

Legacy of the American West: Indian Cowboys, Black Cowboys, and Vaqueros

S. Kay Gandy

*Oh, I'm a lonely cowboy and I'm off the Texas trail,
My trade is cinchin' saddles and pullin' bridle reins.
For I can twist a lasso with the greatest skill and ease,
Or rope and ride a bronco most anywhere I please.*

—“Lone Star Trail,” recorded by Ken Maynard, 1930.

The cowboy is viewed as an American icon: rider of the open range, rugged individual, and champion of good. Many young children pretend to be cowboys, riding stick ponies and shooting “bad guys.” When I was growing up, Western shows peppered the television screen: *Bonanza*, *Have Gun Will Travel*, *Stagecoach West*, *Rifleman*, *High Chapparell*, *Lone Ranger*, *Gunsmoke*, and *Johnny Ringo*. Authors, such as Louis L’Amour and Zane Grey, have documented the life of a cowboy through more than 200 stories. Recordings by singing cowboys Roy Rogers and Gene Autry were a part of my early music collection.

But the cowboy life was not an easy life. Beans, bacon, and coffee were the leading sustenance, a bedroll under the stars served as home most days, and pay was about \$30 per month.¹ The work was tough. Cowboys faced cattle rustlers, stampedes, Indian raids, and hostile white settlers. They had to make sure the herd had plenty to eat and drink, and often had to drive cattle hundreds of miles to the nearest railroad.

Cowboys are still very much a part of American culture today. High school and college students participate in rodeos sponsored by the National High School Rodeo Association and the National Intercollegiate Rodeo

Association. The Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association sanctions around 700 rodeos annually.

Why is it important to study cowboys? The introduction of cattle and horses by the Spanish *conquistadors* transformed the local culture, influenced the economics of the times, and created a national identity with the cowboy. Yet our understanding of cowboys has, for the most part, been informed by movies and television shows. Dime store novels and Wild West shows helped construct the stereotypical images of the “white” cowboy and the red-skinned “savages.” However, the cowboy culture and history are a product of men and women of many ethnicities; therefore, it is imperative that students be exposed to the many influences that shaped the American cowboy.

When Indians were Cowboys

As the West was often portrayed as a battlefield between cowboys and Indians, it may be difficult for students to understand that so-called Indians were often cowboys. The early Spanish missionaries trained Native Americans as cattle herders. Many Natives adopted ranching into their economies.² As Native Americans had historically worked with animals and lived in close relation to the natural world, ranching provided connections to that heritage.³ Natives were recognized for

their horseback riding skills, particularly Comanche warriors, noted for their ability to shoot arrows from under a horse’s neck while galloping onwards.⁴

Since laws of the day made it necessary to register cattle brands, annual roundups were held. Branding cattle, riding horses, and roping skills were a natural part of the cowboy existence and often led to competitions for bragging rights as to who was the best. The rodeo was a natural extension of activities that were a fundamental part of the cowboy life. In a rodeo, the Native was not locked in the stereotype of primitive savage, but could be established as a skillful horseman or roper. Some noted Native cowboys include:

1. **Jackson Sundown** (Nez Perce), winner of the World Championship Rodeo in 1916;
2. **Tom Three Persons** (Blood), winner of the first World Bucking Horse Championship at the Calgary Stampede in 1912;
3. **Will Rogers** (Cherokee), noted writer and actor who grew up as a cowboy;
4. **Teesquantee Woolman** (Cherokee), three times National



Fred Whitfield of Hockley, Texas, competes to score a time of 7.4 seconds in calf roping during the opening night of the National Finals Rodeo on Dec. 6, 2002, at the Thomas & Mack Center in Las Vegas. (AP Photo/Joe Cavaretta)

Finals Rodeo (NFR) Team
Roping World Champion;

5. **Tom Reeves** (Sioux), team captain for U.S. Olympic rodeo team in 2002.

Native cowboys were often discriminated against in early professional rodeos, which led to the formation of such organizations as the Indian National Finals Rodeo (www.infr.org) and the All Indian Rodeo Cowboys Association (www.aircarodeo.com). Other famous Native cowboys can be found at the Indian Rodeo News website (indianrodeonews.com/PRCAIndianCowboys.htm). Two books that teachers could use to find background information include *When Indians Became Cowboys: Native*

Peoples and Cattle Ranching in the American West (Iverson, 1997), and *Tom Three Persons: Legend of an Indian Cowboy*, (Dempsey, 1997).

Black Cowboys

American history textbooks frequently omit contributions of black cowboys, yet about one in every four cowboys was African American.⁵ A former cowboy, Silver Walker (an African American), was one of the leading horse racers in 1870. In fact, the winning jockey of the first Kentucky Derby was black. Until the early 1900s, there were many black jockeys winners, such as Ike Murphy who won the Derby three times.⁶

The word “cowboy” may have first been used as a description of a black slave’s role with cattle.⁷ Impelled by

racial oppression, many blacks went west in the 1800s. The Civil War generated many African American cowboys, as white ranchers went off to fight in the war. White and black cowboys worked together, sharing the same bunkhouse, same food, and often the same pay. Yet blacks still faced social discrimination. Rarely did a black cowboy advance to the level of trail boss or foreman; and in saloons, blacks were forced to stay at the end of the bar.⁸ Saloons often segregated by class and race, charging from five cents to twenty-five cents for a mug of beer.⁹

Although most movies and books excluded the black cowboy, Herbert Jeffries (the first singing black cowboy) convinced Hollywood to make several all-black cowboy movies.¹⁰ These 1930s Western musicals created the hero known as the Bronze Buckaroo, acknowledged later in *The Untold West*, Turner Broadcasting Service’s documentary on the legacy of black cowboys on the American frontier. Jeffries sang his own Western compositions in the movies, some of which were released in a 1995 CD, *The Bronze Buckaroo (Rides Again)*.¹¹

Like Native American cowboys, African American cowboys soon organized their own competitions and associations. The Southwestern Colored Cowboys Association was formed in the 1940s. The Bill Pickett International Rodeo, which has been in existence more than 20 years, is dedicated to keeping the legacy alive of black cowboys who helped define the American West (www.billpickett.rodeo.com/web/pages/main.htm).

There are many famous black cowboys documented in historical records and children’s literature. Some books I recommend are *Black Cowboy, Wild Horses: A True Story* (Lester, 1998), *The Story of Stagecoach Mary Fields* (Miller, 1994), and *Bill Pickett, Rodeo-Ridin’ Cowboy* (Pinkney, 1996). Information on many black cowboys can also be found at www.blackcowboys.com. Listed below are some of the more famous cowboys.

Nat “Deadwood Dick” Love, former slave considered expert roper, rider, and shooter (Nat wrote the only known autobiography of an African American cowhand);

Bose Ikard, former slave who became right-hand man to one of the richest cattlemen in Texas (The character played by Danny Glover in the movie *Lonesome Dove* was based on Bose Ikard);

Bill Pickett, first African American inducted into the National Cowboy Hall of Fame; credited with inventing “bulldogging” (Until he became famous, Pickett was often forced to dress as a Mexican *toreador*, as many rodeos did not admit black contestants);

Two famous African American lawmen were **Willie Kennard** and **Bass Reeves**. Kennard served as Marshal of Yankee Hill, a gold mining village in Colorado, and Reeves served as a deputy U.S. Marshal in present-day Oklahoma;

Mary Fields, first African American woman to work as a U.S. postal worker (Mary broke gender, racial, and age barriers delivering mail well into her 60s);

Bob Lemmons, legendary tracker;

Isom Dart, great bronco-buster, cowman, and cattle rustler;

Fred Whitfield, first black rider to win a world title in rodeo’s prestigious all-around division; secured four championship gold buckles in calf roping;

Cranford Goldsby, a famous outlaw, often compared to Billy the Kid;

Charles Sampson, first black champion bull rider for ProRodeo in 1982.

Vaqueros (Charros)

When the Spanish introduced horses and cattle to the Americas, large haciendas were established in Mexico. This created a demand for skilled *vaqueros* to rope, ride, control, and protect the animals. The word “vaquero” came from the word *vaca*, the Spanish word for cow. Cowboys often referred to themselves as buckaroos. In Spanish, the “v” is pronounced like a “b,” so vaquero may have evolved into *bukero*, then finally *buckaroo*. *Charro* is another Spanish term that means expert horseman or cowboy. Charro became the cultural construction of maleness to the Spanish settlers.¹² Charro referred to the landowner and vaquero to the poorly paid laborer. The dirty work of the cowboy was beneath the nobility. Ranch hands consisted of Indians and *mestizos* (the mixed race descendants of Indians and Spanish).¹³ Thousands of vaqueros worked on ranches in Mexican territories, including *Tejas* before it became a part of the United States.¹⁴ Vaqueros were even invited to come to Hawaii in the 1830s to teach ranching skills to Hawaiians.¹⁵ As the black cowboys, Mexicans also faced discrimination, earning less pay and prevented from advancing to foreman or trail boss.

Cattle roundups were called *rodeos*, from the Spanish word *rodear* that means “to go around” or “to surround.”¹⁶ Fiestas, which featured exhibition of riding and roping, were held to celebrate the end of the round up. At this time, the *charreada* (riding competition) was established. The early charreadas (*rodeos*) served as a venue through men of any social class could prove their worth and gain statue.¹⁷

North American rodeo origins can be traced to these festival pastimes in Mexico, and today include many of the same events. Some of the events from *La Charreada* included:

- *Cala de caballo*, a test to show how well a charro handles his horse

- *Piales*, lassoing an animal
- *Coleada*, grabbing the tail of bull, wrapping it around your right leg and spinning the bull to the ground
- *Jineteada de toros*, bull riding
- *Jineteada de yeguas*, riding a bucking wild horse bareback
- *Escaramuza charra*, equestrian ballet performed by women and girls
- *Paso de muerte* (leap of death), three teammates chase a wild horse; one charro brings his horse alongside and leaps onto horse, grabs the mane, and rides until the horse tires.¹⁸

Regulations of the Federacion de Charros prohibit women from competing in any charro event. Mostly they serve behind the scenes as organizers and hostesses of La Charreada. The only event for women is the precision riding team, in which women must ride sidesaddle.¹⁹ In early rodeo days, women were typically viewed as “window dressing” rather than competitors. During the Wild West shows of the 1880s, women first appeared as contestants and competed in all events for a few years. Today, women appear in timed events and seldom compete with men.²⁰

American cowboys learned their trade from the Mexican vaquero: how to break a bronc, ride a herd, throw a lariat, and use a branding iron.²¹ Cowboy equipment, working techniques, clothes, entertainment, range law, and organizations have their roots in Mexico.²² Even the language of the charro became part of the English language, with such words as rodeo, lariat, lasso, chaps, taps, cinch, bandana, mustang, and bronco. Many expressions and sayings can be contributed to the vaquero, such as:

- Appearances are deceiving.
- Misfortune, like the rattler does not always give warning.

- It's a cinch.
- Spur someone on
- Earmarked (identifying a steer belonging to a ranch)
- Keep your ears to the ground (listening for the approach of a herd).
- Don't let it throw you (referring to a bucking bronc).
- Give him the boot.
- I'm being kept out of the loop.
- I've got to take the bit in my mouth.²³

The influx of farmers, immigrants, fences, trains, and small towns contributed to the demise of the cowboy life. Plowing killed off the range, barbed wire limited access to grass and water, and thousands of hands lost jobs when it became cheaper to ship cattle to market by rail. But the myth of the “Wild West” was nurtured through stories and movies. There were few Mexicans in these stories, even though vaqueros made up more than half the workforce on most Texas and southwestern ranches.²⁴ The vaqueros that were mentioned were regarded as lazy and untrustworthy with a weakness for women and liquor.²⁵

Typically in Western mythology, the Mexican cowboy was portrayed as a vil-

lain. However, there were some Wild West shows that featured outstanding vaquero horsemen. In 1894, the best charros from Mexico made their first major expedition into the United States for a tour with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show in New York.²⁶ These skilled vaqueros were known as the “Congress of Rough Riders of the World.” The show also featured renowned roper José Berrara, and horsemen Antonio Esquivel.²⁷

Other noted Mexican cowboys include:

1. **Ramon Ahumada**, the only vaquero elected to the National Cowboy Hall of Fame;
2. **Ignatio Flores**, one of the greatest trackers; and
3. **El Tejano**, a bandit who robbed stagecoaches from rich Americans and gave to poor Mexicans.

Conclusion

Cowboys are found in many countries around the world. In Chile, they are called *huasos*, in Argentina *gauchos*, in Australia *jackaroos*, and in Venezuela *llaneros*. Their “horse” may be a pickup truck or a helicopter, but cowboys still ride the range. Western movies are still popular, and contemporary films, such as *Unforgiven* (Warner Bros., 1992) and *Open Range* (Touchstone Pictures, 2003), are more balanced in the depiction of ethnicity in the Old West.

Teachers are responsible for creating a curriculum that balances the contributions of various ethnic groups throughout our history. For the American West, students could participate in a variety of activities that would explore the heritage of the many peoples who contributed to the diverse cowboy culture. One way would be to divide students into groups and assign each group a different ethnic group to research. Plan a panel discussion where students take on the role of various cowboys and answer questions about their careers and obstacles they overcame. For an assessment, have students write factual paragraphs that provide important information typically left out of textbooks.

An incentive to get students interested in the cowboy culture would be to ask students to dress as cowboys or to bring in artifacts of cowboy life (bandana, saddle, spurs, chaps, hat, boots, lariat). Cook up a Chuck Wagon feed of Old West cuisine, such as baked beans, biscuits, and beef jerky. Read cowboy poetry or sing cowboy songs, then have students create their own writings. Cowboys sang songs to soothe the restless cattle. Play Aaron Copeland’s musical compositions called “Rodeo” and “Hoedown.” Ask students to describe how the music creates pictures in their minds that relate to cowboys.

Have students research the many jobs of cowboys (wrangler, trail cook, bronco buster, foreman, roper, top hand) and reflect on the discrimination against various groups. Ask questions such as, why do you think the stories of Native American,

Related Websites

www.collegerodeo.com National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association

www.nhsra.org National High School Rodeo Association

www.blackcowboys.com Black Cowboys

www.cowboysofcolor.org National Cowboys of Color Museum and Hall of Fame

www.nationalcowboymuseum.org National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum

www.billpickett.rodeo.com/web/pages/main.htm Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo: The Nation’s Only Touring Black Rodeo

www.lonehand.com/cowboy_songs_index.htm cowboy songs

www.cowboypoetry.com cowboy poems

www.aircardeo.com All Indian Rodeo Cowboys Association

indianrodeonews.com/PRCAIndianCowboys.htm Indian Rodeo News

African American and Hispanic cowboys have been written out of history? Have women successfully pursued careers in rodeo? How have gay cowboys been discriminated against in the cowboy culture?

To bring in geography to the curriculum, have students map some of the famous trails, such as the Old Chisholm Trail. What dangers did the cowboys face on the trails? How did the geography of the land influence the way the trail was developed? What other geographic factors influenced the movement of cattle?

As “time” is often the enemy of teachers, it would be beneficial to create a unit which integrates the legacy of cowboys across the curriculum: the study of word origins and cowboy poetry in language arts; the study of land use, cattle drives, and markets in social studies; or industry and foods in science. Multicultural education as an integrative part of the social studies curriculum should help create students that recognize and respect the cultures of diverse people. Studying

the diverse legacy of cowboys would be a step toward the realization of this high goal. ■

Notes

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10. Mary A Dempsey, “The Bronze Buckaroo Rides Again,” *American Visions* 12, no. 4 (1997): 22.
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12. Olga Najera-Ramirez, “Engendering Nationalism: Identity, Discourse, and the Mexican Charro,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (1994): 2.
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16. Freedman, 9.
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18. George Ancona, *Charro: The Mexican Cowboy* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1999): 8-20.
19. Najera-Ramirez, 8.
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23. Sandler, 102.
24. Freedman, 55.
25. Sandler, 81.
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27. Sandler, 90, 91.

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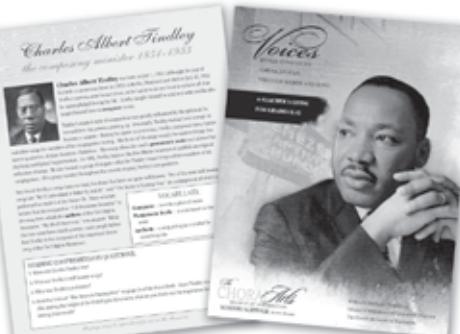
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