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# The Myth of the American Cowboy

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## Abstract

There are many images of the American West. However, one cannot think about the West without envisioning the American Cowboy, clad in chaps, spurs, and of course his iconic 10-gallon hat. Popular television shows such as *Yellowstone* (Sheridan & Linson, 2018) have contributed to a revival of sorts of cowboy culture and dress. In this article, the cowboy is examined for what he was and was not, and then suggestions are provided about how to teach about the cowboy. Additionally, a lesson outline is provided to show what it would look like to teach such a lesson in the social studies classroom.

**Keywords:** cowboy; the American West, dispelling the myth

There are innumerable images of the West; some of these include outlaws, mountain men, miners, Native Americans, farmers, and railroad workers. However, there is one particular image that has been fostered and nurtured through tall tales, dime store novels, Hollywood movies, and television. That image is the Anglo-American Cowboy. He is the most enduring, fascinating, and appealing image of the West. The fascination and appeal rests in the mystery of the cowboy.

The show *Yellowstone* (Sheridan & Linson, 2018) as well as its prequels *1883* (Sheridan, 2021) and *1923* (Sheridan, 2022) have spurred a resurgence of cowboy culture, ironically among many people who have no connection to livestock, farming, or ranching. PreK-12 classrooms are rife with students wearing the *Yellowstone* (Sheridan & Linson, 2018) brand, cowboy boots, and Wrangler® jeans. While this new fad is not necessarily new, it is important that students realize the history of the American cowboy and understand that even though popular culture paints the image of a white, gruff man in a saddle conquering the West, the history of the cowboy is much more diverse and complicated than media portrays them to be. In this article, I discuss the birth, the life, and dress of the cowboy. I will then examine the ethnicity and leisure of the cowboy, followed by a discussion of the cowboy's lure today. I will then provide suggestions for how to teach about the American cowboy, and then conclude by arguing that it is still difficult to dispel the myth of the American cowboy.

## The Birth of the Cowboy

To understand the cowboy, one must understand and realize how and where the “cowboy” was born. Iber (2000) stated, “The earliest mounted men herding cattle in the Western Hemisphere bear little resemblance to the romantic, dime store novel cowboy” (p. 22). In fact, the first real cowboys of the western hemisphere were not L, they were Spanish and they were given the name *gaucho* in Argentina, *vaquero* in Mexico, *llanero* in Venezuela, and *huaso* in Chile (Iber, 2000). Nevertheless, as the principal of herding cattle reached the continental United States, people began calling the young men herding cattle and living on the trail by the name cowboy.

## The Life of the Cowboy

The cowboy's "average age was only 24" (Forbis, 1973, p. 17). Usually, young men were attracted to the trail because of the hazards and challenges that were apparent (Westermeier, 1955). Although young, the cowboy would shortly be worn out. Life on the trail was tough and overbearing at times. They were exposed to the elements. They had to ride through blizzards, drought, tornadoes, dust storms and whatever severe weather was present on the trail. Miles were covered on horseback and foot every day. As one could imagine, the cowboy probably had sores, boils, and calluses all over his body. There were little luxuries on the trail to make up for these present problems.

Often for thirty-six hours continuously in the saddle, the hardships of their lot are apparent, cold black coffee, without sugar, drunk whenever the opportunity offers, is the sole luxury of the cowboy. With a piece of bread in one hand and some jerked beef in the other, he will ride around a stampeded herd, eating as he goes, and as happy as a king on his throne. (Westermeier, 1955, p. 24-25)

While this depiction seems to place a heroic slant on the image of the cowboy, it still embodies the difficulty of life on the trail. For example, 36 hours on a horse would be excruciating for even the toughest person. The reason for the assumption that the cowboy "was as happy as a king on his throne" (Westermeier, 1955, p. 24-25), is because most likely the cowboy may have looked as if he was happy since he did not complain, for there was not any need to.

The not-so-pleasant life of the cowboy can be best seen by an excerpt from a journal of the cowboy George Duffield in which he wrote:

May 1: Big Stampede. Lost 200 head of Cattle.

May 2: Spent the day hunting and found but 25 head. It has been Raining for three days. These are dark days for me.

May 3: Day spent hunting cattle. Found 23. Hard rain and wind. Lots of trouble.

May 8: Rain pouring down in torrents. Ran my horse into a ditch and got my Knee badly sprained-15 miles.

May 9: Still dark and gloomy. River up. Everything looks Blue to me.

May 14: Swam our cattle and horses and built raft and rafted our provisions and blankets over. Swam river with rope and then hauled wagon over. Lost most of our Kitchen furniture such as camp Kittles Coffee Pots cups Plates Canteens &c &c.

May 16: Hunt Beeves is the word-all Hands discouraged and we are determined to go. 200 Beeves out and nothing to eat.

May 17: Not Breakfast. Pack and off is the order. All hands gave the Brazos one good harty damn and started for Buchanan.

May 31: Swimming Cattle is the order. We worked all day in the River and at dusk got the last Beefe over. I am now out of Texas. This day will long be remembered by me. There was one of our party drowned today

June 1: Stampede last night among 6 droves and a general mixup and loss of Beeves. Hunt Cattle again. Men all tired and want to leave

June 2: Hard rain and wind storm. Beeves ran and I had to be on Horse back all Night. Awful night Men still lost. Quit the Beeves and go to Hunting men is the word 4p.m. Found our men with Indian guide and 195 Beeves 14 miles from camp.

Allmost starved not having had a bite to eat for sixty hours. Got to camp about 12M  
Tired

Next Day: 15 Indians came to Herd and tried to take some Beeves. Would not let them. Had a big Muss. One drew his Knife and I my revolver. Made them leave but fear they have gone for others

June 27: My back is Blistered badly from exposure while in the River and I with two others are suffering very much. I was attacked by a Beefe in the River and had a very narrow escape from being hurt by Diving

July 26: The day was warm and the Flies was worse than I ever saw them Our animals were almost ungovernable (Duffield, 1866, as cited in Brown, 1994, p. 74).

In a short time, Duffield had sprained his knee, faced the elements, lost men from his party, lost cattle, almost starved to death, had confrontations with Indians, had a blistered back, got attacked by a cow and plagued by flies. Duffield exemplifies that the trail was hard and undesirable, but it was his job, so he had to do it.

### **The Cowboy's Attire**

Every article of clothing on the trail was for utility, not fashion. However, much old western literature portrays the cowboy in these clothes for different reasons. For example, Westermeier (1955) wrote:

Right then was the day of the cowman in all his glory. He was King of the West, clad in his green shirt, red handkerchief, wide-brimmed sombrero, and arsenal of weapons, his chaps, spurs, saddle and gloves ornamented as the fancy and pocketbook of their owner detailed-he was a picturesque character. At home, in the saddle, on the windswept ranges, he was a creature lean swarthy, sinewy and taciturn. (p. 32)

The reason for the cowboys' apparel was not to be picturesque. The cowboy did not wear a coat, because he could not move as freely. If he wore a vest, he did not button it for fear of catching a cold. He wore chaps, but not for show. He had to protect his legs from briars and thorns, and that was the only thing to do the job. His boots kept his feet from slipping through the stirrups and gloves not for egotism, but to protect his hands from rope burn while he was roping cattle. His wide brimmed hat protected him from the sun, rain, or whatever weather he encountered. Last

but not least was his bandana. The cowboy's bandana was a major necessity on the trail. It protected his neck from the sun, served as a dust mask, an ear cover, a towel, and a blind fold for horses, a makeshift rope while trying to hold an unruly cow, a water strainer, a sling, and a variety of other uses (Brown, 1994). The cowboy was not trying to be handsome; he was trying to survive.

### **The Ethnicity of the Cowboy**

Not only is the cowboy often portrayed as being a handsome, picturesque man, he is portrayed as a handsome, picturesque white man. Very rarely in stories, descriptions, tall tales, or Hollywood film is the cowboy cast as anything but a white male. Nevertheless, there were Mexican cowboys, black cowboys, Irish cowboys, and many other cowboys from various ethnic descents. An excerpt Philip Rollins (1922) reveals this fact:

While the men of the Range were mainly of English or Irish descent or birth, and had,

in frequent instances, claim to early American ancestors of Scottish origin, the Southwest added to its quota of such bloods numerous men of Mexican extraction, and a more than occasional negro, with here and there men of strain partly Indian.

The great majority of all the men were American born. (p. 22)

Although most were American born, they were not all white. It seems that various ethnic groups were ignored in the history of the West, and Rollins' depiction is a prime example.

### **Cowboy Fun, Guns, and Leisure**

Even though the difficult life on the trail seemed as if it would never end, there was a finale to every big cattle drive. When the cowboys finally reached the town that they were going to, it was time to celebrate. This aspect is exemplified by Brown (1994):

Finally, after three months of mud, dust, rain, rivers, Indians, rustlers, short rations, and stampedes, most of the men and cattle and horses still endured. And when the cowboys heard the whistle of a train on the railroad, or saw the first sprawling false fronts on the trail town buildings, they broke into rebel yells, and sometimes song:

*I've finished the drive and drawn my money, Goin'  
into town to see my honey.*

It was the end of the drive, at last. (p. 76)

They had been on the trail for a long time without any relaxation or stress relievers. As one could imagine, when they reached their destination they were excited, so they usually entered with guns blazing in celebration.

People were sitting in town, talking to their neighbors, eating lunch, and living their everyday lives when all of a sudden yells and gunshots rumbled into the town. Therefore, the cowboy appeared as a rather rough individual. As Westermeier (1955) notes:

It is a deplorable fact that young men in our western cities are becoming too familiar with the use of firearms. They have a sort of desperado spirit instilled into them by constant association with those older than themselves who carry weapons. They should be taught that safety to life does not lie in the 44-cartridge but in the avoidance of melees and bad men, and in the maintenance of order.

Whatever may have been the condition of this Territory when it was a veritable border it is certain that young boys of your communities should be forbidden to carry firearms. (p. 111-112)

There are many people who think that the cowboy had the "desperado spirit" (Westermeier, 1955, p.111-112), and perhaps some did. Nevertheless, gun control of which the author wrote is something that was often instituted in cattle towns. Many towns required that the men upon entering the town were to give up whatever firearms they possessed (Dykstra, 1997). However, gun control as it relates to cowboys is not something that is present in the minds of citizens today, most likely because historical narratives about cowboys more so capture events like the blazing guns at the end of a cattle drive. Therefore, that is the image that the cowboy has carried throughout time.

After the cowboy entered the town, it was time to cleanup himself.

The usual first action of a trail's end cowboy was to get a haircut and have his mustache or beard properly shaped and blacked. Then he visited a clothing store for a

new outfit. Emerging with new clothes, the hat and boots he embellished with Texas stars, he was ready for fun and frolic. (Brown 1994, p. 198)

Most scenarios like the one described above helped add to the myth of the picturesque cowboy. Most people did not view the cowboy as the unpleasant looking man that he was when he entered the town, they saw him after he was shaved and finely dressed.

After the cowboy was cleaned up, it was time to spend money and have fun in the town. The cowboy probably spent his leisure time spending money in the bars, drinking, playing poker, talking, and often fighting. The cowboy in the town setting was intriguing. One Kansas traveler described a cowboy as such, "In appearance a species of centaur, half horse, half man, with immense rattling spurs, tanned skin, and dare-devil, almost ferocious face" (Brown 1994, p. 199). The cowboy sitting in the bar, in his new clothes and hat, with his suntanned face was something to behold. Obviously, the cowboy's spirit was hardened by the trail and he was what many would have called a rough and tumble character. The people in the town saw him sitting there, looking like a painting. Their recollections of him are very romantic and are often exaggerated for this reason. The people in the towns did not see him out on the trail, sleeping in the dirt or fighting the elements and insects. They did not see him with his legs broken, boils on his feet, in the middle of a stampede, famished, parched, in need of sleep, and in some cases, dead. Therefore, the image of the cowboy as seen in the cattle towns was as the Kansas traveler remembered. Nevertheless, that was not the "real" cowboy.

There were not many people besides cowboys that knew about life out on the trail. Aside from a few journals and recollections such as the "Journals of George Duffield," there are not many personal accounts of the trail. Because of this, many people assumed that the life of the cowboy was very romantic. Many people assume that the cowboy's life was free and limit-less and he answered to nobody but himself. He was a lawmaker, and when necessary, he would enforce the law as a vigilante. The freeness of the cowboy can be seen in an excerpt about the sheer personality of the cowboy regarding law and social restrictions.

Certain characteristics run through the whole tribe... their taciturnity, their surface gravity, their keen sense of humor, their courage, their kindness, their freedom, their lawlessness, their foulness of the mouth, and their supreme skill in the handling of horses and cattle...

If one thinks down doggedly to the last analysis, he will find that the basic reason for the difference between a cowboy and other men rests finally on an individual liberty, freedom from restraint either of society or convention, lawlessness, and accepting of his standard alone. (Westermeier, 1955, p. 35)

This persona of the cowboy is portrayed in works of fiction, Hollywood presentations, and even "Old Western" history.

### **The Cowboys' Lure Today**

Because of the romanticism and heroism placed on the cowboy, many people in the present time want to be a cowboy (Carlson, 2000). Although there were other roles in the West such as mountain men, miners, Native Americans, ranchers, settlers, and railroad workers, to name a few, not many people claim to be one of those. In fact, the cowboy persona and image have been fostered and nurtured not only in literature and film, but has also been used in the country music genre

(Carlson, 2000). The individuals who sing country music have adopted the cowboy dress and constantly sing about cowboy themes. There are numerous songs about being a cowboy, but there are hardly any singers that have been a cowboy or even know what a cowboy really is. A cowboy was a man that herded and drove cattle. However, the definition of a cowboy has changed considerably in recent years. Many people consider themselves cowboys, but not because they herd cattle. A cowboy, by today's standards may be someone who is tough, "country", uncomplaining, sometimes arrogant, good-looking, proud...the definition goes on and on because the definition rests in the eye of the beholder, whereas a cowboy used to be an occupation. While there are not many true cowboys today, there are some. As Carlson (2000) states:

Modern-day cowboys come in a variety of guises. In part because of low wages and long hours, two-thirds of them are recent immigrants, underpaid-like the Childers brothers-overworked, and often unemployed in the winter. A few are summertime ranch hands on break from school who, when working, wear t-shirts and tennis shoes more often than they wear the traditional cowboy garb of boots and hats. A few more are permanent ranch hands, many of whom are caught up in myths about the Old West, and partly as a result, dress in Wrangler jeans tucked inside tall boots, long-sleeved shirts and vests, and large Stetson-style hats. (p. 1)

The life of the cowboy as written about in history books cannot be relived. There are modern day cowboys, but the old west definition of a cowboy is no longer in existence.

"New Western" historians seek to dispel the myth of the American Cowboy. Among those is Richard White. As White (1991) noted:

Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) became the classic literary Western, and its author's premodern preferences ran through it pure and unadulterated. The cowboy's of Wister's West had wild and manly faces...In their flesh natural passions ran tumultuous; but often in their spirit sat hidden a true nobility, and often beneath its unexpected shining their figures took on heroic stature. Western saloons, Wister wrote, contained more death than New York City saloons, but less vice, and death is a thing much cleaner than vice.

Wister's cowboys got drunk, frequented prostitutes, gambled, slept with other men's wives, and killed each other, but their life and violence, was nonetheless, pure. It set them apart from the eastern immigrant worker. The *Virginian* ran a subtext of inequality, an attempt by Wister to explain why some Americans were, by the very human nature that the West laid bare, destined to rule and command others. (White, 1991, p. 621-622)

Although the cowboys in *The Virginian* drank, fought, committed adultery, gambled, and committed murder, they were still considered "good men"; they were dignified. White (1991) realized that myth takes events out of context and robs them of their historical accuracy. White (1991) sought to dismiss such falsehoods and replace them with accurate history.

People are still fascinated with the cowboy and that is why he tends to be the enduring symbol of the American West. The reason for this is complex. As stated before, there is not a lot of evidence about the actual life lived by cowboys while out on the trail. Because of this, the cowboy was easily romanticized by writers and story tellers. Due to the lack of evidence, many companies

could easily sell the idea of the great cowboy. As Savage (1979) states:

The Cowboy Hero has always been a commodity. He may be part of a mythic construct of America's past, and his image in popular culture may be rife with sociological and psychological implications, but he exists in the first place because of a superior act of marketing. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the cowboy hero has manufactured and sold to the American public in a manner similar to that employed in the manufacture and sale of any other product of the industrial revolution. He resulted from the efforts of men working in the best American entrepreneurial tradition of making something from nothing. (p. 109)

Marketers could have made the cowboy to be anything that they wanted if it would sell. There was so little evidence to contradict their stereotypes and portrayals of the cowboy, so he was easily configured.

Another possible reason for the exaggeration of the cowboy lies in the spirit of a country. America is the land of the free and the home of the brave. Many people in America want to think that the United States can conquer and tame anything that stands in its way. Nevertheless, America needed something to embody its spirit. Savage (1979) revealed this fact:

The cowboy's facility of mind explains much of this popularity in our culture, for Americans espouse nothing if not common sense. Whether or not they have it themselves, they agree that it is a good thing, and they will recall from their public school education a reading or two of Franklin's Autobiography and at least the name of Paine's pamphlet, remarking in the process that common sense—another name from pragmatism—had a lot to do with how America came into being in the first place. They would not, perhaps make common sense a conscious measure by which to judge their cultural heroes, because it is what mathematicians and other logicians call a given: it is present in all but accidental heroes, and the cowboy hero is not accident. He is popular because he, more than any other historical or mythical figure from America's past, represents the fine middle-class virtue of common sense, and in action at that. (p. 20)

Heroes are often born because of virtues or values that people or countries hold. America needed a hero, and the cowboy was the best possible candidate for the job. As aforementioned, there was not a lot of evidence to contradict a person, so the cowboy was easily manipulated to capture and embody the spirit of America.

Another possible reason that the cowboy is the enduring symbol of the American West is very simple. When one thinks about the West there are various images and symbols that enter the mind. Some of them include cowboy hats, boots, spurs, chaps, horses, cattle, Native Americans, barbed wire, saddles, cattle towns, lawlessness, outlaws, and a variety of other images and depictions. The cowboy was related to most of the images previously discussed. Because of this, the cowboy tends to be the symbol of the West because it captures people's ideas of the West and its culture. Because many people in the West dressed in apparel similar to the cowboy, most people classify all those that wore cowboy hats and dressed in so called "western" apparel, cowboys.

The main problem with the myth of the cowboy is that many people do not wish to dispel it.

There are many authors who know that what they are writing is not exactly accurate, but they continue to do so just because it makes for a good story and they do not see the need to change it. For example, Hoig (1958) states:

While I have tried to point out a few of the relevant facts concerning the cowboy's personality, my aim has largely been to pass on the cowboy's humor for the entertainment and enlightenment of the uninitiated. Most of these jokes and stories are old mossybacks and have been around a plenty. But for those not overly familiar with the Old West, this humor should be just as fresh as it was when a man could ride a hundred miles and never see a fence. The biggest part of the gather has been rounded up from back brush of libraries. Some are a little wooly, but I'm sure that whoever sinks his teeth into this beef will agree that it's salty! (p. 8)

The author knows that he is adding to the myth. He holds an admiration for the cowboy, so much so he wants to add to the myth. There are countless authors who continue writing about historical aspects that are not entirely true. By doing this, they are not only adding to the myth—they are generating sheer historical ignorance.

### **Teaching About the Cowboy**

Teaching about the cowboy in context of the social studies, would most likely fall under a unit on westward expansion. To teach a balanced view of the American Cowboy, a teacher could take several approaches:

- The teacher could have students analyze primary source excerpts similar to the ones provided in this article as a means to show students what life on the trail was really like.
- Additionally, students could compare primary source evidence to popular depictions of the cowboy in such media as John Wayne movies or even *Yellowstone* (Sheridan & Linson, 2018).
- Lastly, country music lyrics could also provide another source of evidence, in which students could analyze how the cowboy is depicted in song. Some artists that would be helpful for this include Garth Brooks, George Strait, and Chris Ledoux. There may be other artists that could be analyzed as well, but these three specifically address the life and legend of the cowboy.

To be more specific with these ideas, here is what a sample day could look like when starting the lesson.

**Warm Up:** Students are asked to answer the following question: Does the cowboy way of life allure you? If so, why? If not, why not?

**Introductory Discussion:** The previous question would allow the teacher to gauge prior knowledge and common misconceptions regarding the life of the cowboy. The teacher could follow up with questions based on student responses. An example of this could be, why do you see this as alluring and what have you read or seen that makes that life seem appealing?

**Source Analysis:** The teacher could take one of the sources in this paper, such as the diary of the

cowboy on the trail and compare that to a clip from *Yellowstone* (Sheridan & Linson, 2018) or compare the diary to a country music song such as Rodeo by Garth Brooks. Students could also compare the cowboy diary to one of the many popular homesteading/farming/cowboy YouTube channels which number in the thousands. An excellent strategy for source analysis is the SCIM-C scaffold. SCIM-C is an acronym that stands for: Summarizing, Contextualizing, Inferring, Monitoring, and Corroborating primary sources (Hicks, et al., 2004; National History Education Clearinghouse, 2018; TeacherTube, 2009).

**Discussion:** The teacher can then lead the discussion based on the question prompts provided with the SCIM-C strategy, which will make the discussion much more robust and rigorous.

**Closing the Lesson:** The teacher could then have students respond to the following prompt: The cowboy way of life is much more difficult and different than you expected; why then do you think it is popularized in media? This question will allow the teacher to dive deeper into the popularization of the cowboy and this will in turn provide opportunities for students to interrogate the nature of the American Cowboy as depicted in modern media.

### Conclusion

This article described how idealistically constructed depictions of the West have shaped our perceptions and emulations of the American Cowboy. The American Cowboy has been portrayed as the hero of the American West in dime store novels, Hollywood films, and tall tales. To dispel the myths and the public's naïve fascination about the American Cowboy, Western historians continue to research and publish works that more accurately describe the cowboy experience. Teachers can (and should) utilize primary and secondary sources—such as the ones presented in this article—to promote a more informed understanding of the American Cowboy of the past and the present. Hopefully, this article will serve as a catalyst for other ideas related to teaching about the American West generally, and the American Cowboy specifically.

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