THE COWBOY: ORIGINS OF AN ICON

National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum



Courtesy Chisholm Trail Heritage Museum

Where and how did we form our perspectives about Cowboys?



Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society

Are these the images that come to mind?

How accurate is our mental picture of the American cowboy?



Think About…

Essential Question:

How do our views of history change over time?



Exhibit, National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum

Supporting Questions:

- How do individuals and groups affect regional development?
- What role did cowboys play in the development of the West?
- To what extent did positive character traits impact the life and work of the American cowboy?



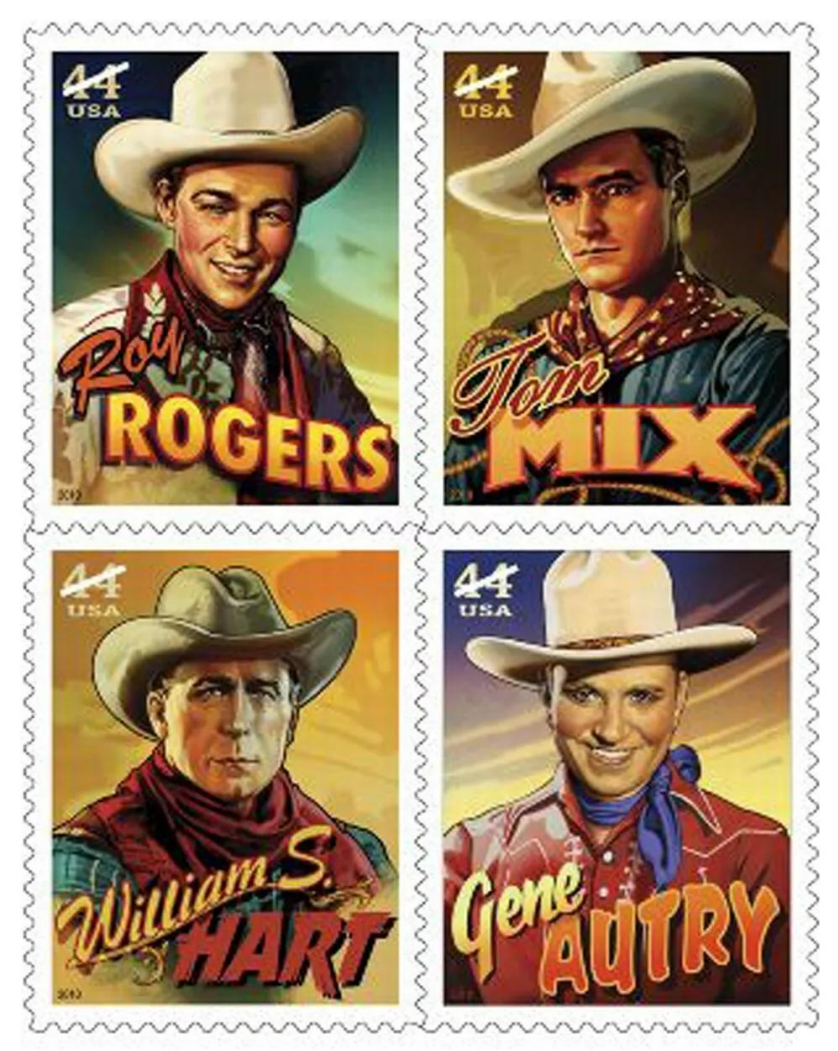
The American Cowboy

Few images embody the spirit of the American West as well as the trailblazing, sharpshooting, horseback-riding cowboy of American lore.



US Postal Service, commemorative stamp, 1994

But, as much as film stars John Wayne, Roy Rogers and Gene Autry come to mind when “cowboy” is mentioned…



US Postal Service, commemorative stamps, 2010



John Wayne, movie publicity photo,
The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance

America's First Cowboy



W. Herbert Dunton, "Fernando Roped One of the Bears and His Brother Caught Another"

...the first actual cowboys in the Americas were most likely African American laborers brought by the Spanish, who introduced the horse and cattle to Mexico in the 1500s. Early Spanish missions played a major role in establishing ranching in North America, using American Indian laborers as cattle herders, as well.

The Cowboy Culture

No history of cowboy culture would be complete without understanding the integral role that African Americans, Native Americans and Hispanics played.



American Indian and African-American cowboys, circa 1860-1870

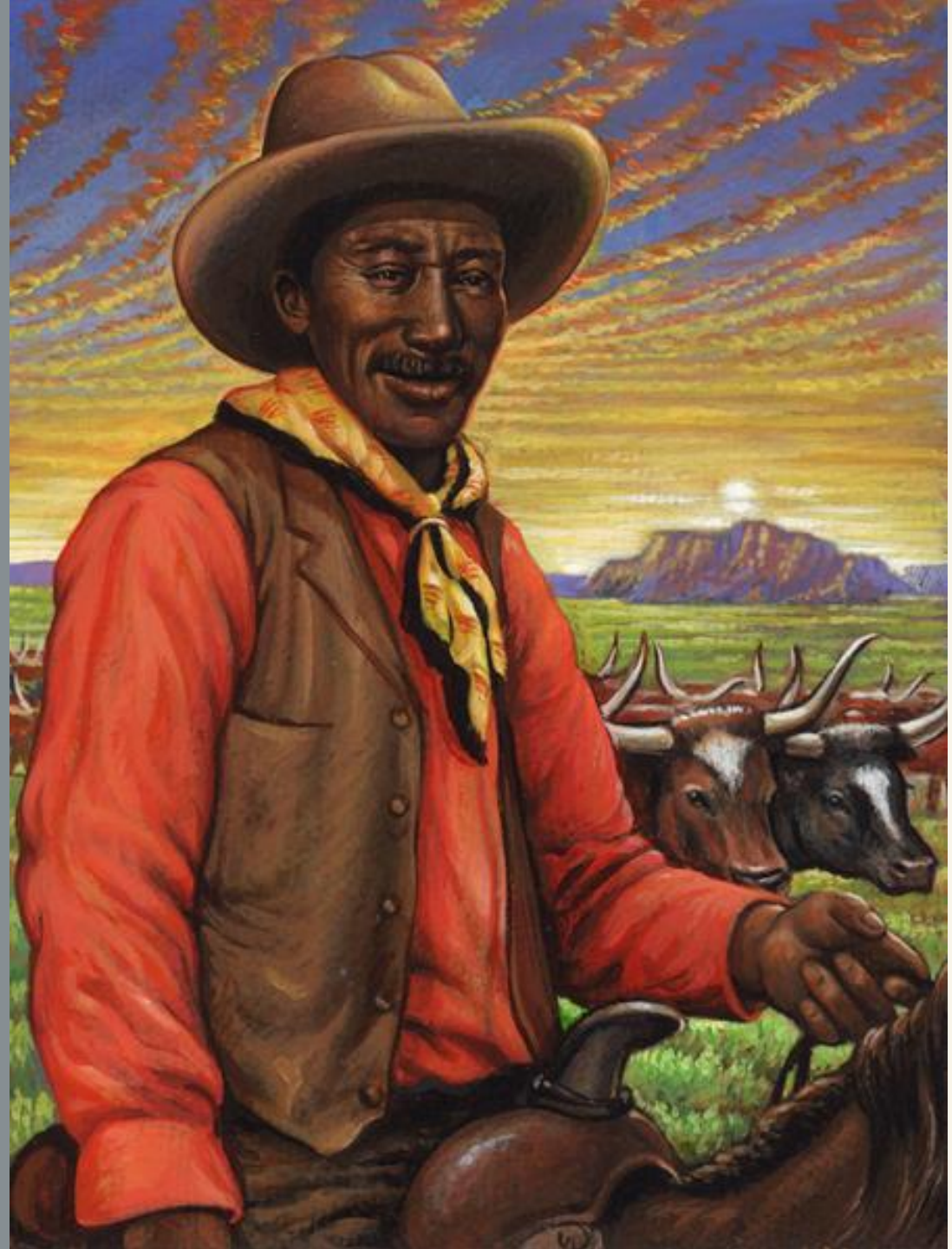
Cowboys from Many Backgrounds



Unknown photographer, George McJunkin, c.1907

Historians inform us that cowboy outfits mirrored the multi-racial and multi-ethnic population of the region.
For example, an estimated one in four cowboys were of African American ancestry.

Birth of the Cowboy



Artwork from *The Bill Pickett USPS stamp, 1994*.



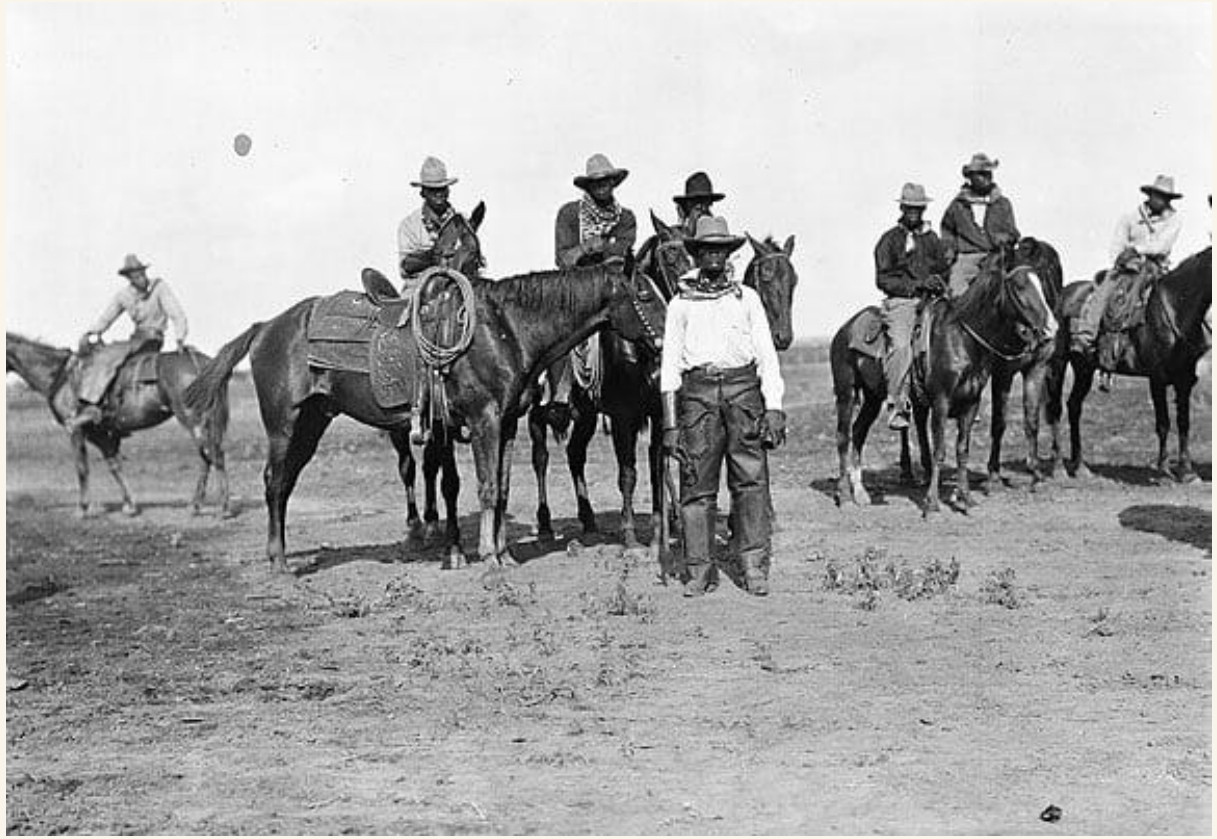
The Impact of Slavery

Americans seeking cheap land began moving to the Spanish (and later, Mexican) territory of Texas during the first half of the 19th century.
Though the Mexican government opposed slavery, Americans brought enslaved persons as they settled the frontier, establishing cotton farms and cattle ranches.

By 1825, slaves accounted for nearly 25 percent of the Texas settler population.

The Civil War and Cattle Ranching

When the state of Texas, joined the Confederacy, many Texans took up arms. While Texas ranchers fought in the war, they depended on enslaved persons to maintain their land and cattle herds.



African-American cowboys during the Negro State Fair, Bonham, Texas, 1911; Library of Congress

War-Time Cowboys

In doing so, African Americans developed the skills of cattle tending that would render them invaluable to the Texas cattle industry in the post-war era.



Isom Dart, formal photography, Wyoming; Colorado Historical Association

Cattle Ranching's Golden Age

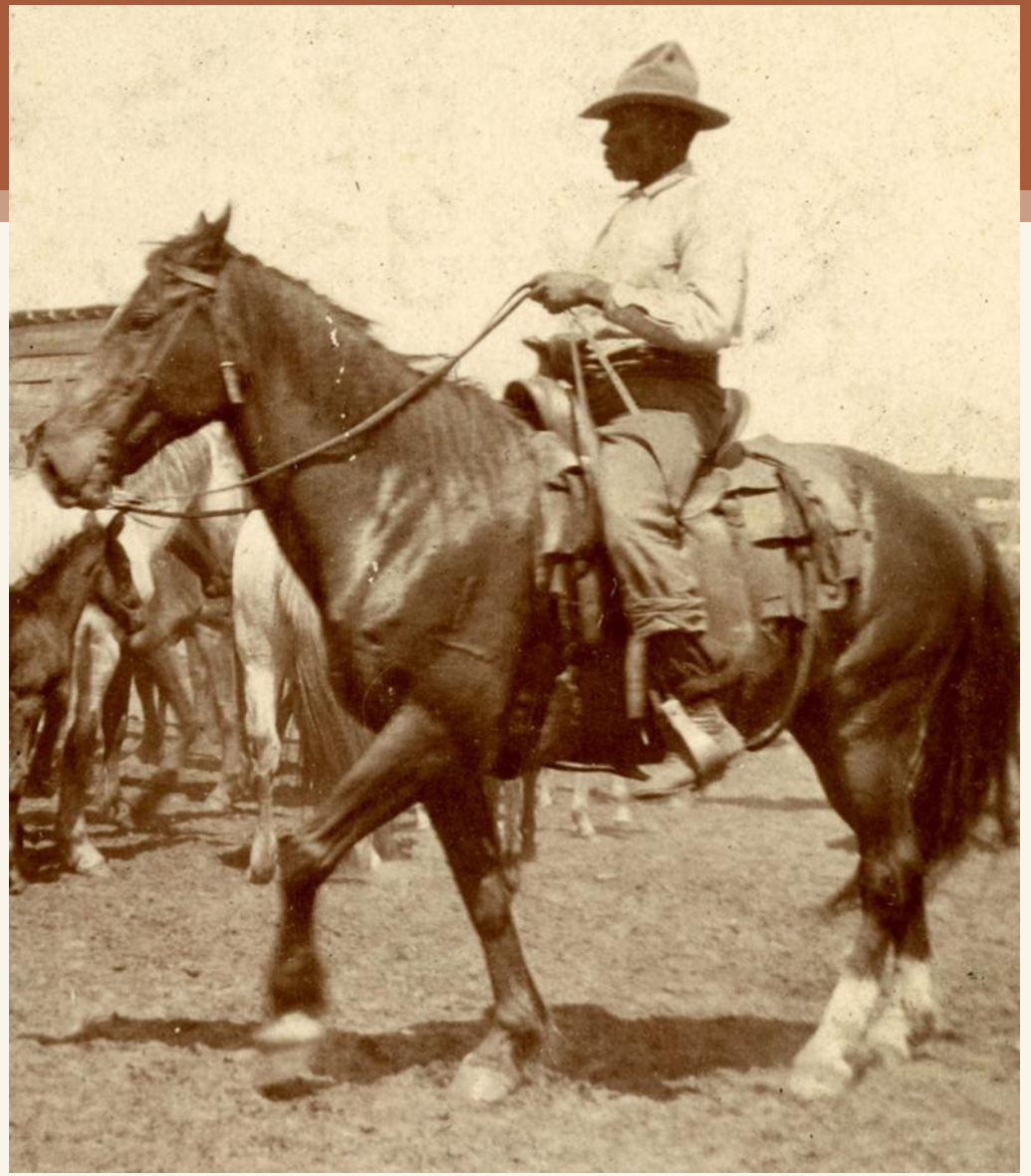


African-American cowboy, Pocatello, Idaho in 1903; Smithsonian Institute

Cattle ranching did not become the bountiful economic and cultural phenomenon recognized today until the late 1800s when millions of cattle grazed in Texas.

Post-War Dilemma

With a combination
of ineffective containment
(barbed wire was
not yet invented)
and too few cowhands,
the cattle population ran wild.
Ranchers returning from the
war discovered that their herds
were lost or out of control.



Courtesy Chisholm Trail Heritage Museum

The Cowhand

Desperate for help rounding up maverick cattle, ranchers were compelled to hire newly freed and highly skilled African-Americans as paid cowhands.
Joining their ranks were young farm boys, seeking the “thrill” of the cattle drive, as well as Hispanic ranch hands from south of the border.



Photo: Nat Love, Unknown. Prints and Photographs Division; Library of Congress

Building Self-Reliance

In these vast swathes of open terrain, where law enforcement was near nonexistent, cowhands were left to fend for themselves in open country, keep up with their cattle by horseback, and protect themselves from rustlers and bandits.



Unknown; c. 1900; Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture

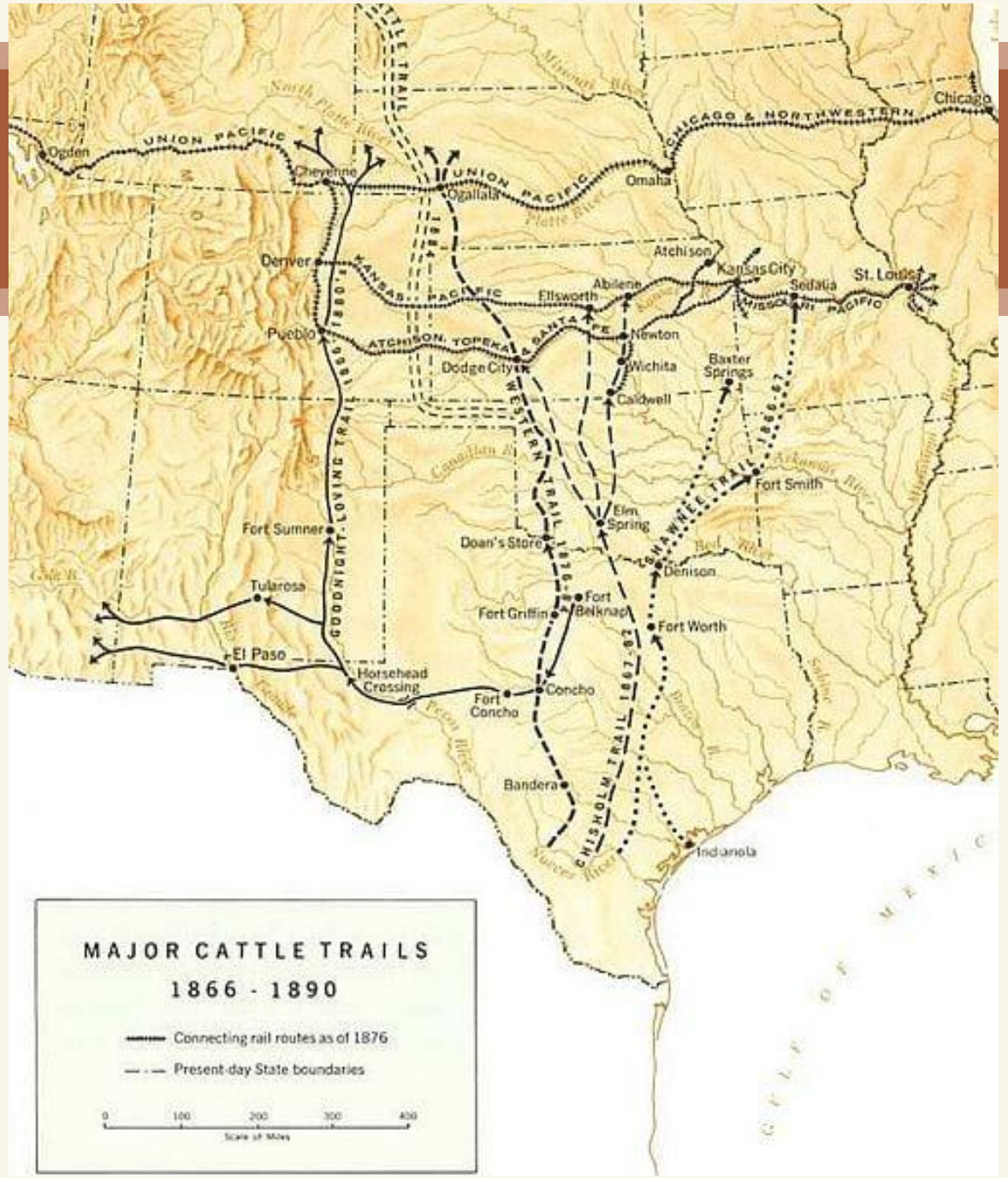
Cattle Drives



Courtesy of Denver Public Library, Special Collections

Cattle Trails

The overland cattle trail developed due to a limited railroad system.
This meant that enormous herds of cattle needed to be physically moved to railroad shipping points in Kansas, Colorado and Missouri.



Courtesy Chisholm Trail Heritage Museum



Opportunity?

Cattle ranchers in western states hired cowboys to guide cattle to railroad depots where the beeves were then shipped to eastern markets.

Not only did “cowboying” become a way to make decent money, it was also an opportunity for African American men to escape continued and growing racial discrimination of the South.

Demand for Beef

From 1865 until the 1890s the largest number of domestic animals in world history were driven up trails from Texas to be sold at market to provide the country with beef.



Courtesy of Denver Public Library, Special Collections

Life on the Cattle Drive

Rounding up herds on horseback, cowboys traversed unforgiving trails fraught with harsh environmental conditions.

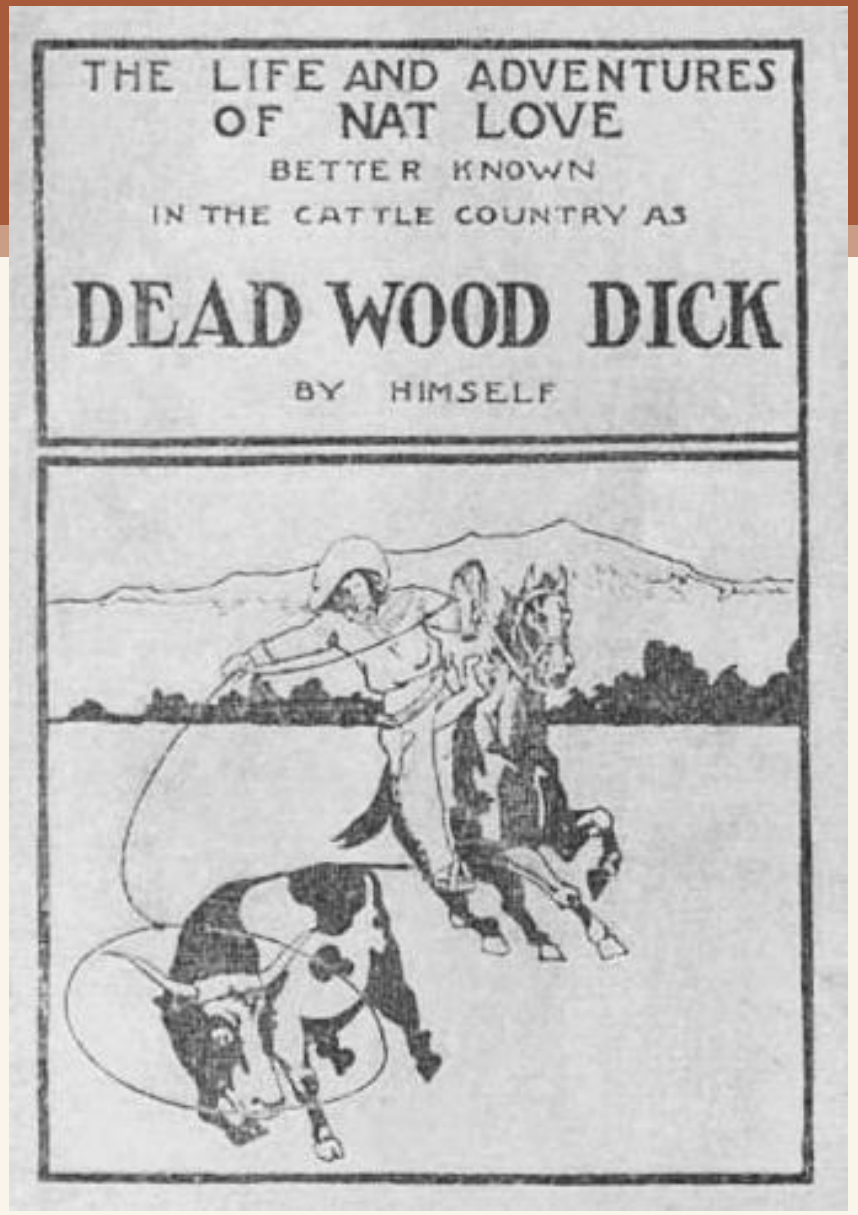


Frederic Remington, *In From the Night Herd*, 1907

Recollections…

Nat Love, a Freedman and Texas cowboy, recalled the camaraderie among cowboys in his autobiography…

"A braver, truer set of men never lived than these wild sons of the plains whose home was in the saddle and their couch, mother earth, with the sky for a covering."

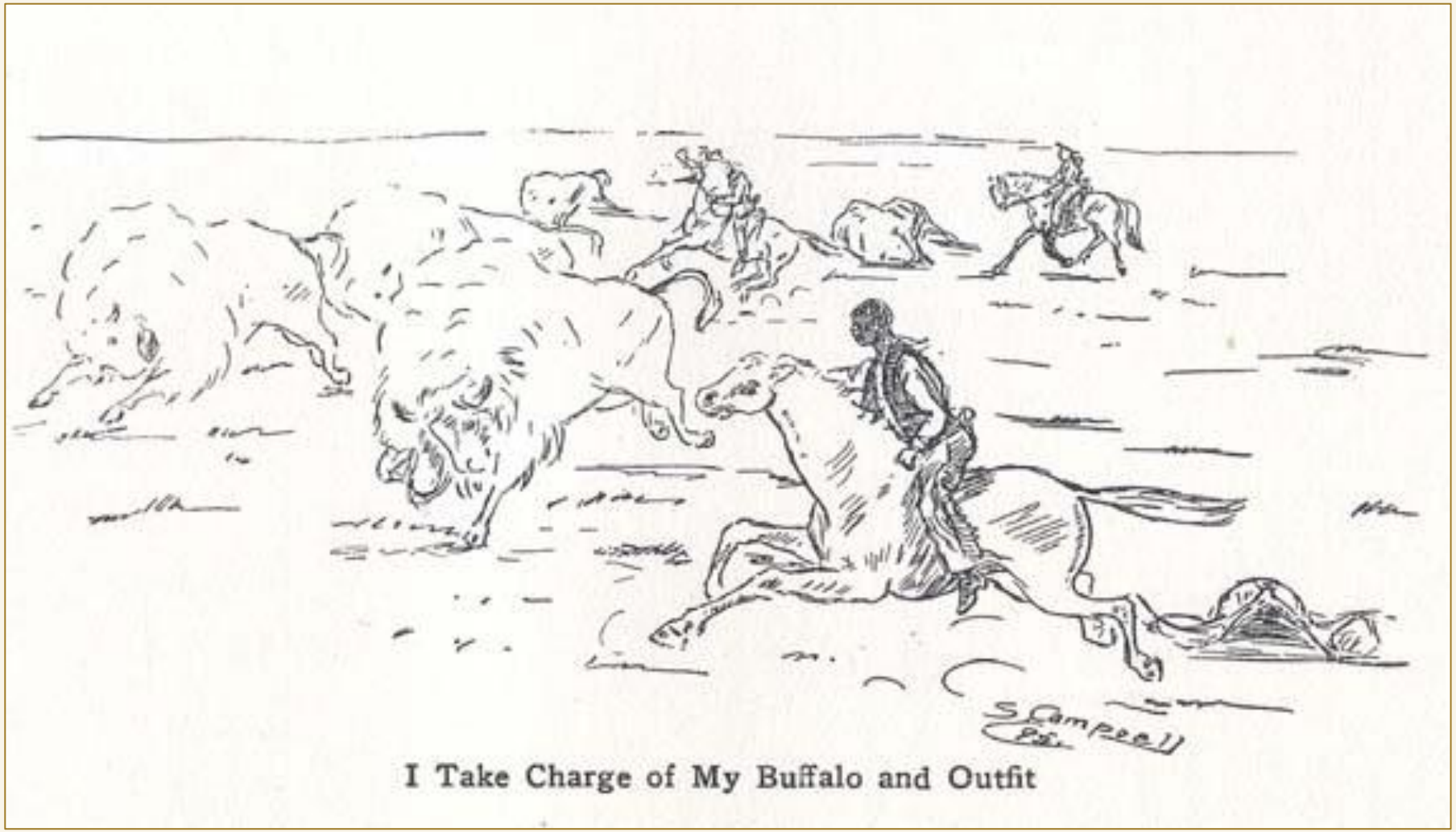


“They were always ready to share their blanket and their last ration with a less fortunate fellow companion and always assisted each other in the many trying situations that were continually coming up in a cowboy's life.”



Willie Kennard, cowboy and US Marshal, Courtesy Cincinnati Public Radio

They worked as ropers, trail cooks, wranglers and bronco busters. Some hunted game or performed other duties.



I Take Charge of My Buffalo and Outfit

The Life and Adventures of Nat Love, 1907



I Rope, Throw, Saddle, Bridle and Mount My Mustang in Nine Minutes

The Life and Adventures of Nat Love, 1907

A number of cowboys found a sense of freedom in the West, eventually retiring from the job and purchasing property on the frontier.



Courtesy Oregon Historical Society

The Myth and Legacy of the Cowboy



Frederic Remington
Off the Range (Coming Through the Rye), model 1902, cast 1903

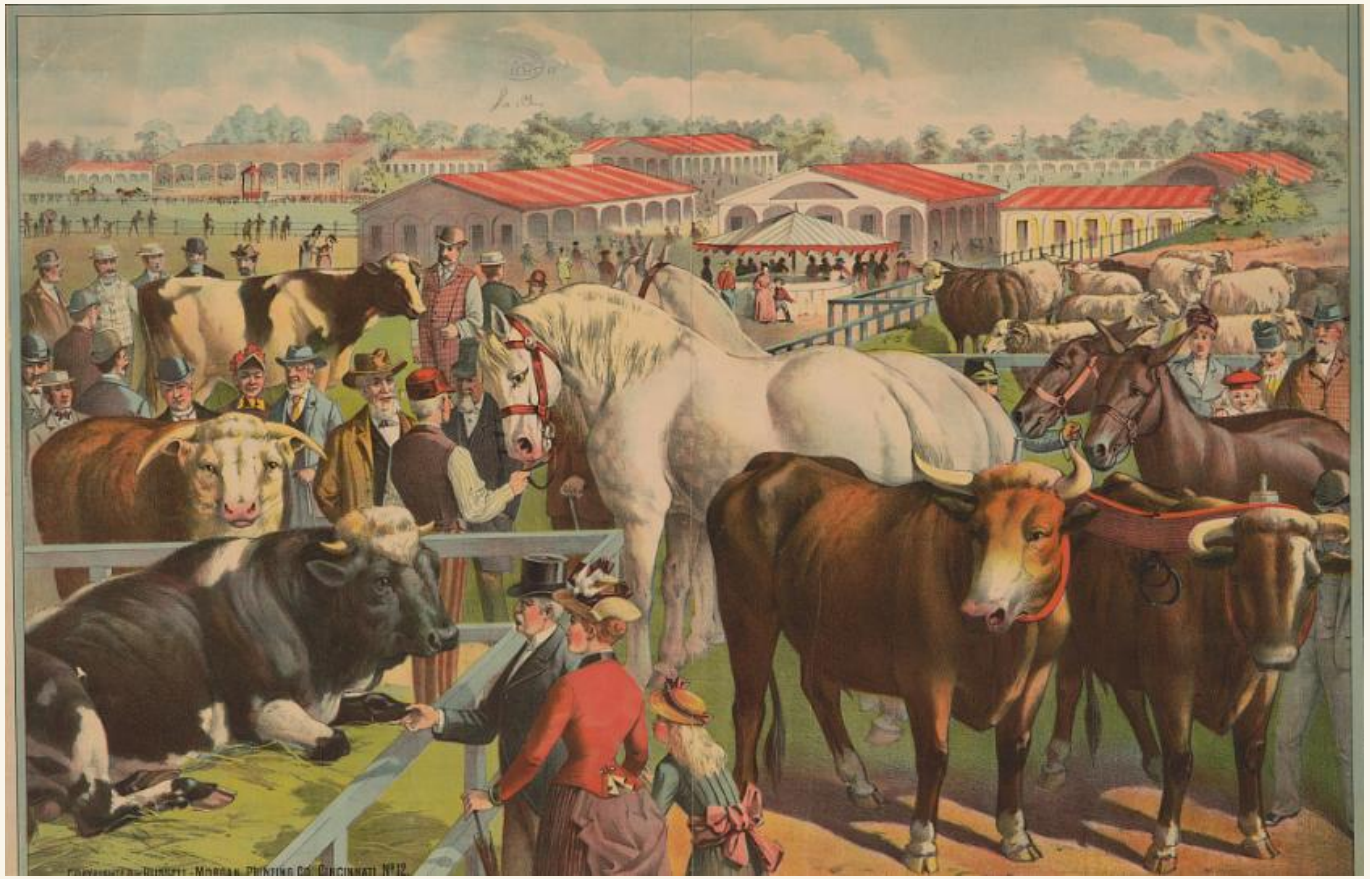
The mythical figure

The myth of the cowboy
is only one of many that have shaped
our view of the West in the late
19th century.



Bill Pickett, Dickinson Research Center,
National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum

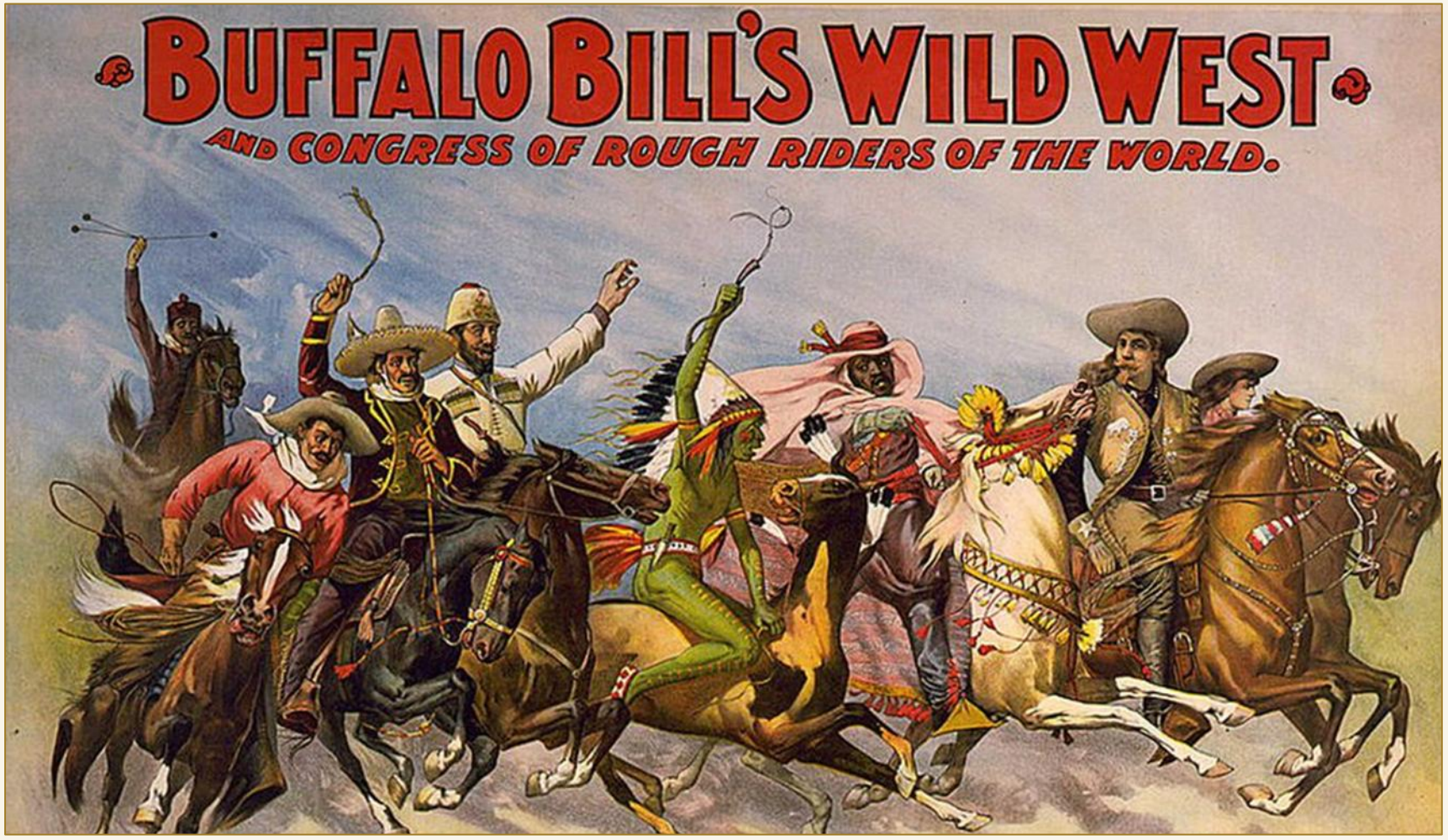
Popular Lore



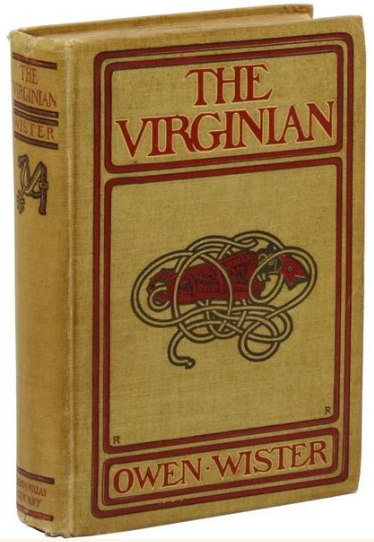
Cincinnati : [publisher not transcribed], 1891; Library of Congress

Though opportunities to become a working cowboy were on the decline, the public's fascination with the cowboy lifestyle prevailed.

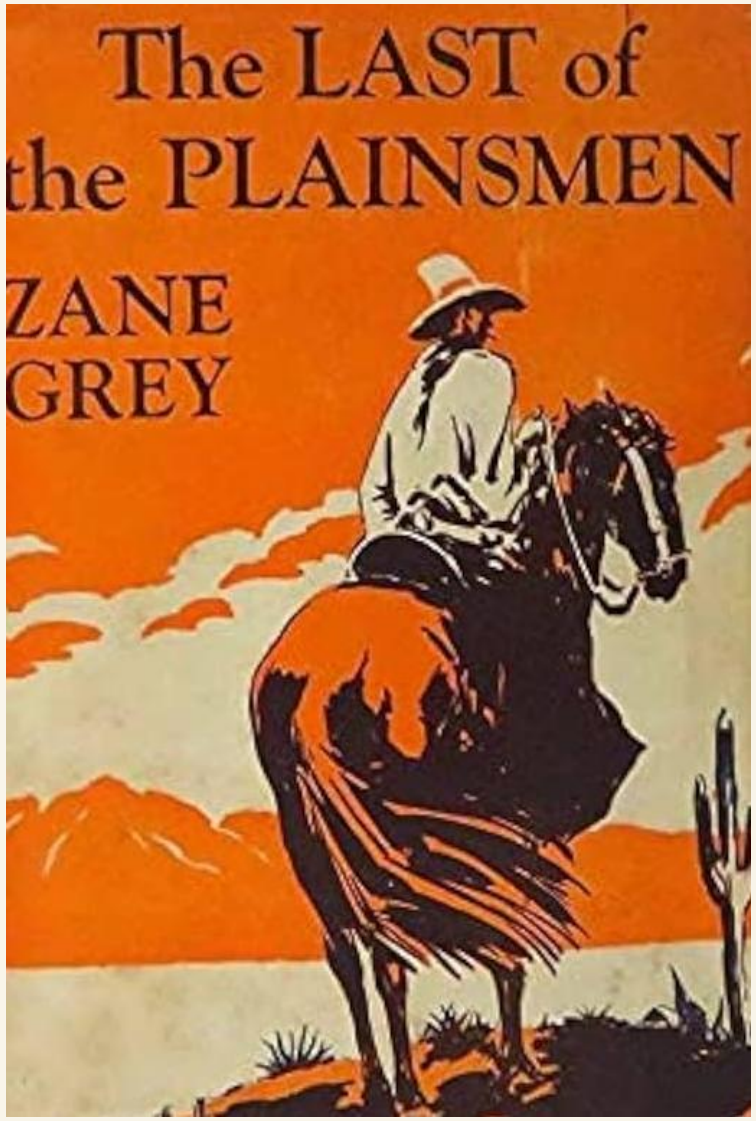
In the hugely popular Wild West shows of Buffalo Bill in the late 19th century…

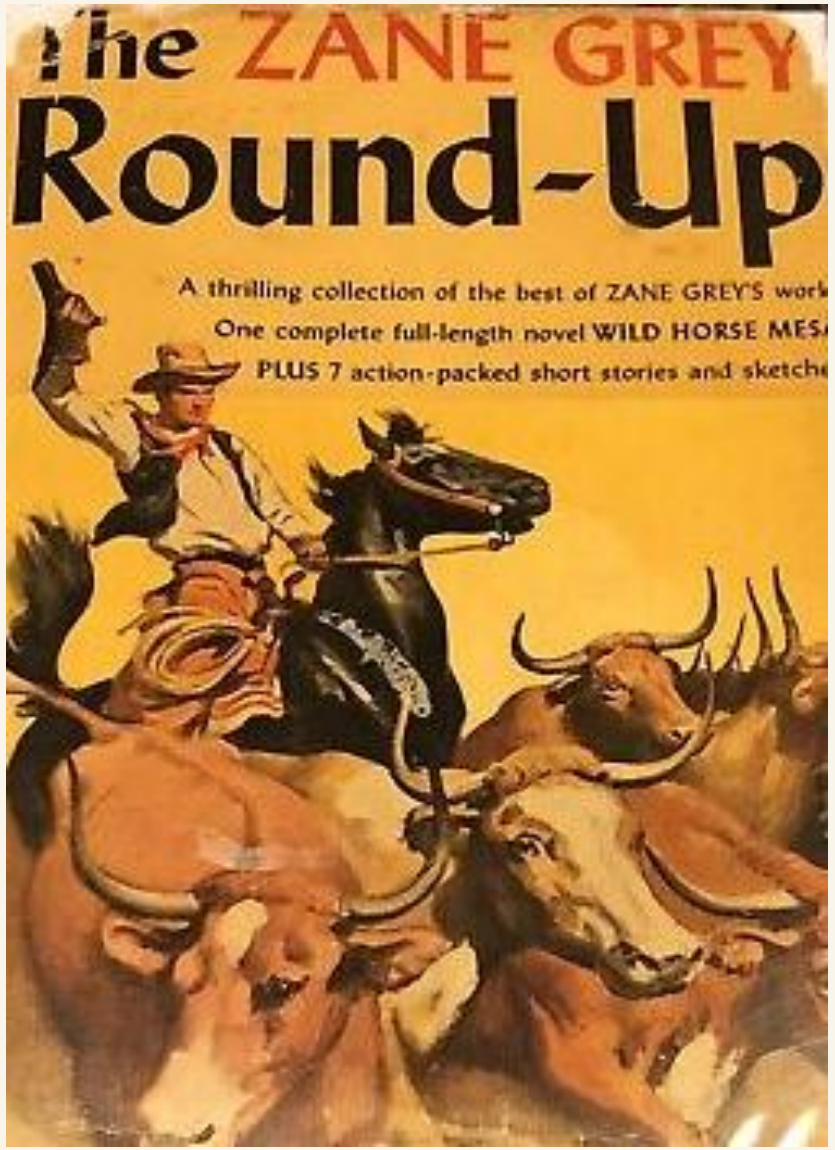


Buffalo, New York: Courier Litho. Co., c.1899; Library of Congress



...the cowboy novels such as *The Virginian*, by Owen Wister, and series by Zane Grey in the early 20th century,





…then the Western films and television shows in the midcentury,







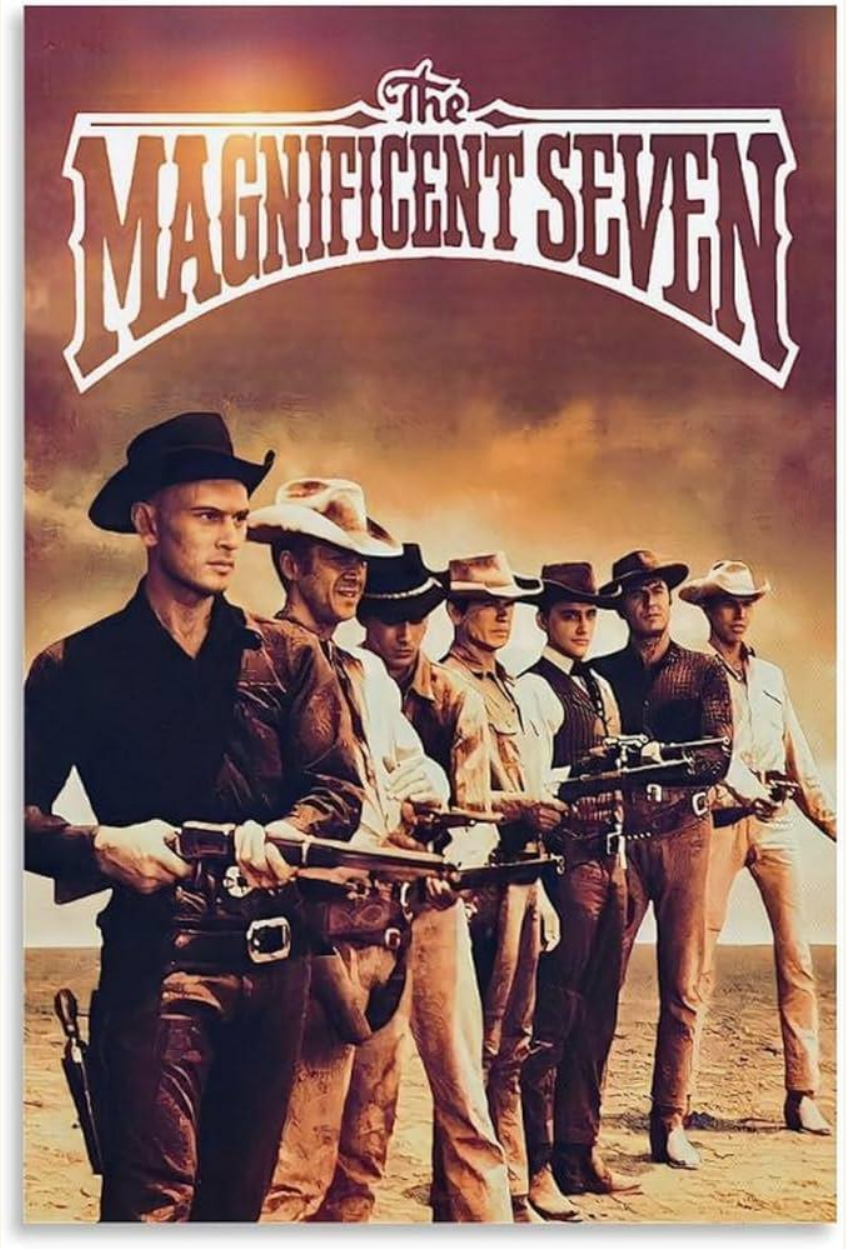
The Legend

…the romantic legend of the cowboy was born.

A quiet man, capable, tough, honest, respectful of the fairer sex, and possessing a poetic respect for the land (and his horse).



But mostly, as time passed, pop culture influenced our perspective of cowboys, creating a misleading image of men on horseback, riding the lonely grasslands.





Resilience of the Cowboy



Courtesy Oakland Black Cowboy Association

Origins in Rodeo

Cowboys competed with each other as a natural part of ranch gatherings. Soon small fairs across the nation showcased their riding and ranching skills.

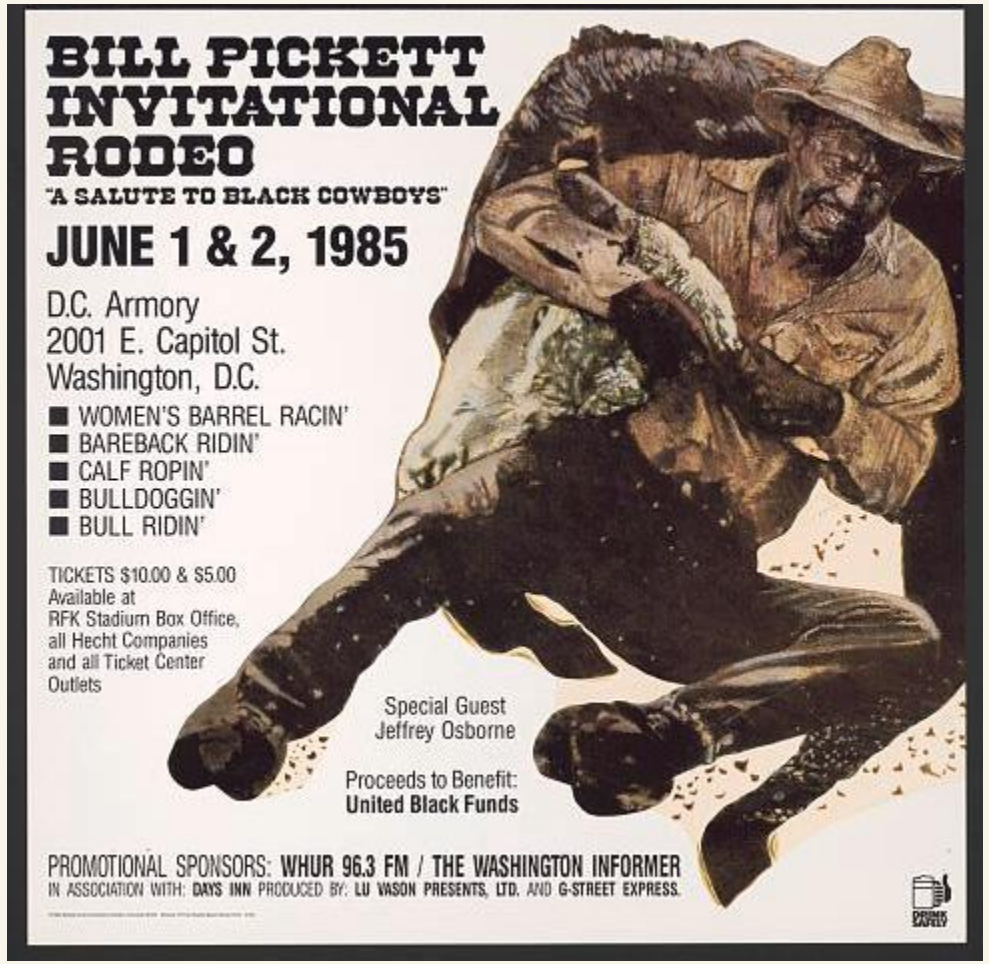


Courtesy Oregon Historical Society

national rodeos today



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Home on the Range

The cowboy's heritage in American culture is even reflected each time we hear "Home on the Range" – an anthem of the West.

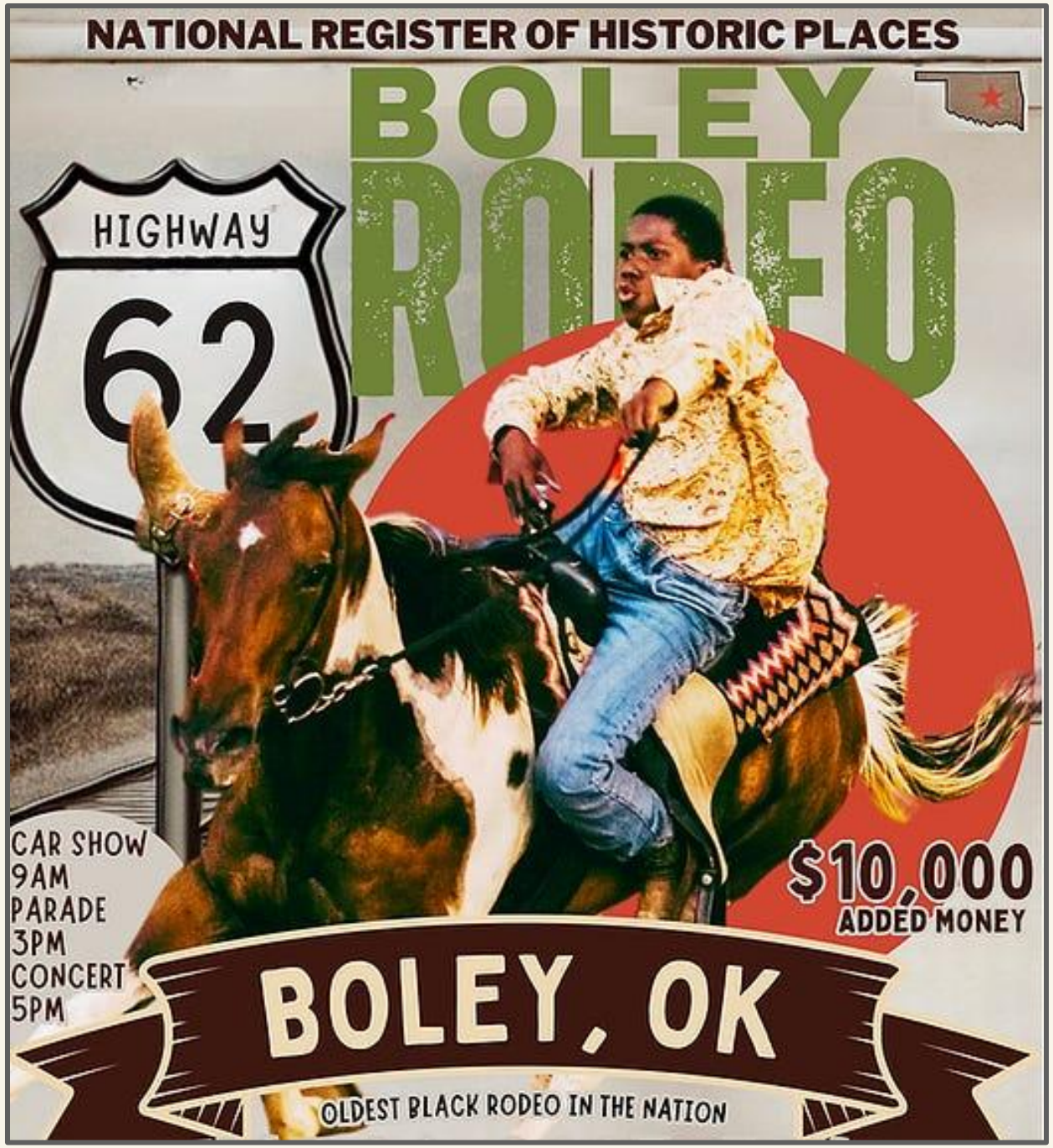
Historians realize its roots as being first performed by a former African American cowboy in San Antonio.



Courtesy of the Library of Congress



Clearly,
the American
cowboy
did not disappear
with the
Old West...



Published by the
town of Boley, OK

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Courtesy Chisholm Trail Heritage Museum

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Sources and Acknowledgements

National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum
Library of Congress
National Archives and Records Administration
National Parks Service
Oklahoma Historical Society
Smithsonian Institution
Witte Museum
Texas State Historical Association
Chisholm Trail Heritage Museum
Oregon Historical Society
Oakland Black Cowboy Association
Cincinnati Public Radio
Colorado Historical Association