

# SO YOU WANT TO BE A COWBOY?

The western historian William W. Savage Jr. observed that, “*historically, the cowboy was of little or no significance*”. The days of the cowboy – the long cattle drives from Texas to the cattle towns of Abilene and Dodge City – lasted only about 25 years. Yet, cowboy culture has tremendous influence on television, movies, music, clothing, art, literature, and poetry. What accounts for people’s continuing interest in cowboys when they made such a small contribution to our history? Why would a brief period of activity in a highly specialized market continue to influence people, years later, far from the “purple sage”? Why is it that cowboys never really ride off into the sunset?

Lesson adapted from: Wentworth, Donald et. al. “Why don’t cowboys ever ride into the sunset?” United States History – Focus on Economics. New York: National Council on Economic Education, 1996.



Howdy, pardner! In this activity, you will be looking at the life and legacy of a cowboy on the open range. Follow the instructions below very carefully. This should set the stage for our long drive tomorrow!

**FIRST**, close your eyes and think about your idea of a “cowboy”. Move that background knowledge from the file cabinet to the front of your brain. (2 minutes)

**SECOND**, watch the “Cowboys” video on the AHR website to get your brain churning even more. (8 minutes)

read “The Cowboy – One of America’s Greatest Heroes” from ABC-CLIO on the reverse of this page. (5 minutes)

- ★ In the margin on the right, **identify the main idea of each paragraph** of the reading.
- ★ Be prepared to discuss the ideas of the short reading in class tomorrow.

**FINALLY**, play the fun games on the interactive website for PBS’ *Texas Ranch House* at

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/ranchhouse/history.html>. (15 minutes)

**Record some information in the space provided** in this packet.

We will do the back of the second page in class tomorrow!

If you have a cowboy hat at home, bring it to class on Tuesday!

# THE COWBOY - ONE OF AMERICA'S GREATEST HEROES

No figure in this nation's past has been more celebrated or imitated than the American cowboy. Though his time on the American scene was relatively short, his exciting story has been told in countless songs, books, and movies over the years. The cowboy's saga is filled with more than its share of myths and tall tales. For the real cowboy, however, life was not an adventure full of dangerous gunfights and daring escapades, but a hard and often lonely existence out on the open prairie with only a horse and a herd of cows for companionship.

**The real life of a cowboy was more difficult and less exciting than in the movies.**

## America's Cattle Industry

The cowboy was at the center of the giant American cattle industry that began in Texas near the close of the Civil War. The vast prairie of the American West was covered with free public grass, and between the late 1860s and the late 1890s, cattle from that open range supplied much of the meat that fed a rapidly growing nation. At its height, the cattle industry grazed 1.4 million square miles—or 44% of the entire nation—from Texas to Canada and westward to the Rocky Mountains.

During that brief span of time, more than 40,000 cowboys rounded-up more than 9 million head of cattle and trailed them overland to far-off railroad centers. The trail drives were long, dusty affairs, covering about 15 miles a day and lasting three to four months! The Goodnight-Loving Trail began in Texas and led through New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming. The Western Trail extended all the way into the Dakota Territory. The Shawnee Trail led to Missouri railroad centers in Kansas City, Sedalia, and St. Louis. The most popular of all, the Chisholm Trail led to the Kansas towns of Dodge City and Abilene, the busiest of all the railroad centers.

### Cowboy Attire



A cowboy's attire was carefully assembled; each item served a specific purpose. His wide-brimmed hat shielded him from the sun and the rain. The chaps he wore over his pants protected him and his clothing from the thorns of cactuses and mesquite trees as he rode through thickets and thick underbrush. His high-heeled boots kept his feet from pushing through the saddle stirrups. A neckerchief could be pulled up to cover his nose and mouth against the ever-swirling dust trailing the herd.

### Everybody Wanted to Be a Cowboy

Cowboys came from many different backgrounds. Some of the first were immigrants who came to the Mexican province of Tejas with Stephen F. Austin in 1821. They were joined decades later by Confederate veterans of the Civil War and young men from the East looking for adventure. At the height of the cattle trade, more than 5,000 African-American cowboys, most of them freed slaves, worked on ranches throughout the West. They all learned cattle-handling skills from Spanish vaqueros, including the use of the lariat, saddle, spurs, and branding iron.

### An American Hero

The cowboy of the late 1800s became the envy of millions of his fellow Americans who lived in crowded cities and worked in stifling factories or busy stores. They read about his independent life in the great outdoors in fictionalized accounts presented in the dime novels and newspapers of the day. Often these stories were simply tall tales that Eastern journalists and writers had heard around a cowboy campfire. The cowboys were great storytellers, and their stories were full of bragging and half-truths.

### The End of an Era

The late summer of 1881 saw the last big cattle drive into Dodge City. As the agricultural frontier moved west, the open range was transformed into farms. The increased use of barbed wire to enclose farm and grazing land ended the era of the open range and the glory days of the cowboy.

Writing of his Western travels in 1885, Theodore Roosevelt lamented the end of this era, saying, "The broad and boundless prairies have already been bounded and . . . the tide of white settlement during the last few years has risen over the west like a flood and the cattlemen are . . . soon to be overtaken." Cowboys expressed their sentiments in song, "I'm going to leave old Texas now, / For

they've got no use for the longhorn cow. / They've plowed and fenced my cattle range, / And the people there are all so strange."

The cowboy way of life did not vanish completely. There are still men and women who carry on the tradition, albeit on a much smaller scale and with the advantages of modern day conveniences and technology. As long as there are cows to tend, there'll be cowboys!

Use the **Interactive History** portion of the Texas Ranch House website to have some fun learning about cowboy life.

Take the “**TEST YOUR TRUE GRIT**” test, and write down 5-6 facts you learn about cowboy life:

See if your can “**STOCK THE CHUCKWAGON**” to find out what kind of food a cowboy would have on the long drive.

The screenshot shows a collection of interactive activities. At the top left is "TEST YOUR TRUE GRIT" with a "PLAY" button. To its right is "STOCK A CHUCKWAGON" with a "PLAY" button. Below these is "LEAD A CATTLE DRIVE" with a "PLAY ENTIRE GAME" button. At the bottom are three smaller games: "DO YOU SPEAK COWBOY?" (PLAY GAME 1), "STAMPEDE!" (PLAY GAME 2), and "RIVER CROSSING" (PLAY GAME 3).

As you “**LEAD A CATTLE DRIVE**”, record 5-6 more facts about the life and challenges of a cowboy:

Learn a phrase from “**DO YOU SPEAK COWBOY**” and tell it to the businessman Tuesday before the long drive.

Try to succeed at the “**RIVER CROSSING**” in the fewest number of ...

After learning about brands on the “**STAMPEDE**”, draw a brand for Taft’s herd in the space below.



After you watch the video clips, enjoy Tuesday's activity, and read 19-1 in *Creating America*, you can complete a "Reshaping the Nation" journal entry for the cowboy, if you want! **Use the Voicethread online to complete the bottom part of the assignment.**

**What factors led to the end of the long drive, and therefore, the cowboy?**

**What was the impact of the cowboy?**

In each of the poems below, the author is conveying a **main idea or thesis**. For each work, **write down what you think is the thesis**, and then **underline or highlight the supporting phrases** or details in each work.

## THE OLD CHISHOLM TRAIL

THESIS -

Well, come along boys and listen to my tale  
I'll tell you of my troubles on the old Chisholm trail.  
    With a ten-dollar horse and a forty-dollar saddle,  
    I stated in herdin' these Texas cattle

I'm up in the mornin' afore daylight  
And afore I sleep the moon shines bright  
    Oh it's bacon and beans most every day  
    We'll soon be eating this prairie hay

With my seat in the saddle and my hand on the horn  
I'm the best cowpuncher that ever was born  
    It's cloudy in the west, a-lookin' like rain  
    And my durned old slicker's in the wagon again

No chaps, no slicker, and it's pourin' down rain  
I swear I'll never night-herd again  
    Feet in the stirrups and seat in the saddle,  
    I hung and rattled with them long-horn cattle

A stray in the herd and the boss said "Kill it!"  
So I shot it in the rump with the handle of a skillet  
    I went to the boss to draw my roll,  
    And he had me figured out nine dollars in the hole

Me and my boss we had a little spat  
So I hit him in the face with my ten gallon hat  
    I'm goin' to sell my horse, goin' to sell my saddle  
    'Cause I'm tired of punchin' these Longhorn cattle

Goin' back to town to draw my money,  
Goin' back home to see my honey  
    With my knees in the saddle and my seat in the sky  
    I'll quit punchin' cows in the sweet by-and-by

## A COWBOY'S PRAYER

THESIS -

Oh, Lord, I've never lived where churches grow.  
I love creation better as it stood  
That day you finished it so long ago.  
And looked upon your work and called it good.  
I know that others might find You in the light  
That's sifted down through tinted window panes,  
And yet I seem to feel You near tonight.

Let me be easy on the man that's down;  
Let me be square and generous with all.  
I'm careless sometimes, Lord, when I'm in town,  
But never let them say I'm mean or small!  
Make me as big and open as the plains,  
As honest as the hoss between my knees,  
Clean as the wind that blows behind the rains,  
Free as the hawk that circles down the breeze!

I thank you, Lord, that I am placed so well,  
That you made my freedom so complete;  
That I'm no slave to whistle, clock, or bell,  
Nor weak-eyed prisoner of wall and street.  
Just let me live my life as I've begun  
And give me work that is open to the sky;  
Make me a pardner of the wind and sun,  
And I won't ask a life that's soft or high.

Forgive me, Lord, if sometimes I forget.  
You know about the reasons that are hid.  
You understand the things that gall and fret;  
You know me better than my mother did.  
Just keep an eye on all that's done and said  
And right me, sometimes, when I turn aside,  
And guide me on the long, dim trail ahead  
That stretches upward toward the Great Divide.