Cattlemen and the Open Range

“Here was all these cheap long-horned steers over-running Texas; here was the rest of the country crying out for beef -- and no railroads in Texas to get them out. So they trailed them out, across hundreds of miles of wild country." Teddy Blue Abbott

American settler had never managed large herds on the open range, and they learned from their Mexican neighbors how to round up, rope, brand, and care for the animals. The animals themselves, the **Texas longhorns**, were sturdy, short-tempered breeds accustomed to the dry grasslands.

As American as the cowboy seems today, his way of life steamed directly from that of those first Spanish ranchers in Mexico. The cowboys’ clothes, food, and vocabulary were heavily influenced by the Mexican **vaquero**. Spanish bronco caballo or “rough horse” that ran wild, became known as a bronco or bronc. The English words corral and rodeo were borrowed from Spanish. In his skills, dress, and speech, the Mexican vaquero was the true forerunner of the American cowboy.

The Cow Town

Illinois cattle dealer Joseph McCoy approached several Western towns with plans to create a shipping yard where the trails and rail lines came together. The tiny Kansas town of Abilene enthusiastically agreed to the plan. McCoy built cattle pens, a three-story hotel, and helped survey the **Chisholm Trail**—the major cattle route from San Antonio, Texas through Oklahoma to Kansas.

The Life of a Cowboy

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| In less than two decades six million steers and cows were moved along them; so many, one trail driver said, that in places the dust was knee-deep to the cattle. The men who brought them to the railroads were given a new name "cowboys."  They were a mixed group: former Confederate cavalrymen and immigrants who had only recently learned to ride; there were Indian cowboys and African-Americans -- and Mexican vaqueros, whose ancestors had introduced cattle to the West centuries earlier. A cowboy, one westerner observed, is "just a plain bowlegged human who smelled very horsey at times."  The cowboys' average age was 24. They were paid so badly, and worked so hard, that two-thirds of them made only one trail drive before finding something better to do. They owned their saddle, but not the horse they rode -- and they rode it day and night.   |  | | --- | | "If a storm come and the cattle started running -- you'd hear that low rumbling noise along the ground... then you'd jump for your horse and get out there in the lead, trying to head them and get them into a mill before they scattered to hell and gone. It was riding at a dead run in the dark, with cut banks and prairie dog holes all around you, not knowing if the next jump would land you in a shallow grave."  "The singing was supposed to soothe the cattle and it did... The two men on guard would circle around with their horses on a walk, if it was a clear night and the cattle was bedded down and quiet, and one man would sing a verse of a song, and his partner on the other side of the herd would sing another verse; and you'd go through a whole song that way... I had a crackerjack of a partner in '79. I'd sing and he'd answer, and we'd keep it up like that for two hours. But he was killed by lightning." Teddy Blue Abbott  After up to four straight months in the saddle, often in the same clothes every day, eating every meal at the chuck wagon, drinking nothing but coffee and water, the cowboy's job was finally done -- he was paid for his work, and turned loose in town.  Morally, as a class, cowboys are foulmouthed, blasphemous, drunken, lecherous, and utterly corrupt. Usually harmless on the plains when sober, they are dreaded in towns, for then liquor has an ascendancy over them.  Legend of the West  In the 1880s, William F. Cody toured the country with a show called Buffalo Bill’s Wild West. The show featured trick riding and roping exhibitions. It thrilled audiences with mock battles between cowboys and Indians.  Wild Bill Hickok, Annie Oakley, Calamity Jane, and even Sitting Bull toured in the Wild West shows. Their performances helped make Western life a part of American mythology.  <http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/program/episodes/five/cowboys.htm> |     Settlers in the Great Plains  From 1850-1871, the federal government made huge land grants to the railroads—170 million acres, worth half a billion dollars—for laying track in the West. In one grant, both the **Union Pacific and the Central Pacific** received 10 square miles of public land for every mile of track laid in a state and 20 square miles of public land for every mile of track laid in a territory.  In the1860s, the two companies began a race to lay track. The Central Pacific moved eastward from Sacramento, and the Union Pacific moved westward from Omaha. Both companies had reached Utah by the spring of 1869. Fifteen years later, the country boasted five transcontinental railroads. The rails to the East and West Coasts were forever linked.  The railroad companies sold some of their land to farmers for two to ten dollars an acre. Some companies successfully sent to Europe to recruit buyers. In 1880, 44% of the settlers in Nebraska and more than 70% of those in Minnesota and Wisconsin were immigrants.  Government and Settlement  Another powerful attraction of the West was the land itself. In 1862, Congress passed the **Homestead Act**, offering 160 acres of land free to any citizen or intended citizen who was head of the household. From 1862 to 1900 up to 600,000 families took advantage of the government’s offer. Several thousand settlers were **exoduster**s—African Americans who moved from the post-Reconstruction South to Kansas.  http://middle.usm.k12.wi.us/faculty/taft/unit5/westwebquest/exodusters/levee.gifEventually the government strengthened the Homestead Act and passed more legislation to encourage settlers. In 1889, a major land giveaway in what is now Oklahoma attracted thousands of people. In less than a day, land-hungry settlers claimed 2 million acres in a massive land rush. Some took possession of the land before the government official declared it open. Because these settlers claimed land sooner than they were supposed to, Oklahoma became known as the Sooner State.  Settlers  Since trees were scarce, most settlers built their homes from the land itself. Many pioneers dug their homes into the sides of ravines or small hills. A stovepipe jutting from the ground was often the only clear sign of such a dugout home. Those who moved to the broad, flat plains often made freestanding house stacking blocks of prairie turf. Like a dugout, a sod home, or **soddy**, was warm in the winter and cold in the summer. Soddies were small, however, and offered little light or air. They were havens for snakes, insects, and other pests. Although were fireproof, the leaked continuously when it rained.  Inventions for Farming  Established a homestead was challenging. Once accomplished, it was farming the prairie, year in and year out, that became the overwhelming task. In 1837 John Deere invited a steel plow that could slice through heavy soil. In 1847, Cyrus McCormick began to mass-produce a reaping machine. But a mass market for these devices didn’t fully develop until the late 1800s with the migration of framers onto the plains.  Other new improvements made farm work speedier—the spring-tooth harrow to prepare the soil (1869), the grain drill to plan the seed (1841), and barbed wire to fence the land (1874). These inventions made more grain available for a wider market.  Farmers in Debt  Elaborate machinery was expensive, and farmers often had to borrow money to buy it. When prices of wheat where high, farmers could usually repay their loans. When wheat prices fell, however, farmers needed to raise more crops to make ends meet. Many farmers found themselves growing as much grain as they could grow, on as much land as they could acquire, which resulted in going further into debt. But these were not defeated by these conditions. Instead, these challenging conditions drew farmers together in a common cause.  Danzer, Gerald A. *The Americans*. Evanston, IL: McDougal Littell/Houghton Mifflin, 1998. Print. |