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 Grant-Kohrs National Historical Site staff, 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.

Presented in the following pages is 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 will be explained, 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, but language barriers prohibited similar interviews with Mexican or American Indian men.

The following information can enrich one's understanding of the American cowboy, a figure that has been thoroughly romanticized, but is frequently presented as one-dimensional. Anyone interested in learning more is encouraged to pursue the sources listed in the bibliography.

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AFRICAN AMERICAN COWBOYS

The largest minority group represented in the cowboy population of the open range was African Americans. Although popular history masked the presence of black cowboys for many decades, they undoubtedly made up a significant portion of the cattle industry's labor force during the latter half of the 19th century. Particularly in Texas and on the southern range, and to a lesser extent in parts of Wyoming, the Dakotas, Montana and Oregon, black cowboys contributed their skills and man power to cattle drives and ranches that might otherwise have been understaffed. While the historical record left behind by these cowboys is regrettably sparse, historians have been able to use a variety of sources to piece together a basic understanding of how black cow punchers experienced the open range. Late-19th century ideas about racial hierarchies certainly made the black cowboy experience unique, but in surprising ways it was also not so different from that of their white peers. In many cases the harshness of the western range proved to be more hospitable to African Americans than either the southern farm field or the northern city. This is not to say, however, that the very real discrimination that faced African Americans in all parts of 19th century America did not leave a mark on cow country.

Most research concerning African American cowboys has focused on Texas, the state which played home to the largest number of minority cowboys during the time period in question.[1] Long before the cattle industry boomed, black slaves worked cattle in eastern Texas. In the decades leading up to the Civil War, slaves were charged with rounding up the wild cattle which grazed the coastal prairie and drive them east. New Orleans was then the primary destination for the long horned animals which were more valued for their tallow and hide than their meat.[2] Thousands of black men thus learned the husbandry skills which would become so vital to cowboys in later years. The end of the war, and the beginning of an industrial revolution,

[1] Outside of the southern Plains there is little evidence to suggest a significant population of black cowboys. African Americans surely would have been among the men who trailed cattle up from Texas into grazing lands in Montana, Wyoming, and the Dakotas. A few men may have chosen to stay on the northern range, but the majority headed back south to terrain that was more familiar. According to one source, "There were probably fewer Negro cowboys in Idaho and Montana than in any other part of the cattleman's West. One reason was race hatred and bitterness: early steamboat traffic up the Missouri had resulted in the immigration into Montana of many 'unreconstructed' Southerners and the simultaneous arrival of a number of transient Negro steamboat crewmen and river front roustabouts." Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones, *The Negro Cowboys* (New York: Dodd, Mean & Co., 1965), 140-141.

[2] Jacqueline M. Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men: Class and Masculinity on the Texas Frontier, 1865-1900* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 28-29.

brought new demand to the cattle market. The disruption caused by the war had provided the cattle already grazing in Texas with the opportunity to multiply unmolested. By 1866 there were as many as three million cattle freely roaming the grasslands.[3] Ranchers, backed by Eastern or European investors, were in need of additional labor to staff their growing spreads and drive their product north to industrial centers via railroads. Newly emancipated African Americans cow punchers were a natural choice for many employers.

There is considerable disagreement concerning the number of black cowboys operating in Texas during the trail drive era, 1866-1895. While Texas assuredly had the largest population of African American men and women working in the cattle industry, the actual percentage is difficult to determine because census figures generally underrepresented the minority, transitory population and lists of men on trail drives would not have counted those who stayed on the home ranch to tend to the remaining herd. George W. Saunders, president of the Texas Trail Drivers Association during the 1920s, estimated that out of the 35,000 men who trailed cattle, one-third would have been black or Mexican. He based his approximation on information provided directly by members of the association. Kenneth Porter came to a similar ratio by studying "lists of trail-herd outfits which identify their members racially." In Porter's estimation, twenty-five percent of trail cowboys would have been black, with Mexicans making up only twelve percent. Quintard Taylor, Jr. based his 1880 estimation of only 4% on historian Terry Jordan's research regarding the number of black cowboys migrating from eastern to western Texas during that decade. Therefore, those black cowboys who remained in the east were underrepresented, and that would certainly have been a larger number.[4] While scholars will never know exactly how many African Americans worked in the cattle industry during the open range era, Porter's essay "Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry, 1866-1900" has become the standard reference for researchers.

Although cultural norms of the day prevented the vast majority of black cowboys from becoming foreman or bosses, African Americans could be found at every other rank on the ranch. The most unskilled riders were generally assigned to the *remuda*, or herd of horses awaiting their next shift, because it was believed to be the simplest and least exciting job on the

[3] Sara R. Massey, ed., *Black Cowboys of Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 103.
[4] Massey, ed., *Black Cowboys of Texas*, xiii-xiv.

trail or at the ranch. Standard cow hands demonstrated seniority through their positions on the trail drive. The more experienced a cowboy was the closer to the front he would ride, the rational being that the cattle leading the herd were more rambunctious and energetic. "Greenhorns" were apt to ride at the very back of the pack, "eating dirt" for hours on end. It is significant to note, however, that when it came to managing the herd, black cowboys did not generally experience job discrimination. For instance, if a young white man joined an outfit as a novice, he could not expect to usurp the position of a black co-worker farther up in the herd based on his skin color alone.[5]

While the black cowboy may not have been able to work into the highest ranking positions of a cattle outfit, a great number did make a living as cooks on the trail or ranch, a job which commanded respect, gratitude, and authority. The cook's position was not exclusively reserved for African Americans, although Porter argues that a disproportionate number of southern plains cooks were indeed black. His hypothesis rests on primary source materials which identify the race of an outfit's cook, as well as the reality that it was more common for an African American boy to have learned culinary skills from his mother or grandmother than it was for a young white boy.[6] While cowboy lore has often stereotyped the cook as mean or hard-hearted, it is more likely that he was merely reacting to the stresses of his responsibilities. A cook's day consisted of waking up before dawn to prepare the morning meal and coffee, setting out before the herd, negotiating the terrain without assistance, identifying and setting up camp for the night, starting a fire, and finally, cooking a supper that would satisfy hungry men. With such a tall order, it is little wonder that chuckwagon bosses were frequently cranky. Their importance to the overall success of the drive, moreover, provided even black cooks with enough cultural leeway to forego the politeness that 19th century mores dictated. Of course, occasionally cowboys did trespass against cooks, either by chance or by design, and those men could look forward to tough cuts of meat, undercooked beans, and weak coffee in return.[7] The cook generally ranked only second to the foreman on a trail drive or ranch, therefore, he could expect to earn as much as $5 more per month than the typical cowhand. He was also the master of his domain, and within the sphere of influence of the chuckwagon a black cook could exercise a

[5] Kenneth W. Porter, "Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry, 1866-1900" *Labor History* 10, no. 3 (1969): 348-349.
[6] Porter, "Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry," 355-359.
[7] Durham and Jones, *The Negro Cowboys* (New York: Dodd, Mean & Co., 1965), 49-50.

form of control and leadership over a mixed race crew that would have been unthinkable in nearly every other part of 19th century America.[8]

Discrimination generally lay just beneath the surface of the African American cowboy experience, but a number of black cowboys enjoyed a privileged status with their employer as a confidant or bodyguard. According to Porter, "Where large sums of money were involved, and courage and loyalty in protecting and defending it was needed, prominent cattlemen such as Goodnight, Slaughter, Olive, and Pierce, characteristically preferred to depend on Negro bodyguards." For instance, Bose Ikard, the famous black cowboy who worked for Charles Goodnight, might make the trip back to the home ranch after a drive with $20,000 hidden in his saddle bags or in his jacket. The rationale behind such a risky undertaking was that a road agent was unlikely to stop and search the effects of an African American man.[9] What Porter does not explicitly note, however, is that Goodnight must have trusted Ikard a great deal to entrust a small fortune with him, particularly in light of the contemporary view of African Americans as dishonest or prone to thievery. Besides being trusted by their employers with money or important information, black cowboys were also commonly looked to as mentors for new and inexperienced employees of the ranch. Although Porter does not spell out clearly what their motivations might have been, he asserts that experienced African American cowboys "frequently served as unofficial, one-man apprentice systems to white greenhorns." In fact, Roy Rogers received his first lessons in riding and roping from a cowboy in his father's employ that was of both black and Cherokee heritage.[10]

Some of the most recent scholarship on race relations among the cowboy community of the open range era has focused on the intersection of whiteness and masculinity. During the late-19th century American middle-class men experienced a crisis of confidence in their own manliness. It was widely agreed upon that a decrease in manual labor was making men "soft." Teddy Roosevelt popularized an idealized rugged lifestyle and warned against the effeminizing forces of the modern, industrialized world. Simultaneously, an emerging social Darwinist theory

[8] Porter, "Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry," 354-355.
[9] Porter, "Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry," 361-362.
[10] Porter, "Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry," 350.

provided white men with the scientific proof of their superiority.[11] Only white men could truly claim to be virile and masculine, traits developed through the subordination of lesser races, and therefore any adult male of another color could at best claim to be a boy, and at worst he was only a savage. Thus race (and more specifically whiteness) became inseparable from masculinity, which in turn was a requirement for full citizenship and access to rights.[12]

In fact, there is some debate among historians as to whether the term "cow boy" is a byproduct of the days when slaves were the primary caretakers of livestock.[13] The racism that black (and Hispanic) cowboys faced was compounded by the pervasive attitude among white cowboys and cattlemen that non-Anglos lacked many manly qualities such as intelligence, a strong work ethic, physical toughness, and a sense of right and wrong. Despite the outstanding performance of black cowboys on the range, these beliefs persisted and often translated into lower wages and derogatory nicknames. Both black and white cowboys, moreover, labored under a class hierarchy which credited men of means with more virility and masculinity than those men who worked for a wage. As Moore explains, "Gender was clearly part of the social hierarchy in the West, and paternalism part of social control. When the cattlemen couched social distinctions in paternal terms, the cowboys generally agreed with them."[14] This is not to say, of course, that black cowboys did not recognize the prejudices which plagued them day in and day out. In an era of lynchings and general harassment, however, life on the open range could provide some relief from the most vicious forms of racism.

The discrimination experienced by black cowboys came in a variety of forms. The names of nearly all black cowboys were preceded by the word "nigger," for example Nigger Joe, and a black man could expect to be called "boy" even if he was older than the person he was conversing with. "Nigger" was also commonly used as derogatory slang; for instance, "nigger brands" were actually saddle sores which appeared on the backs of horses when they were not

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[11] Social Darwinism has long been discredited, but it is important to understand the very real belief in racial hierarchies that dominated 19th and early-20th century thought.
[12] Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men*, 11-12. For more on race and masculinity within 19th century American culture, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
[13] Durham and Jones, *The Negro Cowboys*, 30-31. Some historians believe that the term "cow boy" is actually more representative of the class division between owners and cow punchers, with discrimination occurring on the basis of social strata rather than race.
[14] Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men*, 42.

properly cared for.[15] As previously noted, barriers to promotion were standard across the industry. It was generally believed that black men lacked the intelligence or capacity for leadership necessary for a successful trail boss. Even if a particularly open-minded cattleman saw potential in an African American employee, he would have had to seriously consider whether a competitor's trail crew would respect the authority of a black man during roundups or other events which brought rival enterprises into contact. Records show that on a few very rare occasions black men were promoted to the position of trail boss, but those crews were made up exclusively of African Americans and Mexicans.[16] It is interesting to note, however, that financial records of ranches do not indicate that black cowboys were systematically paid less than their white peers.[17] Out on the range, the pressures of discrimination were also evident in the jobs assigned to and expected of African Americans. As Massey describes it,

> "The lives of the African American cowboys tell the story of skill and grit, as they did what was necessary to gain the trust and respect of those who controlled their destiny. For these men and women it meant being the best -- at roping, at bronc busting, at taming mustangs, at calling the brands, controlling the remuda, or topping off horses. They knew that if there were an outlaw horse to be broken, it was their job. If someone had to ride an extra night watch, it was their job to do. That's just the way it was. They were made the butt of jokes, went to the back room to eat, and tried not to fight back. They made fun of themselves or did 'the shamble' because they had to. Some say skill and the scarcity of labor counted more in the West, which may be true, but African American men and women earned respect the hard way -- by becoming the very best at their work."[18]

Similarly, Porter asserts that black cowboys were expected to go above and beyond the bar set by their white coworkers. He stipulates, however, that there is no evidence to suggest that black cowboys were actually assigned more work; instead they picked up the slack, so to speak, as a favor or as a way to build good will among the crew.[19]

A cowboy's relationship with his crew was doubly important in town, where color lines were more pronounced. "Negro cowhands normally depended for protection against insult or injury -- whether from members of their own outfits or outsiders -- not on fists or weapons but on

[15] Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men,* 135-136.
[16] Porter, "Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry," 359-360.
[17] Porter, "Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry," 363.
[18] Massey, ed., *Black Cowboys of Texas*, xvi.
[19] Porter, "Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry," 366-367.

good conduct, tactful behavior, and their standing among the better element of whites."[20] With few options for recourse, black cowboys were dependent on their crewmates for protection; in the era of intense racial hatred, it is remarkable how frequently that occurred. On one particularly famous occasion a Texas crew galloped into Abilene in 1870 to spring their black cook from jail, a venture that included shooting up a town trustee's office to show their discontent with the judicial system.[21] The camaraderie shared by outfits of mixed race should not be overstated though, as the majority of white cowboys still very much expected their black peers to respect the racial etiquette of 19th century America. Black cowboys who challenged authority or spoke out too frequently were likely to be labeled as "uppity" or "smart," traits which could incite a violent retribution from an offended party. Moore's research uncovered on such incident:

> When tenderfoot James Shaw and a black cowboy named Albert were the only men to stay with the herd while the rest of the outfit ran away to drink in Dodge City, they were not pleased. Albert rebuked the ringleader of the other cowboys, saying pointedly, "Where do you suppose dem cattle would abin if Mr. Shaw and me had went to town," but his complaint backfired. The man drew his pistol on Albert, saying, "It's all right, ain't it, Albert?" leaving Albert only able to reply "Yes, sah cos it [is]."[22]

Taken in concert, all of this evidence suggests that while the West did indeed provide some relief for black men from the stifling racism back East, it should not be overly romanticized.

In part, the tenuous mix of social acceptance and inherent racism was a product of economic necessity. As previously noted, Texas cattlemen were in desperate need of labor during the first few decades of the open range era. Without fences an outfit's cattle, numbering in the tens of thousands, could roam a great distance if left unchecked. The rancher, therefore, needed to hire enough men to form a sort of human fence which could contain the cattle and protect them from predation. The sheer number of men needed to achieve that level of control required cattlemen to accept any able bodied cowboys, no matter the color of their skin. For this reason historian C. Robert Haywood cautions against the acceptance of mythic frontier where Westerners gladly accepted any hardworking and honest individual into the community. Instead, Haywood "sees economic interdependence as a primary factor in creating the perception of the

[20] Porter, "Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry," 368.
[21] Durham and Jones, *The Negro Cowboys,* 55-56.
[22] Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men,* 136.

West as a land of opportunity."[23] Segregation and discrimination were fiscally irresponsible on the open range, and so conversely, as barbed wire replaced men on horseback and additional train tracks made long cattle drives obsolete, the white West traded its "reputation for freer social interactions for more Victorian sensibilities."[24]

Despite their proven importance to the development of the cattle industry, only a handful of black cowboys escaped the obscurity of history to be remembered by historians of the subsequent decades. The most famous of those men is most certainly Nat Love. Love was born a slave in Tennessee in 1854, but left his family in 1869 to pursue opportunities on the western frontier. His experiences in Dodge City, a town of lawlessness and vice but little formalized racial discrimination, convinced Love to sign on with a Texas cattle outfit. For nearly two decades Love rode the range, purportedly encountering beautiful Spanish maidens, blood-thirsty Indians, and a number of the West's most colorful characters throughout his travels. He insisted that his roping, riding, and shooting skills were without equal, as evidenced by his legendary performance at the July 4th, 1876 rodeo in Deadwood, South Dakota. Love was crowned the undisputed champion of the event and later that day posed for photos at a local studio. Those pictures of a black man with wild hair and manly swagger have become some of the most reproduced images in Western American history. Yet the reported closing of the frontier in 1890 marked the end of Love's career as a cowboy. He lived out the rest of his working days as a Pullman Porter, one of the jobs available to black men seeking entry into the middle class.

In 1907, Love solidified his status as the West's most famous African American cowboy by publishing his autobiography *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love: Better Known in the Cattle Country as "Deadwood Dick."* As the only memoir published by a black cow puncher, the richly detailed text provides historians with incredibly valuable insight into how African Americans experienced the open range. It is significant to note, therefore, that Love makes very little mention of his status as a racial minority within the chapters that discuss his life as a cowboy. In fact, the only real mention of race in those sections is in regards to Native

[23] Charity Fox, "Cowboys, Porters, and the Mythic West, Satire and Frontier Masculinity in *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*," chapter in Timothy R. Buckner and Peter Caster, ed., *Fathers, Preachers, Rebels, Men: Black Masculinity in U.S. History and Literature, 1820-1945* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2011), 187.
[24] Fox, "Cowboys, Porters, and the Mythic West," 188.

Americans, whom Love describes in very derogatory terms. By Love's account, Indians ambushed his party on several occasions and more than a few "red men" died by his hand.[25] Of course, autobiographies present a number of issues which must be addressed by the historian if he or she intends to utilize it as a primary source. First, it must be recognized that the account was written many years after Love's final days as a cowboy. His recollection of people, places, and events, therefore, could have been compromised over time. More importantly, an investigator must question Love's motives for presenting his life in a specific framework.

In her analysis of the Love autobiography, Charity Fox makes a convincing argument for the need to understand the work as a piece of social satire designed by Love to specifically challenge the notion that racial distinctions play any role in evaluating the worth and work of a man. According to Fox, Love modeled his memoir after popular dime novels of the day, and this framework inspired Love to include a number of dramatic accounts of Indian fights and near-death experiences which are very nearly unbelievable. Similarly, as dime novels "white-washed" the cowboy community, so too did Love; yet the illustrations commissioned for the text very purposefully depict Love's dark complexion. *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love* satirized the great Western narrative, a story of American freedom and rugged individuality, by illustrating the complexities ignored by traditional storytellers. Love also seemed to be making a claim to the extreme masculinity promoted by Roosevelt and others when he included countless stories of his physical toughness and courage. As noted before, this type of masculinity was believed to be the exclusive purview of white, middle-class men. Again, it seems that "by satirizing conventions of…dime-novel Westerns…Love uses the genre of autobiography to comment on the social constraints regarding African American men in the postbellum, pre-Harlem era."[26] Regardless of his motives, Love's autobiography is among the most valuable sources of information available to historians regarding the black cowboy experience.

Although he did not write his own story, Mathew "Bones" Hooks is another black cowboy who made such an impression on his peers that he has been remembered in the annals of history. Bones was best known for his bronc busting skills, which he plied all over the Texas

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[25] Nat Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love: Better Known in the Cattle Country as "Deadwood Dick", A True History of Slavery Days, Life on the Great Cattle Ranges and on the Plains of the "Wild and Woolly" West, Based on Facts, and Personal Experiences of the Author* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).
[26] Fox, "Cowboys, Porters, and the Mythic West," 194-196.

Panhandle during the 1880s and 1890s. As a traveling specialist, he was able to maintain a modicum of independence, a trait Bones would later put use in organizing community churches and schools for African Americans. His incredible ability to work with even the wildest of horses gained him the respect of many cattlemen, including Charles Goodnight, who reportedly promoted his services to fellow ranchers.[27] Bose Ikard, the trusted confidant of Goodnight, is another black cowboy often mentioned in the notes of historians. Ikard rode with Goodnight and Oliver Loving as they blazed their famous cattle trail west. After many years of cowboying, Ikard settled down to farm and raise a family.[28] In fact, many black cowboys took advantage of the Homestead Act because they not only faced racial barriers to promotion within a cattle outfit, but also because few cowboys of any race had the means to become cattle owners.

Edward "Sancho" Mozique's story reminds us that cowboying was not the only way black men could make a living on the western frontier. Before Mozique's years as a ranch cook he was part of the distinguished Tenth Cavalry, also known as the Buffalo Soldiers. For five years Mozique, whose father was a French creole, was based at Fort Concho and there he served primarily as a carpenter.[29] Most historians agree that the Buffalo Soldiers were instrumental in opening up the west to Anglo cattlemen and large ranching operations. The Nineth and Tenth Cavalries and the 24th and 25th Infantries swept westward onto the plains following the Civil War to pacify and in many cases relocate American Indian tribes. In addition to insuring that ranchers were left unmolested by Comanches or Apaches or Sioux, the Buffalo Soldiers often served as federal law enforcement in the West. Black infantrymen and cavalrymen played significant parts in the Johnson County cattle war, the pursuit of Billy the Kid, and the regulation of the Oklahoma land rush.[30] After their service to the Armed Forces was complete, a number of Buffalo Soldiers turned to ranch work as an attractive option which would allow them to remain in the region. In examining the individual stories of black cowboys, a more complete picture of the African American experience in cattle country comes into focus. These are just a few of the men who contributed to the thriving cattle industry of the open range era.

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[27] Ana Carolina Castillo Crimm, "Mathew 'Bones' Hooks: A Pioneer of Honor," chapter in Massey, *The Black Cowboys of Texas*, 219-246.
[28] Bruce M. Shackelford, "Bose Ikard: Splendid Behavior," chapter in Massey, *The Black Cowboys of Texas*, 133-142.
[29] Massey, *The Black Cowboys of Texas*, 85-88.
[30] Durham and Jones, *The Negro Cowboys*, 9-11.

HISPANIC COWBOYS

Although long obscured in the annals of history by racial discrimination and cultural elitism, cowboys of Hispanic heritage played an undeniably pivotal role in the cattle industry of the United States. Vaqueros, or men who traced their lineage to the Spanish colonies of Latin and South America, not only worked the cattle drives and open ranges of the American West, they imparted their animal husbandry skills on newly emigrated Anglo cow punchers, skills which they had been refining for centuries. Throughout ranching culture, even to this day, the legacy of the vaquero is evident. In the equipment, technique, and language of the American cowboy, one can detect the tremendous debt owed to the Hispanic men that work alongside the iconic Anglo cowboy of the open range.

Spanish explorers were the first to introduce cattle to the New World in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It took only a few years for the initial transplants to multiply and establish massive, wild herds of cattle and horses throughout the Caribbean, Central and South America. While governments attempted to partially regulate the hunting of these wild animals, the sheer abundance of feral animals made it difficult and largely unnecessary to enforce. In fact meat was so plentiful that most cattle were hunted only for their hides, while the carcasses were left to rot. Cattle were directly introduced to the Spanish colony of Florida in 1521, but stock raising there proved more difficult than in other regions. Hostile American Indians, numerous predators, and a swampy climate and topography all made cattle ventures in Florida unprofitable and thus herds were abandoned to fend for themselves. The wild progeny of those animals spread across Florida and also migrated northward, but by the nineteenth century few remnants of the early Spanish cattle project remained.[31]

More important to the history of the U.S. cattle industry was the development of the organized cattle hunt in the northern territory of Spain's empire. In what is today Mexico and the U.S. Southwest, the seventeenth and eighteenth century brought changes to the way wild

[31] Richard Slatta, *Cowboys of the Americas* (New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 1990), 9-10; Jorge Iber, "Vaqueros in the Western Cattle Industry," in Paul H. Carlson, ed., *The Cowboy Way: An Exploration of History and Culture* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2000), 22-23; Dee Brown, *The American West* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1994), 42-43.

cattle herds were managed as well as new ideas about ownership. While the hunting of feral cattle had once been only loosely regulated, Spanish elites began to see resource monopolization not only as a tool for prosperity, but also as a way to reign in a human population that they feared was gravitating outside of official control. The rural poor that had come to depend on the legal and illegal harvesting of wild cattle for their livelihoods needed to be more forcefully managed, landed elites believed, and so they began to draw up laws that would determine who could hunt cattle, where and when those hunts could occur, and how the state would draw a profit from the venture. Cooperative associations were formed among ranch owners to create a structured framework under which regular cattle hunts would take place. Branding became more common, and men caught harvesting an animal that either bore the mark of another or ran with a designated herd faced stiff penalties, including corporal punishment. It is interesting to note, however, that Spanish cattlemen preferred to foster the wild behavior of their herds, believing that skittish cattle would be more difficult for rustlers or Native Americans to drive off.[32]

When Anglo settlers arrived in east Texas at the beginning of the nineteenth century they came into contact with a well established and thoroughly regulated cattle industry that had migrated north from Mexico. Anglo men soon picked up on the ways of the Mexican vaquero, and they too began to manage cattle on horseback. Indeed the practice of hunting or driving cattle by horse was a Spanish practice that would have been quite foreign to a man from British North America. In the eastern United States, the British introduced cattle in the seventeenth century, but colonists had adopted the English practice of domesticating their animals and keeping them in fenced pastures. The cattle that roamed throughout the Texas prairies, however, were wild Longhorns that could not easily be adapted to this British form of husbandry. As Anglo entrepreneurs hoped to capitalize on the tremendous resource that was making Spanish ranchmen wealthy, they realized that they would need to adopt the practices of the Mexican ranch hands that drove the cattle to places like New Orleans. If they could master the arts of riding, roping, and cutting, industrious Anglo cowboys might hope to create their own ranching empire. As one twentieth century historian noted, "Texans did not create their cattle industry,

[32] Slatta, *Cowboys of the Americas*, 18-20; Iber, "Vaqueros in the Western Cattle Industry," 22-23; Brown, *The American West*, 42-43.

they simply took it over." Without the groundwork laid by Spanish ranchers and vaqueros, the Texas cattle industry would have looked quite different.[33]

More than any other historian, Richard Slatta has provided incredibly valuable information regarding Spanish influences on the U.S. cattle industry and America's cowboy culture. His work has shed light on the undeniable links that exist between Latin American stock raising and the later development of western open range ranching. Drawing on the words of the well-known literary scholar and Latin Americanist Edward Tinker, Slatta quoted him as follows:

> "[Anglo cowboys] had to lean how to ride herd from the Mexican vaqueros, how to break a bronco, and to use riatas and branding irons. They adopted his entire equipment – the ring bit, that was copied by the Spaniards from the Moors and is still in use in parts of the Southwest, and the stock saddle...Even the cowboy's work-a-day vocabulary is still generously peppered, in the Southwest, with Spanish words."[34]

Slatta's work also illuminates the shared similarities between cowboys and vaqueros, as well as their gaucho (of Argentina) and llanero (of Columbia) brothers. All of these communities detested footwork, preferring to take on any task atop a horse. They all shared an affinity for strong tobacco and caffeinated beverages, be they coffee or yerba mate. Finally, superstition trumped religion among these groups of men. When a cattle dealer in 1888 determined that "the average cowboy does not bother himself about religion," he could have been assessing any cattle wrangler in Latin America. "The creeds and isms that worry civilization are a sealed book to the ranger, who is distinctively a fatalist."[35]

Despite being indebted to the Spanish ranchero and the Mexican vaquero for all manner of skills and equipment, including the lasso, saddle, and chaps, Anglo cattlemen and cowboys would not or could not suppress their ideas about racial superiority. Historian Jorge Iber explains the process of integration as follows:

> "The arrival of Anglos in Texas (and points farther west) after the 1820s produced a 'fusion' of two cattle herding cultures. The union proved both fruitful and tempestuous. The Mexican-Anglo ranching marriage provided much of the know-how used during cattle drives of the 1860s and 1870s, but the relationship destroyed the economic status

[33] Slatta, *Cowboys of the Americas,* 18-19.
[34] Richard Slatta, *Comparing Cowboys and Frontiers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 91.
[35] Slatta, *Comparing Cowboys and Frontiers*, 93-94.

> and lifestyle of many rancheros in Texas and California. The replacement of one group by another at the pinnacle of the cattle industry fostered the myth of the 'purely' American cowboy and cattleman."[36]

Just as early Anglo cattlemen felt little hesitation in claiming ownership over the cattle that roamed Texas and usurping the land once utilized by Spanish rancheros, Anglo cowboys eagerly claimed the vaquero legacy as their own.

The experiences of vaqueros in the American cattle industry varied across time and place. In the early decade of the nineteenth century, before Anglo cattlemen and cow-hands began to trickle in to west and south Texas, Hispanic men performed nearly all of the labor on Spanish-owned ranches. Understood as menial labor, tending to cattle was the business of the lower classes. Yet among the opportunities open to Mexican men living within the remnants of the Spanish caste system, ranch work was one of the better options. Spanish ranch owners employed a system of paternalism, believing that by fostering a sense of family among his workers he could ensure loyalty and productivity. This meant that vaqueros would generally be employed year-round, aloud to bring their family to live on the estate, and were treated with a degree of respect. Similar arrangements were common throughout Arizona, New Mexico, and southern California. This system was disrupted, as noted earlier, by the arrival of Anglo cattlemen who took over most of the ranching territories. The prospects for Mexican cow-hands fell precipitously, as a result.[37]

At the most tangible level, vaqueros could expect to make only one-third to one-half of the salary of his Anglo counterpart while in the employ of a ranch owner; these wages rarely took in to account a cowboy's skills. In seeking to understand why vaqueros working north of the Rio Grande faced significant challenges to their autonomy and livelihood during the latter half of the nineteenth century, two identifiable causes emerge. The first was a manifestation of the racial attitudes that Anglo-Americans had regarding Hispanic peoples, and Mexicans in particular. Historian Jacqueline Moore explains that,

> "By the 1870s and 1880s, Anglos believed that Mexicans liked to live primitively and had no need for more money, and since they thought they would just spend it on idle

[36] Iber, "Vaqueros in the Western Cattle Industry," 24.
[37] Iber, "Vaqueros in the Western Cattle Industry," 25; Jacqueline Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men: Class and Masculinities on the Texas Frontier* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 40.

> pleasures like gabling, it was not necessary to pay them very much. Anglos saw Mexicans as culturally inclined to indolence, and morally lax. Early discussion of Mexicans had dwelt on their mixed blood heritage, which many saw as mongrelization. Threatened by the idea of miscegenation, Anglos painted people of mixed blood as degenerate, and attributed all sorts of negative behavior to mestizos and mulattoes. Since Mexicans could be a mix of white, black, and Indian ancestry, they seemed less than human to most Anglos."[38]

These attitudes also meant that Mexican cow-hands, along with African Americans, were generally assigned the most dangerous and grueling work assignments; unsettling assumptions about human worth as based on race made vaqueros cheap and expendable. Iber confirms that "Spanish-speakers did not lack the ability to do the jobs, but racist ideology reduced both their wages and their opportunities for promotion." While African American cowboys faced similar challenges to their upward mobility, they were much more likely to find advancement on a ranch, particularly as cooks. There are no records of a Hispanic cowboy ever becoming ranch foreman or trail boss for an Anglo cattleman. In fact, vaqueros almost never appear in ranch records by name, even within the roles of outfits that took the time to identify specific black cattle punchers. Within the racial hierarchy of the open range, Hispanic cowboys were not on equal footing with African Americans.[39]

Along with pay inequalities came other manifestations of racism. Iber explains that "ranchers often provided separate facilities for their Mexican and white cowboys. In the managerial hierarchy of the ranch the 'Angle always stood over the Mexican.'" Anglo cattlemen and cowboys both applied their racist assumptions about the Hispanic work ethic to vaqueros, even as they worked alongside them and were witness to an individual's specific skills. One very famous advocate of the cowboy work ethic, Theodore Roosevelt, held these same views about Hispanic vaqueros. While praising the unique ability of cow punchers to get along with almost anyone, he had to qualify his assessment with the following statement: "Some of the cowboys are Mexicans, who generally do the actual work well enough, but are not trustworthy; moreover they are always regarded with extreme disfavor by the Texans in an outfit, among whom the intolerant caste spirit is strong." Roosevelt's statements reflected the popular sentiment of the times, but they were not entirely accurate. Those Mexican and Mexican

[38] Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men*, 136.
[39] Iber, "Vaqueros in the Western Cattle Industry," quote on 25; Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men*, 72, 78.

American men who found employment on south Texas ranches were afforded a modicum more of respect, particularly on the King and Kenedy ranches that had been traditionally staffed by vaqueros. There the owners provided steady employment as well as housing for a man's family. As Iber notes, "the vaquero's work was hard and physically demanding, but the Mexican and Mexican American horsemen contrasted their fate with the plight of other Spanish-speakers in South Texas and felt 'secure in the knowledge that at least their families would be housed and fed.'" Yet even under these more favorable conditions, there would be no Hispanic foreman on the King or Kenedy spreads until the 1930s.[40]

At the same time, all cowboys were faced in the late-nineteenth century with a changing industry that incrementally replaced manual labor with technology. As a result, cowboys of all ethnicities saw their bargaining powers erode and their access to full employment diminish. Minority cow-hands, particularly Hispanic men, at first benefited from the corporatization of the cattle business. Vaqueros had always received lower wages than their white peers, for equitable work, and as many rancher owners sought to maximize their profits they consciously employed Hispanic cow-hands. This window of opportunity, however, did not last long. Barbed wire, extended rail lines, the adoption of more docile cattle breeds, and the introduction of the cattle chute all drastically reduced the number of employees needed on any operation. The cattle industry as a whole, moreover, went into decline in the 1890s as prices fell and open grazing ranges became more difficult to access. For vaqueros these developments meant that their role within the open range cattle industry was all the more challenging.[41]

Although the story of the Hispanic cowboy of the open range era mirrors the narratives of many minority communities in nineteenth century America, a few instances of racial collaboration denote the uniqueness of the frontier. Moore recounts a few of these examples in her study of the Texas cow country.

> "On at least one trip to bring a herd from Mexico, the Mexican vaqueros and Anglo cowboys fraternized easily and the Anglos learned a few tricks from the vaqueros…When cattleman A.J. Clinton brought 22,400 head of cattle up the trial, only

[40] Roosevelt quote appears in Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men,* 72; Iber, "Vaqueros in the Western Cattle Industry," 26.
[41] Iber, "Vaqueros in the Western Cattle Industry," 26-28.

losing twenty-one on a five-day dry drive throu ght Nueces Canyon, the *Texas Livestock Journal* credited his entirely Mexican outfit for the success of the drive."[42]

Similarly, many Anglo cowboys willingly and eagerly adopted the moniker of "vaquero" because it denoted an especially knowledgeable and accomplished horseman. As historian James Wagner explained, "since a number of Mexicans had attained a high degree of efficiency in riding, roping, and other skills that were necessary to get a longhorn of the right age out of the brush during roundup, many cowhands thought of vaqueros as the best cowhands."[43] It is difficult to imagine any other instance in late-nineteenth century U.S. history when Anglo men sought out affiliation, even if just in name, with men of Mexican or Hispanic heritage.

[42] Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men*, 71.
[43] James R. Wagner, "*Cowboy:* Origin and Early Use of the Term," in Carlson, *The Cowboy Way*, 15.

AMERICAN INDIAN COWBOYS

Among the most famous tropes in America's literary and cinematic history is the antagonistic relationship between cowboys and Indians on the open range of the U.S. West. The juxtaposition of these two communities, while reflective of significant conflicts and very real violence, masks the existence of a unique and important group. American Indian cowboys, although rarely identified in the traditional narrative of the cattle industry, worked on ranches and drove cattle in many parts of the West. Indeed when Kenneth Porter revealed that nearly one-third of all Texas trail drivers were non-white, American Indians made up part of that statistic, along with black and Hispanic cowboys. This makes sense, of course, because North America's indigenous populations have been engaged in stock-raising and harvesting for centuries. In particular, the Plains tribes that acquired the horse in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries cultivated a rich culture revolving around animal husbandry. Traditions of refined horsemanship and mounted bison hunting were effectively translated into cattle management. Yet the history of the American Indian cowboy, from his earliest ventures tending to missionary herds, to his service for large non-Indian cattle outfits, to the challenges he faced raising his own stock within the post-Dawes Act reservation system, has been largely omitted from cow puncher lore. As historian Peter Iverson, the authority on American Indian cowboys, once wrote, "cattle ranching is a story usually told and nearly always understood in one color, and that color is white."[44]

The history of the American Indian cowboy begins in the pre-contact era, when tribes living in the region that would become the U.S. West hunted bison on foot. With only the aid of basic weapons and dogs, men were able to take down fully-grown buffalo. Women would butcher the animals, refashioning all parts not suited for consumption into useful and valuable materials for everyday living. These traditions were revolutionized by the adoption of the horse, however, which migrated north from the feral herds first introduced by Spanish colonizers. American Indians living on the northern Plains, such as the Blackfeet and the Crow, traded for

[44] Thomas A. Britten, "Indian Cowboys of the Northern Plains," in Carlson, ed., *The Cowboy Way*, 45; Peter Iverson, *When Indians Became Cowboys: Native Peoples and Cattle Ranching in the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 25.

horses with the Apache and Cheyenne. Those tribes that could acquire horses had immediate advantages over their neighbors, both because of their increased ability to conduct successful raids and the advanced hunting capabilities. Furthermore, as historian Thomas Britten explains, "the new advantages allowed Indian communities the time…to develop larger, more stable social groups and increasingly sophisticated forms of cultural expression. For many Plains peoples, therefore, the century and a half that followed their acquisition of horses was both an economic and cultural 'Golden Age,' or traditional period, as it is now called." It was during this period that American Indian communities developed their invaluable horsemanship skills, which would allow them to take on roles as open range cowboys with confidence.[45]

American Indians were first introduced to a domesticated cattle enterprise through the missionary systems of the southwest, from present-day Texas to southern California, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Franciscan missionaries established dozen of ranches in Texas during the eighteenth century, but many had to be relocated to more defensible positions because of number American Indian assaults. Despite the challenges posed by native populations, Franciscans and Jesuits were committed to their ranching enterprises as a way to convert and assimilate the tribes of the region. As Richard Slatta noted, one Italian Jesuit missionary established close to twenty ranches in Arizona, believing that "the role of livestock tending [was] essential in converting and feeding the Pima Indians on the northern frontier of New Spain." These same ideas about the transformational power of stock raising would drive U.S. Indian policies in the nineteenth and twentieth century. While the mission ranches often failed to convert American Indians to Christianity, native peoples did gain valuable animal husbandry skills and had their first introduction to a lucrative economic market that was growing with the fledgling colonies. In the decades to come, American Indians in the southwest would draw upon inherited knowledge of the cattle industry to negotiate a place in the open range era of U.S. ranching.[46]

In the latter part of the nineteenth century cattle were introduced into the lives of northern Plains peoples. Following successive campaigns waged against American Indians by the U.S. government, tribes throughout the former Indian Territory and farther west found themselves

[45] Britten, "Indian Cowboys of the Northern Plains," 45-46; Richard Slatta, *Comparing Cowboys and Frontiers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 43-47.
[46] Richard Slatta, *Cowboys of the Americas* (New Haven, NJ: Yale University Press, 1990), 21-22.

confined to the marginal lands designated as reservations. This project of forced relocation and cultural suppression was couched in the terms of assimilation, as American policy makers and the public at large believed that native peoples must adopt Eurocentric practices if they were to be included under the umbrella of the growing empire. Along with sending their children off to far-away boarding schools and seeing their cultural traditions forcefully banned, American Indians were prevented from pursuing their historic migrations and bison hunts. This abolition was made permanent by the near extermination of the buffalo by over-eager white hunters and sportsman. To accelerate their assimilation, Britten explained, "reservation agents…encouraged Native Americans to take up agricultural pursuits and become economically self-sufficient." Of course, Britten continued, "the climate and terrain of the northern Plains…proved resistant to agricultural pursuits, as the failed white homesteaders of the 1860s gave ample testimony." Cattle, however, could thrive on the arid prairies of the northern tier states. The centuries-old traditions of the tribes like the Lakotas, moreover, were much more adaptable to ranching than to farming. As one late-nineteenth century observer, Captain D.C. Poole, noted, "why endeavor to make [Indians] unwilling agriculturalists, in place of leading them to a pastoral life, for which they show considerable inclination, and which has always come in the first state of advancement for barbarism to civilization?" While Poole's comments reveal his subscription to ideas about racial hierarchy and the succession of civilization, he highlights an important reality. American Indians from the open range territory, for the most part, were intrigued by the possibilities that ranching offered.[47]

The practice of introducing cattle onto reservations began in the 1860s at Fort Laramie with the Lakota people. Within two decades, cattle herds of large numbers could be found at a number of reservations, including a herd of 4,600 at Pine Ridge. At the Fort Berthold reservation, members of the Three Affiliated Tribes (the Mandans, Arikans, and Hidatasas) were paid in cattle for land cessions. The federal government issued the cattle, and in the early years were generally wild and wirey Longhorns from Texas. Given their small size and unpredictable nature, the cattle did not offer high returns on investments of time and energy. For men living on the reservation, however, the cattle offered access to both financial and community capital. As Peter Iverson explained,

[47] Britten, "Indian Cowboys of the Northern Plains," 46-49.

> "By becoming an owner of a considerable number of cattle, a person could achieve status within the community. Moreover, this individual could use the animals themselves to obtain the kind of reputation generally sought. By giving cattle or beef to one's relatives, by feeding people at a celebration, and in other comparable ways, a person would be seen as generous, thoughtful, and properly mindful of the well-being of others. By becoming or continuing to be a skilled rider, one demonstrated a skill appreciated and noted. By raising cattle of good quality, one showed that Indians could participate on an equal or competitive basis in a pastime that dominated the surrounding non-Indian society."

For men who had lost access to many of their traditional modes of communicating status, wealth, and masculinity, the ability to acquire and maintain cattle was invaluable. Stock-raising, therefore, became an important component of the lives that American Indian communities made for themselves under the sometimes watchful and other times neglectful eyes of the U.S. government.[48]

Britten's work on the development of reservation ranches provides a useful summary of the similarities that existed between early practices and the cattle enterprise that was introduced to American Indians.

> "Open range cattle ranching did indeed hold out a relatively strong appeal for peoples who had only recently been forced to abandon their dependence on the bison economy and relocate to reservation. Like the bison hunts of old, cattle ranching was a communal activity that required young men to work together and to depend on each other during cattle drives and annual roundups. Women, meanwhile, often accompanied Indian cowboys at roundup time, pitching tents nearby, where they butchered cattle, cut the meat into strips, and then hung it to dry as they had once done with bison…Cowboying was masculine and equestrian work that required mobility, self-reliance, stamina, and courage. It provided young men a means of achieving wealth and status, not unlike being a successful hunter or warrior."

As Britten noted, American Indian men found their performances as cowboys to be one of the only avenues by which they could assert their masculinity both within their own communities as well as in the broader Anglo-dominated American West. In the pursuit of a federally sanctioned economic enterprise, young men could demonstrate their physical toughness. When working alongside non-Indians, moreover, Indian cowboys could prove their superiority in categories of horsemanship and endurance. Given the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century American

[48] Britten, "Indian Cowboys of the Northern Plains," 47-49; Iverson, *When Indians Became Cowboys*, 53-54.

obsession with the masculine cowboy, perpetuated by Theodore Roosevelt and Buffalo Bill Cody among others, this was a valuable opportunity for American Indians to prove they were virile and hardy men.[49]

Like their African American and Mexican American counterparts, American Indian cowboys left behind few written records from which historians can learn about their experiences on the open range. Ranch logs and records kept by the Bureau of Indian Affairs do provide clues, however, and in many ways the American Indian cowboy was no different than his non-Indian peers. A number of young Indian cowboys worked for the large cattle operations that grazed on the peripheries of the reservations or leased tracts of reservation land. Felix LeBeau, who would be best remembered as a rodeo star, was a Lakota man who learned to break horses so that he could get a job as a cowboy instead of being forced to attend an Indian school. Hoe Yellowhead, from the Cheyenne River reservation, became a cowboy after coming back from the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Guy Buffalo was also from the Cheyenne River, and as a young man he worked for several major cattle outfits, but ultimately became the first American Indian to work as an ordained minister in South Dakota. Lakota cowboys in North Dakota also found numerous cattlemen willing to hire them on to ride fences in the summer and cut hay in the fall.[50]

American Indians, like other minority cowboys, would have faced varying degrees of racialist discrimination from their employers, their colleagues, and the cowtown communities they visited. For the cowboys working reservation cattle, however, a separate form of oppression loomed large in their lives. Britten summarized the plight of the American Indian rancher quite succinctly when he wrote, "on the one hand, policy-makers demanded that Native Americans adopt cattle ranching as a means of expediting assimilation and self-sufficiency. Yet they simultaneously carved up reservations into individual allotments that were too small for Indian families to raise cattle effectively, and force tribes to lease what remained of their lands to non-Indian cattlemen." With the passage of the Dawes Severalty Act in 1887 American Indians saw large portions of the land promised to them in treaties removed from their stewardship.

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[49] Britten, "Indian Cowboys of the Northern Plains," 49; for more on the connection between cowboys and ideas about masculinity see Dulce Kersting, "'In All Truthfulness as I Remember It': Deciphering Myth and Masculinity in Cowboy Memoirs," Master's Thesis.
[50] Britten, "Indian Cowboys of the Northern Plains," 49-51.

Prior to this redistribution of land, communities of American Indian cattle growers could amass moderately sized herds on the grazing lands of the reservation. After the allotment, men could maintain only as many cattle as could be supported on 160 to 320 acres of land. Meddlesome Indian agents further compounded the hardships of American Indian ranchers by seeking to erase all vestiges of tribalism by outlawing communal ownership of cattle. On the Cheyenne reservation, for example, 1000 government issued cattle were divided among the approximately 430 households. "The arithmetic added up easily but unproductively," writes Iverson, "two or three cows per family hardly represented a recipe for the onward march of progress and private property." They could only watch as non-Indian cattlemen secured multi-year leases to the "excess" lands. Native ranchers could have leased the land themselves, but without access to the capital that so many white cattlemen enjoyed, they had little opportunity to graze on the lands that were legally theirs. The process was justified as a means to generate revenue for tribes, but the profits generated by these cattle outfits far outpaced the rental fees. Ultimately, as Britten notes, "the long-term effect of [allotment] proved detrimental to the government's goal of self-sufficiency. Indian stock-raisers who struggled to eke out a living running small herds on their allotments must have questioned the utility of such an enterprise when thousands of non-Indian cattle were grazing on reservation lands with profits sent to cattle barons headquartered in Texas or back East."[51] Ranching on reservations continues today, but for most communities the 1880s to the 1910s saw the zenith of their operations.

[51] Britten, "Indian Cowboys of the Northern Plains," 53-55; Iverson, *When Indians Became Cowboys*, 60.

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