 7-foot bullwhip. He uses the plaited leather whip in an exhibition of skill, precisely snapping the heads off carnations held in his teeth or flicking it to grab a scarf held by a volunteer.

Barrera has an act with a lineage of its own. It's an act that can be matched by few. He has taken elements of traditional cowboys of the United States and [Mexico](#), mixing trick roping with whip tricks from [Australia](#) and a smattering of good old-fashioned storytelling. It's modeled on [Will Rogers](#), whose famous stage shows featured roping tricks and commentary on the day's news. Barrera focuses more on history, especially that of the Mexican vaqueros and charros. "Everything that the American cowboy is has been learned from the Mexican vaqueros," he said.

Even Rogers was inspired when he saw the Mexican Vincente [Oropeza](#) performing with ropes at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. Barrera's combination of history and action stagecraft is a winner, especially for kids. That's why [Kate Ramos](#) booked Barrera at Leonardo da Vinci School in March.

"Not only was it great for the kids to see something that was that physical, but it was also cultural," said Ramos, a parent who works on a committee planning cultural programs for the school. "My son came home and made a whip and tried to cut flowers out of his mouth for a week," Ramos said.

Barrera stresses safety, though. When he does tricks with kids, he uses a softer rope than the hard ropes of plastic or maguey fiber that some trick ropers use. And the tricks he performs take years of practice, not a week.

He has yet to perfect another whip act he wants to take to the stage: snapping cards out of the air, like a trick shooter. His practice began with roping. His aunt – "not a person to take no for an answer," he said – had asked him to help out with a dance troupe. He found himself on stage trying to fill time between performances of the dancers.

"I did the little lasso thing ... and the audience loved it," he said.

He'd grown up helping on an uncle's ranch, and like any man of the West, "you took the tools you worked with and used them for play," he said. After that one improvisation, he spent a summer practicing with ropes two hours a day. His act was born when he folded in the stories.

"I've always had a love toward history," Barrera said.

And he loves bringing it to kids, hoping they, like Ramos' son, might think about taking it up.

"Maybe they'll continue practicing this art when I'm too old and feeble," he said.

And Murrieta, Zorro and Batman will ride again.

Call The Bee's Carlos Alcalá, (916) 321-1987.

More Information

[Trick roper performs](#)

Upcoming shows for James Barrera:

- Saturday: International Children's Festival, Gibson Ranch, Elverta Road near Watt Avenue. Barrera will do a 15-minute set after 1:30 p.m.
- June 13: Uptown Art Walk. Barrera will perform about 6:30 p.m. in the lot at Casa Bella Galleria, 1511 Del Paso Blvd.
- More information on Barrera's acts can be found at trickroperjm.com.