

Cowboy State of Mind

Evan Crystal
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A Block

A solitary figure rides down a dusty trail into the setting sun. Hat down low to cover his eyes and a gleaming six-shooter peeking out of its holster. A cowboy. However, this romantic cowboy created by American literature and mythology is nothing like the true cowboys of the west. From Will Smith's "Wild Wild West" to *NSync's "Space Cowboy" all the way to True Grit starring John Wayne, cowboys have been glamorized, romanticized, and misrepresented by the media and all who consume it. Real-life cowboys were rough and uncouth, as well as dirty and pungent, nothing like the Hollywood spawned myth so commonly recognized. Misportrayed as they are, Cowboys were still a very important part of frontier life, bringing the change that would turn the American West from a lawless set of territories to the group of states it is today. Cowboys explored the land and blazed new trails, built it economically and politically by supporting the massive beef industry and making new laws, and populated it with familial growth by eventually settling down into life on the farm.

The cowboy was active solely during the late nineteenth century, specifically about 1865-1890, but the West had been a frontier long before then. The American West was a relatively empty place, devoid of any of the cities and infrastructure of the established American East. Before the beginning of big western settlement the population east of the 98th meridian (It roughly splits Oklahoma in half) was 42 million and population west of the 98th meridian was 2 million (Forbis P.10). This number does not include the Native American population because at the time the government was in the process of constant Native American relocation, and still did not treat them as citizens. The first large American push westward was by American farmers and Ranchers who journeyed into Mexican Texas looking for cheaper land. At first the Mexicans welcomed in the American settlers, enjoying the economic boost they provided. However, as soon as they got to Texas, they immediately began Americanizing it by speaking

only English and practicing Protestantism. This led to repeated clashes with the Mexican government, and in 1835, Texas had its own revolution, becoming an independent republic. Ten years later Texas was brought into the union as the 28th state in 1845. The sudden exodus of many Mexicans meant that not only was there suddenly a lot of unused land, but also a lot of cattle now roaming wild in the plains of Texas. The new leaders of Texas, having just fought war with Mexico, were very distrustful and racist of the non-white Texans, who were often assumed to be Mexican loyalists, even the ones who had been on their side. Not only was there that, but also in the same way the Mexicans had made it hard to speak English and be Protestant, the Texans made it hard to speak Spanish or be Catholic. This led to many Mexicans packing up and emigrating, leaving their herds behind. Due to the lack of accurate means for counting, people cannot be sure exactly how many cows were left behind, however it is believed to be a just over one million heads of cattle (Carson). These cattle roamed the plains of Texas and Southern Oklahoma for almost a decade. Then groups of enterprising ranchers started heading out to brand large numbers of cows, and cattle rustlers kidnapped large portions of herds for their respective employers (Wright P. 30). The ample supply of cows meant that many Texans could start have their own herds, and this started the competitive cattle industry in Texas. The growth of Texas and the many loose cattle had set the table for the coming age of the cowboys.

The next major western migration came after Gold was discovered in California. Men flocked from all over the world to be a part of this gold rush. People from East Asia, the Eastern United States, and Mexico among others cascaded on California. California's population increased twentyfold from 1848 to 52, but around 95% of the recent immigrant miners were men (Wright 48). This was an unstable model for building a society, however sheer numbers did allow California to become the first state admitted to the union west of Texas, in September of

1850. The Western edge of the continental United States had been set, but there was a large expanse of land, known as the Great American Desert, between California and Texas (Not the most accurate representation of the land, it was mostly home to tough prairie grasses). The Great American Desert remained relatively untouched by whites until the cowboys came along.

The Era of the Cowboy began around 1865, after the end of the Civil War. Wild cattle roamed the plains, left by their former Mexican owners until they were then rounded up and branded by enterprising ranchers. Coincidentally there was an unexplained boom in the beef industry that started around the 1850's, when Americans started to switch from mainly pork to beef as the nation's meat of choice. This, along with new technology in refrigeration and meat packing created a great demand for beef. Cowboys helped the supply catch up the demand. Additionally, it was not a coincidence the end of the Civil War was an important step towards the cowboy era. The Civil War left many young men, especially southerners, with a desire to escape their previous lives and start off fresh, and the frontier gave them this opportunity. The Civil War and the end of slavery influenced the demographic of cowboys. This was a group far more diverse than the solely the white male cowboy that is seen today in popular media. Many were Mexican, a few were Native American, and about one seventh were black (Phillips), as the lack of job opportunities in the South had driven some former slaves to move west. Additionally the government, in an attempt to get more people to settle in the west, introduced the Homestead Act in 1862. The Homestead Act gave land to anyone who promised they would cultivate it. The act was rarely policed and cattle corporations run by big ranchers could easily use it to acquire large tracts of grazing land using people and shell companies as fronts to claim pastures or land around key river crossings for their cattle. For example, in Texas, one of the most barren of any of the plains states, fights often erupted over the land around the Brazos and Colorado rivers. Figuring

out who owned what land and what land was public was especially tough in Texas because of the fact that it had had so many different governments (Mexican, Texan, U.S.). Cowboy to cowboy violence wasn't the only danger, after claiming one particularly desirable section of land that was 100 miles long, on the banks of the Pecos River, one unfortunate rancher, John Chisum, lost many of his animals to raids from Indians, angry he had taken their land. Now that the stage was set, all the big ranchers needed was some dirt cheap labor to work the range.

This dirt cheap labor came in the form of the cowboy. This was not the handsome, sweet-talking, smooth shooting, rugged, handsome cowboy, but the dirty, drunk, cuss-like-a-sailor real life cowboy. Now even though hopping from one stereotype to another can be both hypocritical and inaccurate, this generalization of cowboys is quite precise. Real cowboys were not as glamorous, but they were still an important part of building the west all the same. They were unique figures in American history with their own distinct mannerisms and styles. A big part of what made the cowboy was his equipment; there were certain tools they always brought when they went out on the range. The rope was an indispensable cowboy tool. Cowboys were able to use a rope lasso to snag a cow around the horns or neck; enabling them to control a beast eight times their size. Ropes were also used to set up quick fencing and for dragging things like cows stuck in mud or firewood.¹ The colt revolver was popular among cowboys, but not because they were violent gunslingers. Revolvers were used for target practice to pass time, as well as for finishing off a horse with a broken leg or killing a rattlesnake, as they were too inaccurate for much else. Often revolvers were more of a status symbol than an actual tool used by cowboys.² The horse was another important part of cowboy life, but cowboys rarely owned their own horses. Because they were too poor to own their own horses, most cowboys rented them from

¹ Benson

² Forbis P. 22

whatever ranch they were working for. Veteran cowboys were skilled riders, as they spent most of their day in the saddle when they were out on the range. Even if they did, they still often treated their horses as tools rather than friends, and would be harsh with uncooperative mustangs, and ride their horses into the ground if necessary. Despite their grating treatment of horses, they still thought that riding was far better than walking, and preferred it for any distance greater than fifty yards.³ Maybe the one thing the media has portrayed correctly is that cowboys loved their hats. Hats were both personal and useful. Cowboys' hats protected them from rain, sun, hail and low branches. They could be used to carry water or fan a fire. Etiquette said they could even wear their hats while eating or being indoors in general, showing how important and attached they were to their hats. The Stetson hat, one of the most famous brands among cowboys was originally a failure. First sold in Philadelphia, John Stetson went broke after selling only 12 hats in his first year⁴. Then his business got spread west, and by the time of his death, the Stetson hat was as famous as the Colt (pistol) or Winchester (rifle), and he was selling 2 million hats a year in the west⁵, showing just how popular his brand had become. Other indispensable articles of clothing for cowboys were a tough pair of pants that wouldn't get torn up by a day in the saddle, and a good vest with many pockets for things like tobacco, or a small knife.⁶

Cowboys used all of the aforementioned gear, but they were more than just a tough pair of pants, a nice hat, and a lasso. Cowboys had distinct mannerisms and habits. They were a diverse group that was a majority white but by no means all white, there were a fair number of Mexicans, and other groups and ethnicities that participated in this grueling work. Most

³ Forbis P. 22

⁴ Forbis P. 24

⁵ Forbis P. 24

⁶ Benson

cowboys were between the ages of 17 and 28 with the majority being around 23 or 24.⁷ Cowboys often spent their wages in whatever small towns they stopped in on the trail. When in these towns they would participate in one or more of three activities. Drinking was number one; cowboys were notoriously noisy and rowdy drunks. This habitual drinking often went hand in hand with the second activity, gambling. Saloons always had games of poker going on, and gambling was one of the faster ways cowboys could lose a month's wages. Andy Adams, a cowboy from Texas, described what he and his company did right after receiving a pay day, "After packing away our plunder, we sauntered around town, drinking...and visiting the various saloons and gambling houses." (Adams) Finally, at the end of the night, if he had any money left, a cowboy would often pay for a prostitute. Women were rare in the west and the Cowboys were unmarried, and often hadn't seen a woman in weeks after being out on the range, which meant frequent trips to the town brothel. While generalizing all cowboys to these activities seems like stereotyping, it actually isn't for two key reasons. First, the American West was a relatively empty place, and there were very few if any other activities for Cowboys to participate in. Second, the only friends these men had were their fellow cowboys, and so even if they initially didn't want to partake in these standard cowboy activities, they'd almost always be dragged into them anyway. When Cowboys spoke, they frequently cussed, often multiple times a sentence, unless they were with a lady, or the head of the ranch.⁸ However despite their fairly awful lives, dealing with horrible weather, smelly livestock, and other calamities of the frontier, cowboys rarely complained. The thought process was that everybody was living through the same harsh conditions as anybody else, so complaining just made someone look weak. More than just not complaining, Cowboys rarely even spoke. One popular anecdote went like this.

⁷ Price P. 37

⁸ Finkelman

“Two partners in a lonely cow camp who heard bellowing noises in the night. One of the suggested: ‘Bull’. The other said, ‘sounds like an old steer to me.’ The next morning one of the cowboys began packing up his horse. "Leavin?" "Yes too much argument."⁹ This behavior seems befitting of a Jekyll and Hyde scenario, meaning the same person behaving in two different ways, on opposites ends of the spectrum. Cowboys were a diverse group of men, who, in the towns, were rowdy, boasting, and drunk, looking for any form of pleasure, and out on the range, they were quiet, except for the occasional string of curses.

Cowboys did all the menial tasks befitting the replaceable workers they were. Cowboys work started in the spring as detailed by Russell Freedman: “In the spring cowboys would round up their herd, take a count of the new calves, and then brand them... male calves would be castrated”.¹⁰ Their main jobs involved branding new cattle, and counting the herds. They also de-horned some cattle, and castrated males they didn’t want to breed. Additionally, they could serve as mothers to orphaned calves, which would otherwise starve. In late fall they would round up their herds (identified by the brand), and drive them thousands of miles to a cattle town. The drive was often the worst part of being a cowboy. One author detailed some of the tasks a driver had to do: “fought prairie fires, stopped dangerous stampedes, ridden all day without a bite, ‘laid out’ all night without a bed, stood guard in rain or sleet, without a murmur.”¹¹ Drives could last over a month, and cowboys were seriously underpaid for all the hard work they put in watching the cattle. A cattle town had a railroad station that would take the cows to a slaughterhouse in a big city (most likely Chicago). Early examples of cattle towns were Dodge City, Kansas, and Abilene, Kansas. It was dirty, disgusting, and demeaning work, but some group of replaceable workers had to do it, and the cowboys stepped up.

⁹ Forbis P. 55

¹⁰ Freedman P. 73

¹¹ Monaghan

Cowboys helped transition the frontier to an inhabited area, through their promotion of expansion. They blazed many new trails across the Great Plains. Being constantly on the hunt for a good source of clean water, and the most efficient way to move herds of over a thousand cattle across vast expanses of land meant that cowboys were constantly discovering good places to live, and efficient trails to get there. As big businesses took over the cattle industry, they were then able to pour more and more money into trail blazing, all across the frontier. This was spurred on by the competitive nature of the businesses, which were constantly looking for cheaper ways to produce their product, cattle. Some of this cost cutting involved fighting cowboys over wages and making deals with railroads, but most often it manifested itself in attempts to find the most efficient trails to get from grazing areas to cattle towns. One big rancher, Charles Goodnight, even searched for his own trails, instead of sending hired men to do it for him. Goodnight's recognized that he could make a large profit selling cattle to the many miners around Denver and the American Soldiers stationed along the border with Mexico.¹² Another famous trail was the Chisholm Trail, which connected South Texas to Cattle Towns in Kansas. One branch of the new Santa Fe Railroad even branched off from the original route in order to connect with the Chisholm Trail at an earlier point.¹³ Other trails, like the Western Trail, which went into western Nebraska and South Dakota, were some of the first trails to push into the Northern part of the Great Plains. Cattle drives not only ended in towns, but helped create some of them. Areas where railroads and cattle drives intersected were natural places to found new settlements. The Western Trail and the Union Pacific railroad intersected in the middle of nowhere in Nebraska, but only six years after the trail and the railroad met, their

¹² Phillips

¹³ Dale

intersection was no longer a barren expanse, but the city of Ogallala, Nebraska.¹⁴ Another benefit of the large cattle industry was that many new railroads continued to push westward. There had always been a goal of the railroad companies to eventually create a trans-continental railroad, however the cattle industry, and its massive transport contracts pushed railroads to truly expand west. One of example of this was the Kansas-Pacific line, which started pushing farther and farther west for easier access to cattle, causing cattle towns to start springing up at each of its stops. Its eventual goal was to reach Denver, which it did, and was merged into the first trans-continental line, but it had many branches extending both North and South to service the cattle. The Cattle Industry was not the reason that there was a trans-continental railroad; however it was the reason that the trans-continental railroad reached and stopped in many new places in the West.¹⁵ The cowboys left a legacy of new trails, tracks, and towns that allowed the west to turn from a frontier to states in the USA.

During the Cowboy Era the beef industry was a massive force, shaping the west through its massive economic strength. In many ways the beef industry was similar to the massive businesses back east, like Rockefeller's Standard Oil, or Carnegie's Carnegie Steel Company. Cattle Magnates were called Barons, and they ranged from wealthy ranchers to Eastern businessmen who thought cattle would be a good investment; however they were different from Robber Barons in a few ways. Cattle Barons never had a complete monopoly, and there were often multiple barons in the same geographical area. Even though they didn't have a monopoly, they still used monopolistic techniques, like cutting off competitors from good grazing areas, and controlling water sources. It is estimated that the Cattle Barons controlled about half of the

¹⁴ History of Ogallala NE

¹⁵ Price P. 91

West's 23 million cattle¹⁶, controlling this lucrative business. A steer worth \$4 in Texas was worth \$40 in New York¹⁷, multiply that by the size of the herd, and there was enough profit to make a man do almost anything. The immense profit margin led many cattle barons to conduct business in extralegal ways. They refused to allow cowboys to unionize, forcing them to accept a pittance for their hard work. They also fenced off land that was supposed to be public, and would occasionally finance the "disappearance" of small farmers who were in their way, or held a particularly valuable piece of land. These transgressions helped shape the culture of the west, as well as some of the Cattle Barons' other policies. They employed harsh vigilante justice with anyone who would dare move in on their territory or steal their cattle, cleaning up the west. Nat Love described the interactions between cowboys and cattle rustlers as a "war": "owing to the war between the cattle men and cattle rustlers...every man was needed". Later "open war was declared".¹⁸ Words like "war" show just how far cowboys and their employers were willing to go to bring order to the West. And, as mentioned above it was the cattle industry that helped bring in the railroads into the far reaches of the West. The railroad's stops to pick up cattle became the foundation of future towns that would dot the West, and serve its growing population. Aside from pushing for more expansion through the blazing of trails, the cattle industry also helped bring in other inventions, most importantly, barbed wire. Barbed wire was a cheap way to claim property because unlike past fences, it provided a hazard for all who tried to cross it (especially back then when medicine was woefully ineffective, and infection abounded from even the smallest of dirty cuts). This haphazard fencing led to property disputes, which in turn led to the government stepping in, and creating new laws, starting the move from frontier

¹⁶ Wright P.52

¹⁷ Wright P.52

¹⁸ Love Chpt. 11

lawlessness to a livable community. The beef industry's massive political and economic force shaped the west from a lawless frontier, driving it towards civilization.

Finally, the way that cowboys eventually turned the west from a frontier to functioning states was by settling down and setting up families. As shown by the contrasts of the Jamestown and Massachusetts Bay colonies, the best way to populate a new location is with families, not single men. Early 20th century historian Frederick Jackson Turner quoted this passage from J.M. Peck, a Baptist missionary, in his famous, if discredited, thesis about the frontier:

Generally, in all the western settlements, three classes, like the waves of the ocean, have rolled one after the other. First comes the pioneer...His implements of agriculture are rude...The next class of immigrants purchase the land...clear out the roads, throw rough bridges over the streams...build mills, school-houses, court-houses etc., and exhibit the picture and forms of plain, frugal, civilized life.¹⁹

What this quote is saying is that there are two important steps to settling an area (Peck's third step was the fat cat businesses, which is not truly necessary). The first step was the pioneers, exploring, mapping, and discovering the new territory. The cowboys were the second half of this first step. They were not the first to explore this new territory; however they pioneeringly blazed all kinds of trails, crisscrossing the West, and building the foundation for the upcoming second wave. However unlike Peck explained, the second wave would not necessarily need to be immigrants. The second wave was also the cowboys. The shifting nature of the times had forced the cowboys to settle down, and completely change their once mobile lifestyles to new sedentary ones. Many things led to this decline, which started around 1885. "A number of factors led to the end of the cowboy era. The increased settlement of Kansas led to the closing of the major cattle towns... and expanding railroad lines meant that ranchers didn't have to drive

¹⁹ Peck's *New Guide to the West* quoted in Turner's thesis

their cattle to faraway railheads.”²⁰ This quote basically explains why- along with new fencing techniques that made controlling the movement of cattle cowboy-free and a set of particularly devastating winters- the cowboys started disappearing. The barbed wire fencing meant that it was very cheap to encase huge tracts of land, eliminating the need for cowboys to ensure that some of the herd is not lost or stolen. Also, thanks to expansion the railroads were now so close to the ranches that the cowboys were also not necessary for long cattle drives. Finally, the winter of 1885-86 was one of the most horrible in American History. The blizzard that tore through the Great Plains killed over 300 people and tens of thousands of cattle.²¹ The sudden decrease in cattle contributed further to the decline of the cowboy. And by the end of the decade cowboys were all but unnecessary, and only a select few were retained by their ranch bosses. However that many people cannot just disappear; they had to do something with their lives. Some cowboys stayed on their respective farms and became ranch hands. Some acquired their own land (it was extremely cheap), and became farmers. The beef industry held a monopoly on cattle and wanted to keep it that way, making it hard for cowboys to acquire herds of their own, so this was not an option. While this does not seem like a monumental shift in lifestyle, their new lives were more sedentary, and that made all the difference. Farmers did not have to be out on the range, they could go home to their wife every night, which allowed them to start families. While the idea that women would just flock out west into the open arms of bachelor former cowboys may seem ridiculous on the surface, it made a lot of sense. The West was a lot more equal than the East because everyone needed to work on the farm, regardless of gender. There were no separate spheres, and since women were doing many of the same jobs as men, there was less open sexism. Some of the first states that allowed women to vote were in the West reflecting

²⁰ “Cowboys” Encyclopedia of the American West

²¹ Forbis p. 103

this equality. The new familial model of the West was the difference between solely men, and families, Jamestown vs. Plymouth Bay all over again, and the familial model proved to be successful for the second time. The population of western territories grew quickly after the end of the cowboy era. The former cowboys quickly grew accustomed to their new jobs; whether it was running small stores in the towns they themselves had helped build, or starting their own farm on a small plot of land from the United States Government. As mentioned above, along with this new promise of a stable home, came the single women and the frontier was soon populated by hardworking families. Thus it was the cowboys, settling down into their new lifestyle permitting them to become family men, which increased the population of western territories, allowing those territories to become states.

After the cowboy's lifestyle shift many western territories rapidly became states. Not including Texas, there are thirteen states in between Missouri ("the gateway to the west") and the west coast. The sudden population influx caused by the settling down of the cowboy turned this frontier into the interior, as many new states joined the union only a few years after the end of the cowboy era. The West before the decline of the cowboy era (ca. 1885) was relatively devoid of states. Kansas and Nebraska had already been made states around the time of the civil war (Kansas before and Nebraska after). Nevada had had a gold rush, meaning there was a huge influx of prospectors and miners that gave it the necessary population boost to be a state, and Colorado, thanks to the big city of Denver, had become a state in 1876. Then, between 1889 and 1896, seven new states, North Dakota, South Dakota, Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, Washington, and entered the union, and the first six all entered in 1889 or 1890 (The three remaining territories were Oklahoma [which was reserved for Indians], Arizona and New Mexico). Seven is 54% of the total frontier states, and 78% of the possible remaining states (not counting

Oklahoma), that joined the union right after the end of the cowboy era. These statistics point strongly towards the end of the cowboy era being a major catalyst for the statehood of many of the former territories because as soon as the cowboys had settled down into their new lives, and started having children, many of the former territories quickly became states, thanks to the population increase. The transformation was now complete; the frontier territories had been turned into represented states of the Union.

Cowboys were a very important part of frontier life, bringing the change that would turn the American West from a lawless set of territories to the group of states it is today. They completed this herculean task through the blazing of new trails and creating the need for expansion, acting as the workforce of the powerful cattle industry, and the changes that it brought, and then eventually settling down, and forming families that boosted the populations of western territories, giving them statehood. Even if they were not anything close to the handsome gunslingers they are constantly portrayed as in the media, Cowboys are still an important piece of American history. Not only are cowboys important because of the fact that they were the backbone of the beef industry, one of the most powerful in the country during its time, cowboys are important because the legacy of the cowboy is the states of the American West, which the cowboys helped bring into the existence with their own blood, sweat, and tears.

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