

Diversity on the Open Range:

Exploring the Experiences of Minority Cowboys During the Nineteenth Century

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This report was prepared under the advisement of the staff at Grant-Kohrs National Historical Site, who expressed an interest in supplementing current knowledge of the minority cowboys who played significant but often forgotten roles in the open range cattle industry of the late nineteenth century. Given that the site is meant to interpret and preserve the history of the entire open range cattle industry, this report has collected information about the lives of cowboys who operated from the Rio Grande to the Canadian border.



Nat Love, infamous 19th century cowboy
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My report is primarily a review of the secondary literature that exists regarding the experiences of minority cowboys. Of the three communities examined, historians know most about African American cowboys. As I explain, nineteenth century racial ideology created a hierarchy in which black men warranted more respect than Hispanic or American Indian men in most situations. The primary source record, therefore, reflects this racism by omitting or obscuring the stories of minorities. With the exception of Nat Love's memoir, there are no easily accessible first-hand accounts of cow punching left behind by non-Anglo men. A few oral histories were collected from African American cowboys by the Federal Writer's Project in the 1930s, and I utilize those interviews to bring the black cow puncher's experience into focus. Unfortunately, language barriers prohibited similar interviews with Mexican or American Indian men.

The information aggregated in my report can enrich one's understanding of the American cowboy, a figure that has been thoroughly romanticized, but is frequently presented as one-dimensional. In many ways the minority cowboy's experience paralleled that of his Anglo peers. Yet race did not disappear on the frontier, despite the all-too-common western folklore trope that all hardworking men were treated equally. African American, Hispanic, and American Indian cowboys played significant roles in the western cattle industry, and their work deserves recognition. It is my hope that the staff at Grant-Kohrs will find the report a useful tool in their mission to represent a comprehensive history of cattle ranching in the nineteenth century U.S. West.



Thousands of black cowboys rode the open range
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