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‘Black Cowboys: An American Story’ Coming to the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum

New exhibition transports visitors through time to meet real Black cowboys and gain a greater appreciation of their deep impact on American history.

(Oklahoma City, OK) July 26, 2023—Explore the lives and work of the numerous Black men, women and children – enslaved and free – who labored on the ranches of Texas and participated in cattle drives before the Civil War through the turn of the twentieth century in “Black Cowboys: An American Story,” a new exhibition opening September at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. This powerful exhibition offers insight into legendary cowboys, a clearer picture of the Black West and a more diverse portrait of the American West with artifacts, photographs and documents depicting the work and skills of Black cowboys.

“The individual stories of Black cowboys, illustrating courage in the face of discrimination, skill, despite great odds, and success through generations as ranchers and leaders in their field are powerful,” said Marise McDermott, president and CEO of the Witte Museum, which organized the exhibition. “The Witte Museum was privileged to work closely with an outstanding steering committee and advisors, including community leaders, scholars and Black cowboys and ranchers, to create this unparalleled exhibition, which reveals what life was like for Black cowboys during this time.”

Museum visitors will discover how Black cowboys tamed and trained horses, tended livestock and rode on the trail with thousands of cattle across America. Over time, the role of Black cowboys evolved as they used the skills they learned on the ranch and trail to own their own ranches, serve as lawmen, ride in rodeos, become singers and perform in movies. Today, the lives and legacies of Black cowboys have inspired new generations to explore the past through music, film, fashion and design.

Central to the exhibition is a film about Hector Bazy, portrayed by distinguished actor and playwright Eugene Lee. Born enslaved on a plantation in Grimes County, Texas in 1851, Bazy wrote an autobiography in 1910 describing the exhilarating and dangerous work of cowboy life. In the film, Lee speaks Bazy’s own words to describe his experiences.

“Black cowboys were integral to the growth of Texas’ cattle industry immediately after the Civil War,” shared Ron Davis, Witte Curator of American History, who co-curated the exhibition alongside Texas History Curator Bruce Shackelford. “In fact, one in four cowboys that went up the trails was a Black cowboy.”

“Black Cowboys: An American Story” will run September 22, 2023 through January 2, 2024 in Kerr Gallery.

Exhibition Organization & Sponsors

“Black Cowboys: An American Story” is organized by the Witte Museum in San Antonio, Texas (witemuseum.org) and generously supported by Bank of America, the Ed Rachal Foundation, John L. Santikos Charitable Fund of the San Antonio Area Foundation and H-E-B.

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About the Witte Museum

Founded in 1926, the Witte Museum is where Science, Nature and Culture Meet. Located on the banks of the San Antonio River in Brackenridge Park, the Witte Museum is San Antonio’s premier museum, inspiring people to shape the future of Texas through transformative and relevant experiences in nature, science and culture.

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About the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum

The National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City is America’s premier institution of Western history, art and culture. Founded in 1955, the Museum collects, preserves and exhibits an internationally renowned collection of Western art and artifacts while sponsoring dynamic educational programs to stimulate interest in the enduring legacy of the American West. The Museum is located only six miles northeast of downtown Oklahoma City at 1700 Northeast 63rd Street. For more information, visit nationalcowboymuseum.org.