

Wandering Western Chests  
**Cowboy Crate**

Teacher's Lesson Plans, Grades 3 – 5  
**The American Cowboy**



1700 Northeast 63rd Street  
Oklahoma City, OK 73111  
(405) 478-2250  
[nationalcowboymuseum.org](http://nationalcowboymuseum.org)



Museum Partners: Devon Energy Corp. • E.L. & Thelma Gaylord Foundation  
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# Traveling Trunk Contents

## Schedule Your Class Visit to the Museum!

We offer a variety of on-site programs that focus on the American Cowboy, specifically created for grades K – 12 as an extension of the Cowboy Crate. You are also welcome to bring your students for a teacher-facilitated experience through our galleries. Please call or email us to discuss the best fit for your class: (405) 478-2250 ext. 264 or [education@nationalcowboymuseum.org](mailto:education@nationalcowboymuseum.org). We look forward to seeing you and your students soon!



*Buffalo Bill*, Leonard McMurry, 1975, Bronze. (1975.23).

## National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum

1700 Northeast 63rd Street

Oklahoma City, OK 73111

Monday – Saturday, 10:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.,

Sunday, Noon – 5:00 p.m.

(405) 478-2250

[nationalcowboymuseum.org](http://nationalcowboymuseum.org)

## Trunk Inventory

### Lesson Plans

- Cowboy as Folk Hero / The Western “Character”
- Tools of the Trade

### Artifact Reproductions

- Pants
- Shirt
- Vest
- Chaps
- Cowboy boots
- Spurs
- Bandanna
- Riding cuffs
- Branding iron
- Rope

### Books

- The Toughest Cowboy* by John Frank, 2004
- Black Cowboy, Wild Horses* by Julius Lester, 1998
- Pecos Bill: The Greatest Cowboy of All Time* by James Cloyd Bowman, 1937
- Pecos Bill: A Tall Tale Retold and Illustrated* by Steven Kellogg, 1986

### Images/Reproduction Artwork On Foam Core

- Trouble on the Circle Diamond*, Olof Seltzer, oil on board, 1908
- In from the Night Herd*, Frederic Remington, oil on canvas, 1908
- Branding JJ*, William Robinson Leigh, oil on canvas, 1945
- Sharing an Apple*, Tom Ryan, oil on board, 1967
- The Good Life*, James E. Reynolds, oil on Masonite, 1971
- Cowboy*, Newell Convers Wyeth, 1907

### In Tube

(Please keep in your classroom as a gift from the Museum!)  
*Emigrants Crossing the Plains*, Albert Bierstadt, oil on canvas, 1867

### Lesson Plan Resources

- Excerpts from Jack Bailey's journal
- Diagram of typical cowboy clothing
- Blank Oklahoma map for use in Lesson Plan #2
- Brand tracing sheet (please make copies as needed)
- Reading an Object question cards
- Seven Strategies for Primary Sources cards

# Introduction

## Goal

Characterized as the quintessential laborer on horseback, the cowboy is a celebrated and iconic figure in Western American history and lore. The Cowboy Crate explores the role of the cowboy in American culture specifically through the lenses of work and folklore. Through object interpretation, primary source investigation, artwork analysis, and creative writing, your students will discover the American cowboy in a completely new light.

## Background Information

### The Working Life and Attire of the American Cowboy

The term “cowboy” originally comes from Ireland where horsemen were called “cow-boys,” meaning “one who works with cattle.” Although that term, dating back to AD 1,000, was not used regularly in the United States until the turn of the 20th century, cowboy is a word that permeates our culture and captures our imaginations as Americans. Prior to the widespread acceptance of the term cowboy, the terms vaqueros, buckaroos, and drovers served as other ways to describe someone tending cattle from horseback (depending on the region of the country).

An American cowboy can best be described as a skilled ranch hand who assisted with driving cattle from ranches to railheads and everything it entailed, including roundups and roping, branding, and protecting the assets (the cattle) so the best price could be secured at sale. Once purchased, the cattle from one ranch would be shipped back east where the demand for beef became extremely high. Interestingly, cowboys often traveled from ranch to ranch taking on work as ranch owners needed. The rancher provided a place to live – the bunkhouse – as well as food and a bit of cash. A cowboy usually owned a horse and saddle already, and the rancher provided additional horses to the cowboys as needed. Ranchers depended heavily on the assistance of cowboys; without them, cattle drives and the ultimate sale of beef would not be possible.

One hundred to 150 years ago, cowboys lived and slept outdoors most of the time. On the range in all types of weather, the cowboy was not able to “come inside” if weather conditions became uncomfortable. Traditional clothing of American cowboys reflected both their outdoor lifestyle and cultural background. The demanding job required durable clothing that protected against the hot sun, cold wind, soaking rain, as well as shrubs and thorns. A cowboy’s “uniform” consisted of long underwear, two pairs of pants, a shirt, a vest, a pair of boots, a bandanna,

and a hat. A poncho or yellow slicker would be packed on the back of the saddle and used as needed according to the weather. A cowboy seldom wore a belt due to the possibility of it getting caught on the saddle horn. Regional differences in cowboy dress resulted from varying weather patterns, diverse heritage, and ethnic influences. For example, cowboy vaqueros in California wore the same typical uniform with substantial stylistic differences than cowboy drovers in the Great Plains.

## Branding

Marking cattle with a hot brand or ear-mark has always been the cowboy’s responsibility. The purpose of a brand was, and still is, not only to mark an animal according to which ranch it belonged, but also to mark it so the brand could not be changed by rustlers (cattle thieves). Branding animals such as horses and cattle made a cowboy’s job much easier when it came to large cattle drives. Hernando Cortez, who settled to ranching after conquering Mexico, is credited with the first branding in America. Today, branding is a routine procedure on most large cattle ranches. Cattle are normally branded when they are calves (baby cows). The branding process is incredibly uncomfortable to the animals, but the pain or discomfort is fleeting and in minutes is forgotten by the animal. Brands

are read from top to bottom, left to right.



Alice Greenough, Ralph R. Doubleday, 1935 ca. (79.026.1908).

## Diversity Among Cowboys

Women, people of color, and American Indians did work as cowboys on American ranges, although not as commonly as white men. Though its origin is unknown, the term “cowgirl” appeared in print by the early 1890s. Daughters of many pioneer ranchers

grew up riding and roping along with their brothers. On small ranches, everyone helped with the cattle, yet young women did not seek jobs as salaried cowhands. Victorian attitudes deemed it improper for a woman to dress and ride like a man. Most women wore full skirts and rode sidesaddle. It was not until the late 1890s that split-riding skirts and astride saddles for women gained acceptance.

# Introduction

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Even in the West's remote areas, women rarely wore trousers to work cattle until the late 1920s.

Between 1860 and 1880, approximately 25% of cowboys were African American. While many enslaved people migrated west with their masters before the Civil War, others came after the war ended in 1865 to take advantage of the work opportunities they hoped would come with their newly gained freedom. With their families, these formerly enslaved people built self-sufficient, all-black towns. They became cavalrymen, trail bosses, barbers,



Bill Pickett, Unknown, 1925 ca. (2001.036.012).

trappers, nurses, state legislators, and of course, cowboys! Black cowboys, although not totally free from prejudice and discrimination in the West, flourished in a profession that rewarded skill and paid less attention to skin color.

Prior to the 19th century, as colonists and mission priests introduced cattle to Central and South America, Spanish

ranching methods spread. In the early colonial period, only Spaniards and their direct descendants were permitted officially to own or ride horses. In time, mestizos of mixed Indian and Spanish descent were approved to work on horseback if they wore leather clothing to distinguish them from Spanish gentry. By the 19th century, Latino cowboys (often called vaqueros in America) developed unique equestrian equipment and bold, colorful attire. The Spanish, and later, Mexican, traditions in horsemanship and cattle culture contributed exponentially to the American cowboy lifestyle.

Rarely have American Indians been portrayed as active participants in the heritage of American ranching. Yet when the Spanish introduced cattle to the Americas, the labor of native peoples played a significant role in the rapid growth of colonial herds. Those native peoples, known as "mission Indians," trained in the ways of the vaquero and created the manpower for the massive Spanish and Mexican cattle empires. Unfortunately, American

Indians are most often portrayed attacking cowboys and frontiersmen, and while such events did occur infrequently, many American Indians worked as cowboys and followed a lifestyle largely unreported then and now.

Between 1890 and 1910 many tribes began raising cattle supplied by the American government as part of the transition to reservation life. Furthermore, at a time when American Indians no longer enjoyed the freedom to pursue hunting, warfare, and native traditions, ranching gave them an opportunity to work on horseback and achieve status within their communities. It is important to note, however, that while American Indians did serve as cowboys in the literal sense of the word, most did not willingly choose that vocation.

## The Cowboy in Folklore and Myth

Beginning with *The Virginian*, a novel written by Owen Wister in 1902, the figure of the Western hero captured the American imagination for more than a century. Through literature, art, and film, the Western hero evolved into someone defined by the following personal characteristics:

- Terse, humble, witty, and hard-working
- Values personal honor above all else
- Observant, respectful to humans and animals, yet stern
- Resorts to violence only when absolutely necessary
- Decisive, graceful, and confident

Above all, the Western hero represents a simpler way of life and the old-fashioned values so treasured in the West and so often forgotten in the stresses of Eastern city life at the turn of the 20th century. Entertainment and artistic creativity, not accurate history, served as the main goals for most representations of cowboys and the West. Writers, directors, and artists took liberties with their portrayals as long as the stories enraptured the viewers/readers. Fictional heroes like cowboys became so popular that the line between real and imaginary became blurred in our society. Many untruths about the West and the American cowboy still persist today, but our love of the Western figure has stayed true after all this time.

# Introduction

## Helpful Vocabulary and Terminology

Items included in the trunk are highlighted in red.

**Bandanna** – a 24" – 36" square of material worn around the neck to protect the cowboy from sun, cold, and dust; bandannas had MANY uses (i.e. to wipe sweat, to cover the eyes, to blow one's nose, to use as a bandage, to hold money or food as a pouch, to wash or dry as a towel, to swat flies, to dust or polish)

**Brand** – a symbol burned into the hides of animals as a mark of ownership

**Branding iron** – a piece of metal with the identifying mark of the cattle owner

**Chaps** – leather seat-less trousers that buckle around the waist and are worn to protect the rider's legs from brush and rope burns

**Corral** – a fenced yard for animals

**Cowboy boots** – leather footwear that come just below the knee to protect the leg and ankle; the heel of the boot helps hold the foot in the stirrup on the horse

**Cowboy hat** – felt, wool, or straw headwear with a wide brim for protection from sun, wind, and rain made to withstand rough treatment

**Outfit** – a group of cowboys working for a ranch

**Railheads** – railroad stops where cattle could be loaded on rail cars for shipment back east

**Reata** – a rope made of braided rawhide or untanned cowskin

**Riding cuffs** – leather wrist protection, used primarily during roping and branding

**Rope** – used to catch a cowboy's horse or cattle; often tied to the saddle horn

**Roundup** – gathering scattered cattle together, usually to brand them, to doctor them, or to prepare them for a cattle drive

**Spurs** – metal wheels (roundels) attached to the heels of a cowboy's boot used to signal the horse for turning or quick starts; the roundels are not sharp enough to hurt or cut a horse

**Trail drive** – moving a herd of cattle to the nearest railroad for shipment to market



Cowboy, Newell Convers Wyeth, Oil on canvas, 1907. (2007.39).

# Lesson Plan #1

## Cowboy as Folk Hero/The Western “Character”



John Wayne, Everett Raymond Kinstler, Oil on canvas, 1978. (1978.16.1).

The lore of the American cowboy has fueled art, literature, and film for more than a century. Partly real and partly conjured, the cowboy is a symbol of the West, a tough and exemplary rider and wrangler, filled with spirit, courage, and compassion. This lesson plan celebrates the cowboy as folk hero by examining what he represents to American culture and why the symbol of the cowboy has persisted for so long. Diving into Western folklore and myth invites the students to consider broader concepts surrounding paintings and books that feature the cowboy in the American West.

**Time Required:** 60 – 90 minutes or 2 class periods

**Subject Areas:** history, social studies, visual arts, English language arts

### Learning Objectives

After completing this lesson plan, students will be able to:

1. Identify a cowboy's clothing requirements and work tools
2. Understand the characteristics of a folktale
3. Examine mythical or heroic portrayals of cowboys in visual art and literature
4. Create an original narrative about a cowboy utilizing items from the trunk as inspiration

### Instructional Steps for Educator

1. Start the lesson by asking your students what they envision when they hear the word cowboy. Write down the words on the board as the students say them (i.e. cowboy boots, horse, cattle, gun, cowboy hat, etc.). If a student shares a word that corresponds with an item in the trunk, take it out and show it to the class, leaving it on a table for the duration of the lesson. Allow the students to share all of their preconceived ideas/images that come to mind, then with the help of the class, group the words according to two categories: cowboy clothing and cowboy tools/work. This categorization process demonstrates how much the cowboy has come to be defined by what he wears and what he does. (10 minutes)

2. Discuss folktales and myths, utilizing the information in the Background Information portion of this packet. Guiding questions: How did cowboys come to be such a part of American identity? What makes something a folktale? (15 minutes)

Characteristics of a folktale:

- Creative expression of a common past
- Based on truth/reality, but expanded to stress a point or to become more fascinating
- Features a hero who often seems larger than life but is ultimately a common person
- Plot is funny and often impossible in real life
- Usually told long after whatever really happened, passed down through oral or written tradition



Sharing an Apple, Tom Ryan, oil on board, 1967. (1969.195).

## Lesson Plan #1

3. Select two images to discuss with the class. Facilitate a student-led, open-ended conversation about these pieces utilizing the following questions to strengthen the students' visual literacy. (20 minutes)

**What is going on in this picture?** (Do not tell them what it is about; let them come to the conclusion after careful observation and sharing of ideas.)

**What do you see that makes you say that?** (Require support for their statements – **WHY do you think the cowboy is cold and wet? What do you SEE that supports that statement?**)

**What more can we find?** (Encourage the students to keep digging by looking and looking again to find more in the images.)

4. At the end of the conversation for each piece, share the name of the paintings, the dates of completion, and the artists. Ask the class if these paintings look how they might expect a cowboy painting to look. **How do the dates affect our interpretation of the painting? What might you include in these paintings if you were portraying a cowboy scene?** (5 minutes)

5. Read one of the books to the class aloud. Afterward, ask questions about the portrayal of the cowboy in the story. Help the students connect the depiction of the cowboy in art and literature, but focus on the storytelling aspect of the book. Guiding questions: **How do we know this is not a true story? Why do you think the author chose**

**to focus the story on a cowboy and not a fireman or railroad worker for instance? How does the hero of the story, the cowboy, make this story more interesting?** (25 minutes)



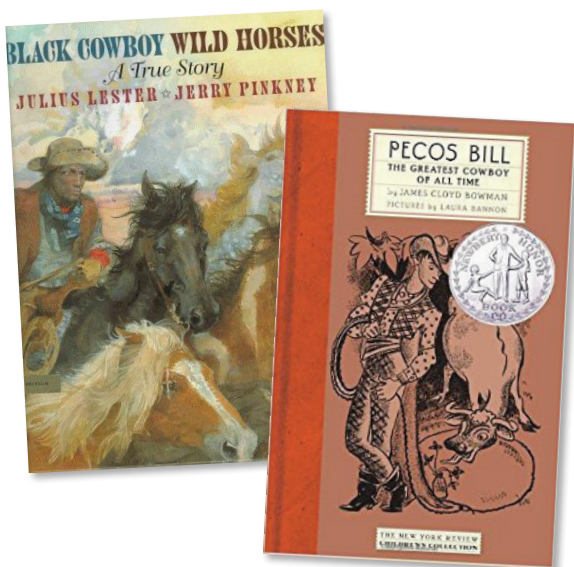
### Assesment: Creative writing activity

Place all trunk items and images out in the front of the classroom so all students can see them. Invite the students to come up to take a close look at the objects and images. Allow the students a few minutes to look at and touch the objects to decide which ones they want to choose for their stories.

Invite students to pick ONE image and ONE trunk item to craft their own cowboy folktales. They must leave the image and object at the front of the room during writing, though, so if more than one child selects the same item, they all can still see it while writing about it. Allow enough time for the students to write their own narratives about a cowboy utilizing the image as a starting point and the object as an item that features prominently in the story. They must also use some of the characteristics of a folktale discussed earlier. Stories can be shared with the whole class or just read by the teacher. We also invite you to share the stories with us by emailing [education@nationalcowboymuseum.org](mailto:education@nationalcowboymuseum.org)!

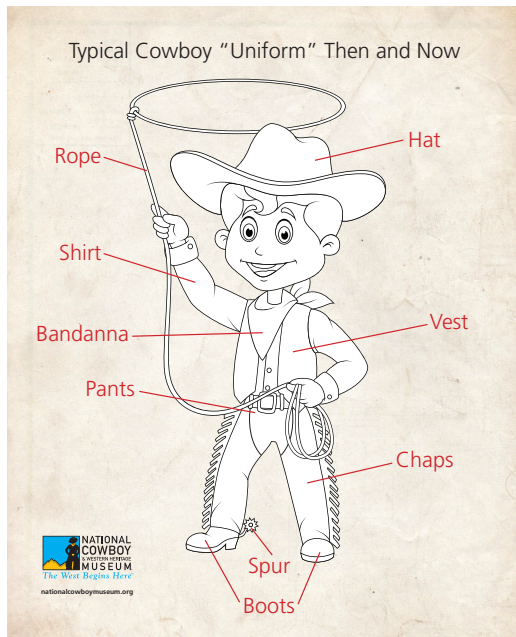
### Optional Follow-up/Additional Assessment

Facilitate another student-led, open-ended discussion about the Albert Bierstadt painting (in the tube), *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*. While this painting focuses more on frontiersman and settlers, notice how the conversation has changed now that the students have more of background in cowboy culture and the folklore of the West. This activity works especially well a few days after the lesson plan is complete.



## Lesson Plan #2

### Tools of the Trade



Over time, ranch work generated different types of specific equipment, clothing, and tools, adapted to the specifics of the environment and conditions. Often defined by what he wears, the iconic cowboy dons the hat, boots, and chaps so necessary to his line of work. This lesson plan explores the material culture behind a figure who now represents the American West and also invites students to contemplate objects in their daily lives that carry a similar form and function to that of a cowboy's.

**Time Required:** 60-90 minutes or 2 class periods

**Subject Areas:** history, social studies, visual arts, English language arts

### Learning Objectives

After completing this lesson plan, students will be able to:

1. Identify a cowboy's clothing requirements and work tools
2. Understand how to "read" an artifact reproduction
3. Utilize artwork to assess and identify a person's tools of the trade
4. Create their own working brand and mark their rangeland on a map

### Instructional Steps for Educator

1. Start the lesson by examining the diagram of a cowboy in his typical dress. As you and the students identify the items on the diagram, pull out the corresponding clothing items in the trunk one at a time to discuss what they are. Dressing a mannequin during the conversation or asking for a student volunteer to "dress up" as the items are

being discussed helps illustrate the concept further. For each item, ask the students: How are these items similar or different from clothing you wear? After entertaining the comments from the students, share with them that the typical "uniform" of a cowboy remains the same today as it was 150 years ago. Why do you think the cowboy uniform has not changed in all that time? It helps to keep the diagram of cowboy clothing up in front of the class during this lesson. (15 minutes)

2. Break the classroom into four small groups for object study and interpretation. Assign one tool from the trunk for each group to study and assess: branding iron, rope, leather cuffs, and spurs. Discuss what an artifact is (an object that has been created or altered by humans from another place or time, or a piece of material culture that represents a person, place, and time) and explain how these artifacts are reproductions, meaning they do not have historic value. Describe what "reading" an artifact means – the students become detectives using their senses to decode clues about their object so they can make an assessment. Allow the groups a few minutes to review the following questions (available on the Reading an Objective Question cards in the trunk):

What kind of an object do you have?

What material(s) is it made of?

Where did it come from? How can you tell?

Where was it used? Think about environment, location, etc.

How was it used?

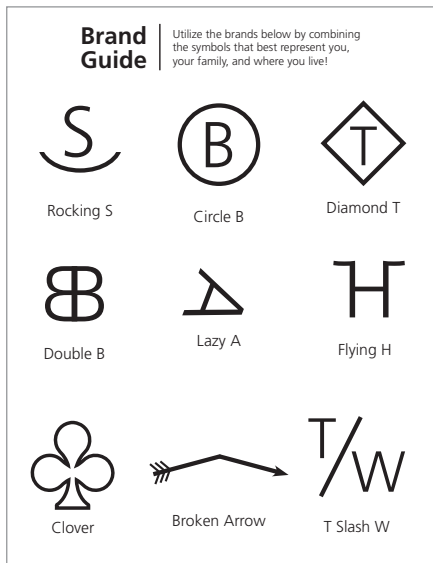
Do we have anything of similar use today?

Invite each group to report back their object assessments while you write the objects and ideas on the board. (10 – 15 minutes)

3. Select two images from the trunk to lead a discussion (we recommend *Branding JJ* and *Trouble on the Circle Diamond*). Invite the students to dissect the images by listing the clothing and objects the students recognize, listing them on the board as you go along. Then ask for further investigation. What more can you find? Ask the students to continue being detectives and to search for other clues. What are some tools of the trade you notice in the paintings that we have not discussed yet? List them off on the board. To finish this section, ask the students why/how visual art can aid us in reading artifacts. (15 minutes)



## Lesson Plan #2



4. For the final activity, inform the students they will have a few minutes to design their own brands. Using the brand tracing sheets and markers, ask the students to think about what symbols best represent them and their families. As the students begin thinking about their own brands, share with them some brief information about why brands were used by cowboys (available in the Background Information of this packet). Once each student has created a unique brand on his/her own paper, put up the large map of Oklahoma at the front of the classroom to create your own classroom trail map. One by one, invite each student to place their brand on the map based on where they live, where they would like to own a ranch, or any other factors so each student can mark their rangeland on the class map. The “branded” Oklahoma map is yours to keep for your classroom. Share your class trail map on social media by using #mywest! (20 minutes)

### Assessment: Primary Resources & Opinion Writing

Break up the class into four or five small groups and assign one excerpt from Jack Bailey’s diary to each group. Give one Seven Strategies card to each group. Place the trunk items out on display at the front of the room.

After the groups have spent a few minutes examining their excerpts from a real-life cowboy’s diary and reading the transcriptions, ask the groups to use their Seven Strategies card to help them assess this primary resource. Once the students have had time to discuss the Seven Strategies in their small groups, invite them to select one trunk object or image that best represents the diary excerpt they just read. Then discuss this question as a class: What does this diary tell us about the life of a cowboy?

Ask each student to write a short opinion piece on why the object or image their group selected captures the real life experience of a cowboy, incorporating a brief explanation of the object or image. These opinion pieces can be shared with the whole class or just read by the teacher. We also invite you to share these writing samples with us by emailing [education@nationalcowboymuseum.org](mailto:education@nationalcowboymuseum.org)!



### Optional Follow-up/Additional Assessment

Facilitate a student-led, open-ended discussion about the Albert Bierstadt painting (in the tube), *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*. While this painting focuses more on frontiersman and settlers, direct the conversation on the objects or tools identifiable in the painting that played a role on the frontier. What do these objects tell us about life on the frontier?

### Schedule Your Class Visit to the Museum!

We offer a variety of on-site programs that focus on the American Cowboy, specifically created for grades K – 12 as an extension of the Cowboy Crate. You are also welcome to bring your students for a teacher-facilitated experience through our galleries. Please call or email us to discuss the best fit for your class: (405) 478-2250 ext. 264 or [education@nationalcowboymuseum.org](mailto:education@nationalcowboymuseum.org). We look forward to seeing you and your students soon!

### Galleries to Visit for Teacher-Guided Exploration:

*The Jack and Phoebe Cook American Cowboy Gallery*  
*Western Performers Gallery*  
*Prosperity Junction*  
*Children’s Cowboy Corral*  
*The William S. and Ann Atherton Art of the American West Gallery*