

Yee Haw! The Real Lives of the Cowboys

A Reading A-Z Level T Leveled Book

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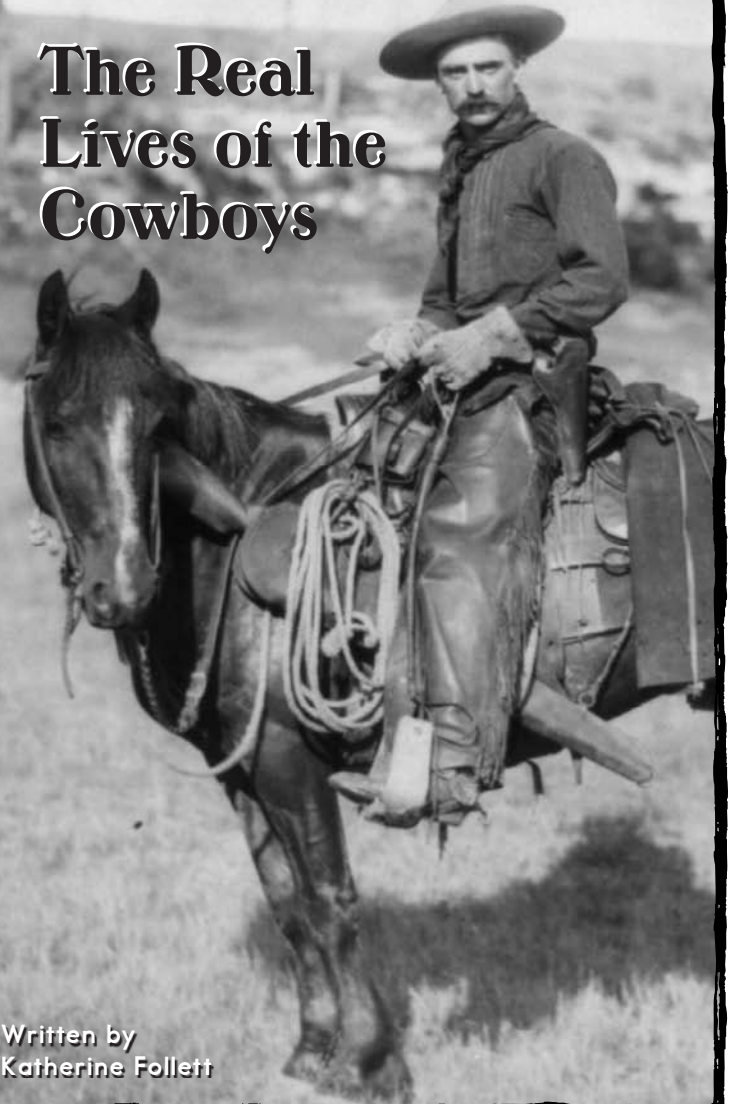
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YEE HAW!

The Real Lives of the Cowboys



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A note on terminology:

In this book, the word cow is used as a general term to indicate a cow, steer, bull, or calf, rather than just a female cow. The term, invented by the cowboys, is used for the sake of style and brevity.

Front cover: The cowboy's image remains famous today.

Back cover: Cowboys rest after a long day.

Title page: Lunch on the drive

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Level T Leveled Book
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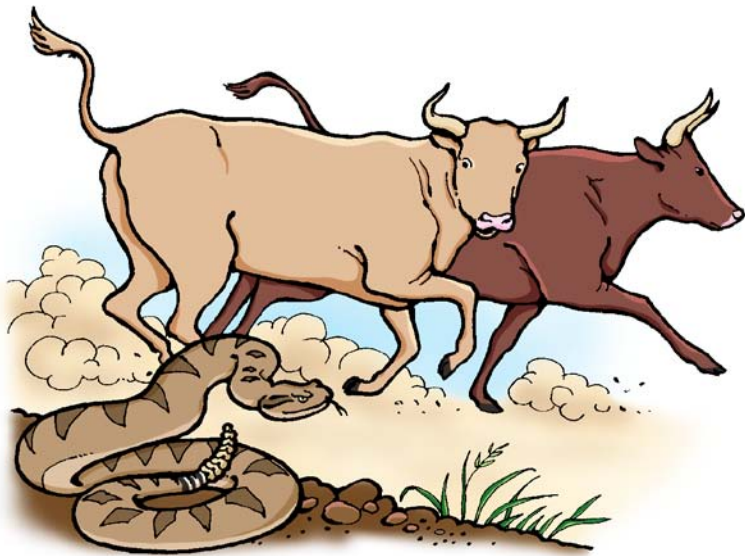
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Correlation

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Introduction

Mention the word *cowboy*, and a picture quickly comes to mind: a tough man in boots and a hat who is fast with his gun. While this romantic image is known around the world, the real cowboys were very different. Cowboys didn't spend their time rescuing maidens or getting in shootouts. They were

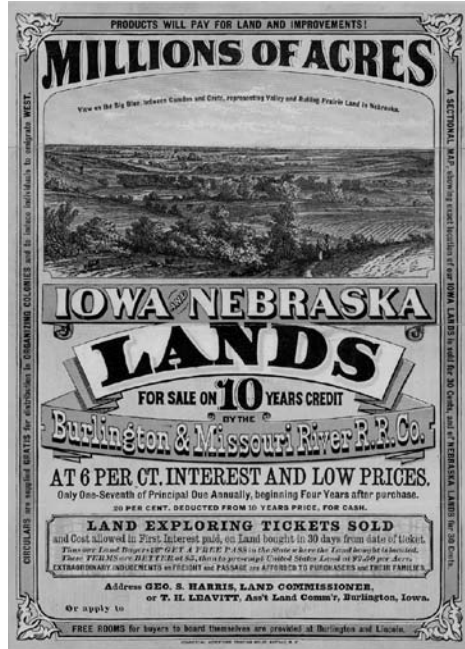


workers who performed a tough, dangerous, and exhausting job. It was this difficult, lonely work that first made cowboys **icons** of the American West.

Movie cowboys were romantic, gun-slinging heroes.

The Cowboy Era Begins

In the 1860s, enormous cattle ranches spread over large areas of western North America. Since so few people lived on the huge plains of Texas, Wyoming, Utah, and Montana, ranchers let their cattle wander over the land. The cows grew fat and healthy on the wild grass. But most of the major **slaughterhouses** and cattle markets were in northern and eastern cities. The ranchers needed some way to round up thousands of cows and take them to railroad stations to get them to market. Before the railroad spread to the western states, the only way to do this was on horseback.



This poster shows how cheap and plentiful western land was.

At the same time, many young men had lost their jobs. The U.S. Civil War left soldiers and freed slaves with few opportunities. People of Mexican descent and Native Americans were forced west as settlers moved in. Many of these out-of-work young men went to the western ranches. There was plenty of land and lots of work to be done there.

Ranchers hired strong men and taught them to handle horses. They sent them onto the range to round up the cattle and march them to railroad stations on the northern and eastern plains. Leading these **cattle drives** was the original work of cowboys. More than one-quarter of American cowboys were Hispanic, Native American, or African-American.



Native Americans were skilled horse handlers.

The first cowboys were Mexicans who called themselves **vaqueros** (vah-KEHR-ohs). They were experienced horse handlers who taught the newcomers how to work with cattle and horses. They invented much of the familiar equipment and clothing that cowboys used, including the lasso, the cowboy hat (a form of the sombrero), and leather **chaps**. Chaps are leg coverings that protected cowboys from cactuses and other spiny plants. The vaqueros were often the ones who captured and tamed **mustangs**, or wild horses, for other cowboys to ride. Mustangs were nearly impossible to control until after the skilled vaqueros had tamed them. The vaqueros trained both cowboys and horses for the **grueling** cattle drive.

Do You Know?

Many cowboy terms come from Spanish words invented by the vaqueros. Some common examples are:

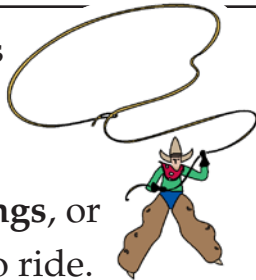
Chaps from the Spanish word *chaparreras*

Rodeo from the Spanish word meaning "to surround"

Lariat a cowboy's rope, from the Spanish word *la reata*

Mustang from the Spanish word *mustaños*

Buckaroo a form of the word *vaquero*



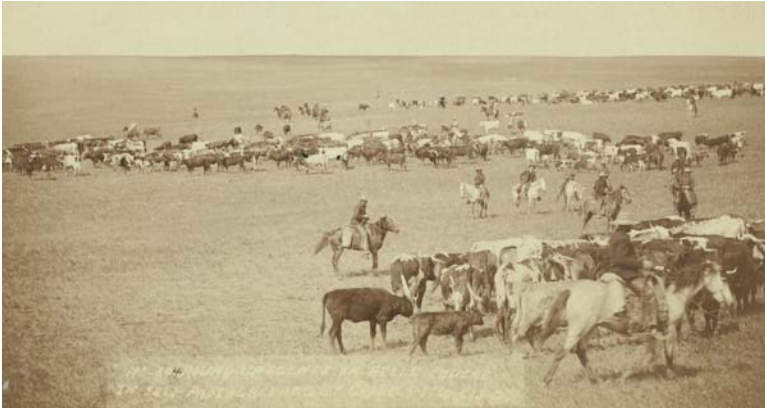
The Cattle Drive

The Roundup

The cowboys' first task was to go out from the ranch house and gather all the cattle for the drive. The ranchers had **branded** their cattle, or burned a pattern into their skin, so they could tell whose cow was whose. This was necessary because the cattle were scattered over miles and mixed in with other herds. The cowboys herded the cattle onto the ranch, sorted them, branded any new calves, and prepared for the long trek ahead.



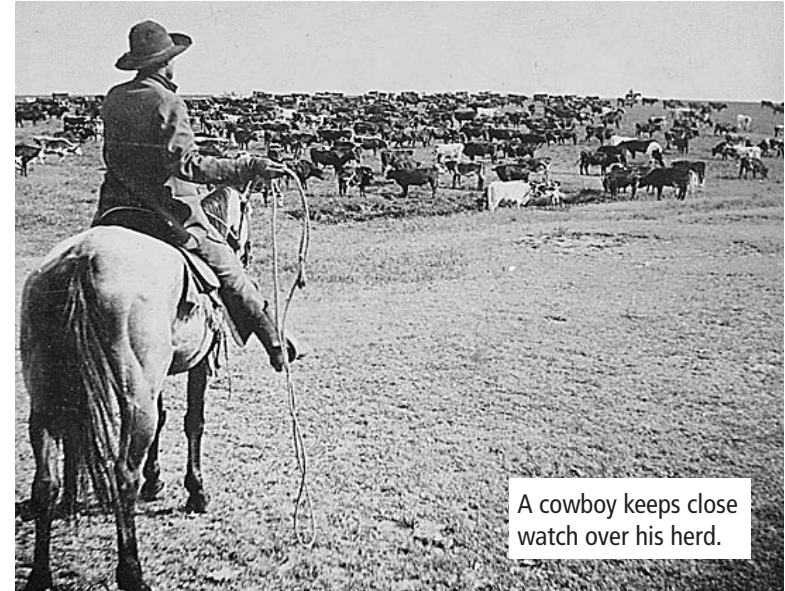
Branding was an uncomfortable event for both cow and cowboy.



Cowboys prepare to leave the ranch.

On the Trail

About 2,500 cattle and 15 to 20 cowboys went on a typical cattle drive. This included the trail boss, who was the highest-paid member of the crew. The trail boss was the leader of the drive. He was responsible for deciding the price of the cattle at the railroad station. The cook, who often served as the drive's doctor, drove a **chuck wagon** filled with food, supplies, medicine, and other goods. Even though he did not handle cows or horses, the cook was a highly respected member of the crew. A **wrangler**, usually a teenage boy, kept track of the extra horses. Cowboys needed to switch horses when the horses became tired, sick, or hurt.



A cowboy keeps close watch over his herd.

For the first few days, the cowboys drove the cattle hard, trying to get them away from familiar land. The cattle were not used to being in a large group, and they tried to run back to their old pastures. But after a few days, the pace relaxed. Cows were sold by the pound, and going too fast would make them lose weight. New cowboys, or greenhorns, rode in the back. This was the worst place to be. The cows kicked up lots of dust and left piles of smelly **dung** behind. Bandanas came in handy keeping dust and bad smells away from the cowboy's mouth and nose.

The trail boss and the cook rode ahead of the herd, searching for the next night's campsite. In the dry west, water sources were very important. The cook and trail boss had to be excellent **navigators** in order to find them. The cook set up camp and began dinner while the cattle followed behind. In a day's ride, the group could travel 15 to 20 miles (24–32 km). Cowboys often rode 16 hours a day through rain, storms, and terrible heat.

The cowboys' hats kept sun and rain off their faces. Tough cowboy boots sat comfortably in the stirrups and protected the cowboy's ankles from biting insects, scorpions, and snakes. The boots had pointed toes, so if a cowboy fell off his horse, he could slip his foot out of the stirrup before he was trampled.

Cowboy boots have heels to rest in the stirrups and straps to help pull them on.



At night, at least two cowboys always stood guard. They even ate dinner in shifts so that someone could always watch the cattle. Guards rode their horses around the herd, making sure no cows ran away. They watched for wild animals, such as wolves or coyotes, and for any human thieves or attackers. They often sang quiet, lonesome songs under the stars in order to keep the cows calm. The last late-night watch would wake the cook, who would begin breakfast, and the drive would move again.



Try This!

Sing a cowboy song! All you need is a lonely place under the stars. This cowboy song is about an old cowboy who misses his job on the trail.

*Thunder of hoofs on the range as you ride,
Hissing of iron and sizzling of hide,
Bellows of cattle and snorts of cayuse,
Longhorns from Texas as wild as the deuce,
Midnight stampedes and milling of herds,
Yells of the cow-men too angry for words,
Right in the thick of it all would I stay.
Make me a cowboy again for a day!*





Cowboys eat a meal around the chuck wagon.

Cowboy food wasn't much to crow about; any supplies had to be cheap and **nonperishable**. The most common foods were beans, hotcakes and biscuits (which the cook made fresh daily), canned fruit, bacon, and strong coffee. Since the cowboys were exercising all day, they ate quite a lot and kept the cook busy. The cook often hunted and fished to add to the cowboys' diet.



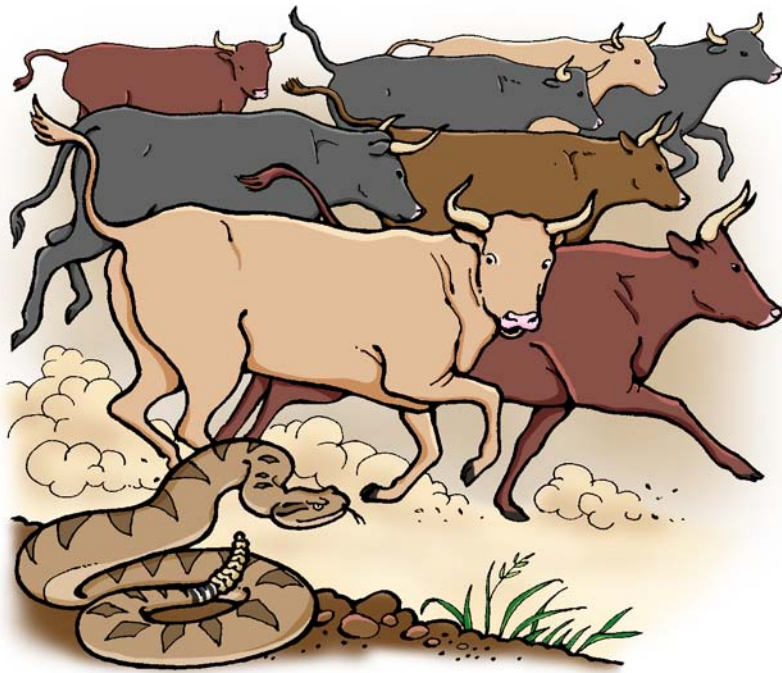
Most cowboys relaxed in saloons after a cattle drive.

The Market

A cattle drive usually lasted two to three months, seven days a week. At the end of the drive, the cowboys led the cattle through the streets of a railroad town and loaded them on trains bound north and east. Afterward, the cowboys got much-needed baths and haircuts. They relaxed in saloons, dance halls, and theaters, and bought more supplies before heading home. The ride back often went much faster than the drive. The cowboys could get good nights' sleep under the stars and spend their extra time hunting and fishing. Once back in ranch land, they would begin looking to get hired on the next drive.

Stampede! And Other Dangers

Cows are herd animals, which means they travel in large groups for protection. Wild herd animals, such as buffalo and wildebeest, have one defense against predators and other dangers: the **stampede**. As a group, they run at top speed, trampling everything in their path in hopes of outrunning, hurting, or confusing their predators. Stampedes were a cowboy's biggest fear.



While on the trail, the cows were nervous and stressed. A rattlesnake, lightning, or any sudden loud noise could startle the cattle and cause a stampede. Thousands of cattle would run forward at once. The cows moved so quickly that they often hurt or killed themselves by falling off cliffs, drowning in rivers, or catching their legs in holes. Often, stampedes happened at night when the cowboys couldn't see the cows or any dangers they might run into. The only way to stop a stampede was by **circling** the cattle.

Do You Know?

Native Americans often owned their own cattle ranches. During the time of the cowboys, all of what is now Oklahoma was American Indian territory. The Native Americans didn't like having someone else's cattle feeding on grass that should have been for their own cows. If the cattle drives wished to cross their land, the Native Americans charged a toll of ten cents for each cow. Sometimes, if the trail boss refused to pay, the Native Americans might sneak up on the drive during the night and start a stampede.



The most experienced cowboys would leap on the strongest, fastest horses. They would ride closely alongside the herd and force the cows to crowd together by shouting and bumping against them. They made the cows on the outside run in a circle, and the cows on the inside would follow. Once they were running in a circle, the cattle would eventually get tired and stop.



This was not an easy task. A cow could knock a cowboy off his horse and trample or gore him. The horse itself could get scared and run off. If stampedes happened at night, the cowboys' horses were vulnerable to the same cliffs, rivers, and holes as the cattle were. And sometimes, the cows refused to go into a circle. Instead, they ran off in all directions. The cattle drive was forced to wait while the cowboys rode across the wilderness, gathering up every stray cow.

River crossings were also dangerous. Cows could drown or become caught in deep sand. Rattlesnakes and scorpions threatened the lives of both cattle and cowboys. The cowboys were miles from any hospital to treat injuries and infections. Cattle and horse **rustlers** were a common and hated danger of the drive. The West also had dangerous weather, including flash floods, tornadoes, and lightning. Cowboys even developed a superstition about lightning striking white horses. The western United States can also become harshly cold, even in the summertime. Records show that many cowboys died of pneumonia and hypothermia.



Rattlesnakes and scorpions were only a few of the dangers cowboys faced on the drive.



As the railroad expanded westward, ranchers no longer needed to drive their cattle.

The End of the Era

Though cowboys became famous for their bravery, the need for cattle drives didn't last long. The railroad expanded rapidly. Eventually, the trains came to Texas, Colorado, and other ranch states. Ranchers no longer needed to drive their cattle hundreds of miles to distant stations. After the invention of barbed wire, ranchers also began fencing in their land. Rounding up cows was no longer necessary. Even if the cowboys wanted to continue the cattle drives, the fences would block their way.



Longhorns are still fierce and impressive.

Do You Know?

Texas cattle in the 1860s were an especially mean breed called *Texas longhorns*. Their huge horns could span nine feet (2.7 m). During the Civil War when ranchers were away, the cows had run wild. Some of the longhorns had never seen a human being before, and they often attacked and killed cowboys and their horses.

While longhorns were mean, they weren't very tough when it came to disease or weather. Longhorns carried a disease called "Texas fever"

that could spread to other cattle. An extremely harsh winter in 1886 froze thousands of longhorns to death. This tragedy was one of the things that helped end the cowboy era.



But the cowboy life was far from over. Just as real cowboys were finding themselves out of work, Buffalo Bill Cody began his Wild West show. Cowboys were hired to show their riding and roping skills to crowds across the United States and in Europe. Annie Oakley, one of the most famous cowgirls, was a star of the Wild West show. It was this show that really created the legend of the American cowboy. The show included plays and acts that portrayed cowboys as rough-and-tough gunslingers, even though few had carried guns in real life. They made cowboy fashion, including jeans, vests, hats, and boots, popular with people throughout the world.



Annie Oakley could shoot a cigarette out of someone's mouth.



Modern rodeos keep cowboy skills and traditions alive.

Long after the American West became settled, Western movies exploded in popularity. During the 1950s and 1960s, cowboy movies, television shows, toys, and games were everywhere. *The Lone Ranger* and *Bonanza* became popular TV shows. Children played “Cowboys and Indians” in schoolyards, even though in the real West, Native Americans often *were* cowboys. Today, you can see cowboy boots and hats in Tokyo and Paris as well as Texas. The cowboy has become little more than an image used to sell jeans, trucks, and cigarettes. But that image wouldn't exist without the hard work and bravery of the real cowboys of the North American West.

Glossary

branded	made a permanent pattern on the skin or fur of an animal to show ownership (p. 8)
cattle drives	the roundup and guiding of cattle from one location to another (p. 6)
chaps	protective leather leg coverings (p. 7)
chuck wagon	wagon carrying food, cooking equipment, and supplies (p. 9)
circling	stopping a stampede by forcing cattle to run in a circle (p. 16)
dung	animal manure (p. 10)
grueling	very difficult; exhausting (p. 7)
icons	important symbols (p. 4)
mustangs	wild horses (p. 7)

navigators	people who choose and find a route on a trip (p. 11)
nonperishable	will not rot or spoil; needs no refrigeration (p. 13)
slaughterhouses	factories where livestock is killed and processed into meat (p. 5)
stampede	when cattle or other herd animals panic and run at top speed as a group (p. 15)
rustlers	thieves, especially of animals (p. 18)
vaqueros	Mexican cowboys and horse handlers who invented much of the clothing, equipment, and techniques the cowboys used (p. 7)
wrangler	person on a cattle drive who kept track of extra horses (p. 9)