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A Peculiar Set of Men: Nebraska Cowboys of the Open Range

By James E. Potter

A new exhibit, Nebraska Cowboys: Lives, Legends, and Legacies, will be at the Nebraska History Museum in Lincoln from September 23, 2013, to January 5, 2015.

The old-time cowboy of the nineteenth-century American West is represented today by the handful of men who work as ranch hands in cattle country and by those who straddle the broncos and rope the calves in Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) competitions and in scores of lesser rodeos. Many other examples illustrate the persistence of the cowboy as a cultural symbol. In *The Cowboy: Reconstructing an American Myth*, William Savage termed him "the predominant figure in American mythology" but added, "Historically, the cowboy was an individual of little or no significance."¹

Unfortunately, as Richard Slatta notes in his 1990 book, *Cowboys of the Americas*, "The real old-time cowboy is only dimly visible in the new sanitized, politicized, symbolic cowboy."² Slatta's conclusion applies as well to Nebraska's "real old-time" cowboys. While the work they did and the lives they led are generally understood, most of these hard-working, underpaid, transient laborers on horseback remain anonymous. A few, however, can be glimpsed more fully in the historical record via recollections, documents, photographs, or personal possessions they left behind. Such is most often the case for those who made headlines for murder and other crimes and for the comparative handful that made the transition from cowboy to ranch owner, law officer, or politician after their range-riding days were over.

As an American icon, the cowboy has few peers. The iconic cowboy began to emerge while the real one was still riding the open range. Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West show premiered in Omaha in 1883 and soon took the romanticized American cowboy abroad. "Dime novels" featuring cowboy derring-do were common nineteenth-century fare. Owen Wister's novel, *The Virginian* (1902), solidified the cowboy hero archetype. *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) initiated a stream of Hollywood films and TV series that helped create and then diffuse the mythological cowboy worldwide.

The occasional cowboy Western still graces the big screen, and who can forget the cowboys who rode the television ranges of *Rawhide*, *The Big Valley*, *Gunsmoke*, and *Bonanza*. Larry McMurtry's 1985 novel, *Lonesome Dove*, became a best seller and was made into a TV miniseries. Cowboy

poetry get-togethers are frequently held, and magazines such as *Cowboys & Indians* and *American Cowboy* find an eager readership. Authors who write about the West, both fiction and nonfiction, affiliate in the Western Writers of America, an organization whose bimonthly magazine is *Roundup*. Cowboy imagery often appears in music and advertising.

Brothers Charles F. and Samuel B. Coffee, both from Texas, were among the first to establish a ranch in Sioux County, where their descendants still ranch today. Several cowboys recorded in the 1885 Nebraska census of the Hat Creek basin worked for the Coffees. NSHS RG2555-3-18

One reason so little is known about most of the men who trailed the longhorns north from Texas or worked Nebraska's open ranges in the nineteenth century is that the period in which they flourished was so brief. Again quoting Slatta, "Extensive open-range ranching came and went in the American West in the space of a single lifetime."³ Although the term "cow boy" can be traced back to AD 1000, its early usage meant literally a youth who tended cows. In North America, "cow-boy" in its modern usage was first a nickname for cattle thieves roaming the Texas-Mexico border during the 1830s.⁴ In its more honorable context, meaning a salaried laborer working cattle from horseback, the day of the American (and Nebraska) cowboy lasted only from the end of the Civil War to about 1900. Subsequently, hired laborers on ranches, often still called cowboys, began to do much of their work as pedestrians while building fences, putting up hay, and repairing windmills. As former cowboy James H. Cook put it in 1923, "A forty-five caliber hammer, a sack of fence-staples, and a wire cutter, splicer, and staple-puller combined are all the tools needed by the modern cowboy."⁵ Saddle horses began to give way to pickup trucks, tractors, or all-terrain vehicles. No longer was the cowboy exclusively an equestrian.

Although a few Texas cattle were driven to Nebraska Territory before the Civil War, such as a herd of 750 from Fort Worth that crossed the Missouri River at Nebraska City in July 1860, the war's outbreak in 1861 foreclosed cattle from Confederate Texas reaching northern markets.⁶ Once the war was over a surplus of cattle in Texas, combined with a growing, increasingly industrialized nation, provided both the supply and the demand for beef. If cattle were driven from their southern ranges to the railroads pushing westward across Kansas and Nebraska, they could be transported quickly to eastern slaughterhouses and packing plants.

Moreover, post-Civil War negotiations with the Plains tribes, such as the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 establishing the Great Sioux Reservation, provided for the government to feed the Indians (including a pound of meat daily for each Indian over age four) while they learned to practice agriculture. By the mid-1870s, with most Plains tribes on reservations and the bison being hunted nearly to extinction for their hides, thousands of acres of Great Plains grasslands became available to raise cattle, both for market and to supply the reservations and the army posts that surrounded them.

The Rise and Fall of Nebraska Open-Range Ranching

The vast herds of bison had already demonstrated that the Plains grasses could sustain large ruminants year round. Proprietors of trailside emporiums of the 1850s and 1860s known as "road ranches" successfully wintered oxen and other domestic cattle, albeit sometimes putting up hay to supplement grazing. "Squire" Lamb, who operated such an establishment on the Platte Valley trail

near present Alda, Nebraska, wrote his brother in January 1865 that cattle did well on the winter-cured buffalo grass: "They graze as in the summer."⁷

M. H. Brown is said to have brought the first Texas cattle to the Platte Valley near North Platte, some eight hundred head, in the fall of 1868. A year later he drove a herd of seventeen hundred to Nebraska, which he sold to local entrepreneurs Keith and Barton. In 1869 John Bratt, in partnership with Isaac Coe and Levi Carter, bought 2,500 head of Texas cattle and in 1870 established his home ranch southeast of the town of North Platte. By February 1870 the town's newspaper, the *Platte Valley Independent*, reported nearly seven thousand cattle and sheep were being "herded on the plains, without shelter excepting that which nature affords" in the region between Plum Creek (present Lexington) and Sidney.⁸

John Bratt's autobiography, *Trails of Yesterday* (1921), provides many details about the lives of cowboys who worked Nebraska's open range in the nineteenth century. NSHS RG2411-571d

Until the middle 1870s, most ranches were located in the region extending from the Platte Valley south to the Republican River and from Fort McPherson on the east to the Colorado line. A few were also being established along the Loup drainages on the eastern margin of the Sand Hills. North of the Platte, ranching remained undeveloped because the Western Sioux (Lakotas) retained the right to hunt there under the terms of the 1868 treaty.

The era of big cattle drives from Texas to northern railheads had begun in 1867 with Abilene on the Kansas Pacific as the destination. Trailing Texas cattle to Nebraska began in earnest in 1870 with the town of Schuyler the first beneficiary of this traffic. Complaints about high rates and slow service had prompted Texas cattlemen represented by Dillard R. Fant to seek a shipping point on the Union Pacific. In the summer of 1870, at least thirty thousand cattle were driven to Schuyler. As the *Omaha Republican* noted, "It has been a good thing for the railroad, a good thing for the Platte Valley, a good thing for Schuyler, a good thing for Omaha, and a good thing for the whole State." The number of cattle coming to Schuyler "surprised everybody" and "promises well for the future." However, the promising future envisioned for Nebraska as a cattle-driving destination would not include Schuyler.⁹

While Texas cattle would continue to be trailed to southeastern Nebraska for a few more years, many passing through to northern Indian reservations, locales farther west would soon absorb the vast herds. Farmers were rapidly occupying the eastern Nebraska prairies and would not tolerate semi-wild longhorns trampling their crops. The legislature in 1871 had passed a herd law making livestock owners liable for damages. Although voters could suspend the law's enforcement on a county-by-county basis, residents of farming regions were not inclined to do so, forcing the cattle drives west to unsettled regions.¹⁰

Some of the last big drives of Texas cattle to eastern Nebraska may have been the herds mentioned by the *Beatrice Weekly Express* in late summer of 1873 as being grazed nearby. They included 2,700 head owned by W. T. Burnham of Austin, Texas, 2,300 or more owned by a Mr. Camfield that arrived in July, and two more herds totaling 3,300 head that arrived in September. Most of these cattle were sold to Nebraska purchasers. The drives prompted the newspaper to state that "Beatrice is getting to be known as a cattle shipping point, and it requires a few more good sales to permanently establish

its reputation."¹¹ Like Schuyler, however, Beatrice as a cattle emporium was destined for disappointment.

The region around Kearney and the nearby hamlet of Lowell south of the Platte River had already become the main Nebraska destinations for Texas cattle, spurred on by the Burlington & Missouri River Railroad's connection with the Union Pacific at Kearney in 1872. For the next few years Kearney would be the primary Nebraska railhead for the longhorns.¹²

"Dime Novels" romanticized cowboy life in ways often at odds with the hard, dangerous reality. NSHS RG1345AM-11

Inevitably the farming frontier surged into the central Platte Valley, although the former Fort Kearny military reservation south of the Platte was still available as a cattle holding ground. Public reaction to a fall 1874 gun battle between Texas herders and citizens signaled the end of Kearney's short reign as an important cow town, although a few more herds and cowboys came the following year. As settlement pushed the drives farther west, new railheads were needed. North Platte gained considerable business fulfilling this role, but it was Ogallala that became synonymous with Nebraska's trail-driving history after the Union Pacific built stockyards there in 1874 and a town site was platted in 1875. The so-called town, whose population soared during the summer with an influx of cattlemen and cowboys, served both as a shipping point to eastern markets and as a distribution center for cattle destined for the Indian agencies lying to the northwest and the open-range ranches rapidly springing up north of the Platte rivers.¹³

John Bratt was apparently the first private ranchman to move significant numbers of cattle north of the Platte after a prairie fire burned the grasslands to the south in fall 1874. Brothers James W. and George H. Bosler, who had the government beef contract for the Red Cloud and Spotted Tail agencies, kept a large herd grazing north of the Platte in the region between present Bridgeport and Lewellen. Every week or so Bosler cowboys drove from five hundred to a thousand head north for issue to the Indians. This beginning, and the 1875 extinguishment of Indian hunting rights in the region, prompted more cattlemen to move in. By the early 1880s scores of ranches dotted not only the valleys of the North and South Platte, the Loups, the Dismal, the Niobrara, the Republican and their tributaries, but also the Sand Hills interior previously shunned by cattlemen as a wasteland. In spring 1879 cowboys seeking the fate of cattle scattered by winter storms found hundreds thriving on the Sand Hills grasses.¹⁴

The range where the vast herds roamed was unfenced government land, upon which no taxes were levied. Water and grass were plentiful, and only crude structures of log or sod were needed for ranch headquarters. The profits to be made from open-range ranching far exceeded the expense of buying the cattle and paying the minimal wages of the laborers who minded them. Prominent Nebraskans such as William F. Cody, Frank North, the Creightons and Kountzes of Omaha, along with financiers from the East and abroad, soon invested in Nebraska ranching. Over time, the smaller ranches sold out to giant corporations such as the Ogallala Land and Cattle Company and the Bay State Livestock Company.

Inevitably the government land was surveyed, homesteaders pressed into cattle country, and the herd law was invoked where cattle had previously been free to roam. Meanwhile, the ranges had become overstocked, the presumably benign western Nebraska climate produced a series of harsh winters that decimated the herds, and quarantines were issued against the importation of longhorns carrying splenic or "Texas fever." The tick-borne disease did not infect the longhorns but it was deadly to other breeds that were increasingly stocking the Nebraska ranges. By fall 1884 even residents of Ogallala recognized that the end of the great trail drives was imminent when a local correspondent noted, "Texas fever has almost spoiled Ogallala for a cattle market and it is a good thing for the town. They [cattle drives] have been here for years and the town never grew one bit. We have found that it takes grangers to make a town."¹⁵ The large cattle companies began moving their herds to Wyoming or Montana. With the end of the open range, the Nebraska cowboy's work and way of life also began to change.

Several cowboys recorded in the 1885 Nebraska census of the Hat Creek basin worked for the Coffees. This detail from the census page has been cropped to show the men's names, ages, occupation, and state (or country) of origin.

Nebraska Cowboys on the Open Range

Cattle drives from Texas to Great Plains railheads after the Civil War brought cowboys to Nebraska. As long as most of the cattle were shipped to market or delivered to Indian reservations instead of being put on the range, there was not much work to keep the cowboys in the state and many returned to Texas. As the 1875 drives to Ogallala drew to a close (the first year the town was a major cattle destination) an observer summed it up:

Thirty thousand head of cattle have just been delivered to the Indian agencies north of here, and the herders returned yesterday on their way back to Texas. They are having a jolly time ere they start across the country pony-back a distance of eight hundred miles. Like discharged soldiers they are free and generous with their money after being paid off and discharged. Many of them spend every dollar of their hard earned money before leaving the fitting out point on the return trip. They are provident enough, however, to have laid in their supplies before going on a "stampede" as they call it. A majority of the herders here are young men, having made perhaps, but one or two trips across the country.¹⁶

Even if they had not been born in the Lone Star State, the trail hands' arrival with the longhorns made them all seem Texans. The Sidney Telegraph noted as much in August 1879: "A large number of the cowboys in this section are from Texas. In a recent conversation with one of them, we remarked how natural it was for a Texas boy to talk about stock, etc. 'Yes,' he replied, 'we are brought up with it, commencing from boyhood, grow with it, and in many instances know nothing else but cattle and ponies.'"¹⁷

The 1880 federal and 1885 state population census for selected locales in Nebraska range country provide a glimpse of Nebraska cowboys' ages and origins, though it is likely that many more were not enumerated. The census was taken in June, when most of the men would have been scattered across the ranges working the annual roundup. Through about 1880, both the census and

newspapers of the time tended to call these equestrian laborers "herders" rather than cowboys. Several "herders" enumerated in the 1880 census of Sheidley's Ranch in Keith County and the Hunter and Evans Ranch on the Niobrara River in present Sheridan County had been born in Texas or other states of the former Confederacy, but many were natives of Iowa, Kansas, Ohio, Illinois, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and several foreign countries including Canada, England, and Germany.¹⁸

James H. Cook. NSHS RG3484-1

Cowboy James Kelly lived and worked in the Broken Bow-Ansley area of Custer County from about 1878 until his death on February 7, 1912. Courtesy of the Dawes County Historical Society, Chadron

The 1885 state census of the Hat Creek Basin (the northern portion of modern Sioux County) enumerated seventy-six cowboys working on the seven ranches listed in the agricultural schedule. Collectively the ranches had slightly more than forty-three thousand cattle on hand June 1. The Sioux County cowboys, like their 1880 counterparts, had been born all across the United States and in several foreign countries, including Norway, France, and Mexico. Nine cowboys had been born in Iowa (11 percent of the sample), followed by seven Texas-born men (slightly more than 9 percent). Natives of Illinois (7.9 percent), Missouri (6.6 percent), Mexico (6.6 percent), and New York (5.2 percent) were next in line. No other state or country furnished more than three cowboys.¹⁹

Regardless of their nativity, many Nebraska cowboys got their start in Texas. James H. Cook was born in Michigan and went to Kansas, where a cattleman told him "the best way to see the West was to get work with some cow outfit and go to Texas." After working on several cattle drives from Texas to Kansas, Cook hired on with an 1876 drive to a Dakota Territory Indian reservation and subsequently ended up in Nebraska as a Hunter and Evans cowboy before buying the 04 Ranch at Agate Springs in 1887. Edward C. ("Teddy Blue") Abbott, whose recollection *We Pointed them North* is a classic, was born in England and grew up near Lincoln, Nebraska, before running away from home to become a cowboy. In Texas Abbott signed on with Isom P. ("Print") Olive and returned to Nebraska in 1879 with a herd destined for the Olive ranch on the Loup. "It was easy to get a job," said Abbott. "The cow outfits were looking for men and every town you went into in Texas they'd tackle you to go north with a herd." Abbott, however, soon left Nebraska and spent the rest of his cowboy days in Montana.²⁰

Some Nebraska cowboys were black. Notable examples were Amos Harris, born a slave in Galveston, and James Kelly, birthplace unknown, the latter said to have come to Nebraska with Olive herds from Texas. Harris and Kelly remained in Nebraska for the rest of their lives, often working as cowboys.²¹ In early February 1888 an intoxicated black man named Shelton Reddon died in the Ogallala jail. A local resident recalled that "'Nigger Redd,' as he was known, came over the trail from Texas in 1875 in the capacity of cook and some time later was employed by Seth Mabry as cook on a ranch, for whom he worked for eleven years. Discontinuing there he was employed by R. E. Bean at the Keystone ranch, where he worked for the past year, dishing up savory viands for the men who follow the festive cattle of the North River country." While black cowboys were usually sprinkled here and there among their mostly Anglo counterparts, the Sidney newspaper mentioned the 1885 passage of a herd for the Bay State range "that was in charge of an outfit of colored cowboys, boss

and all."²² Richard Slatta estimated that about five thousand black cowboys helped trail herds north from Texas between 1866 and 1895.²³

Given the Vaquero origins of the American cowboy's trade, it is not surprising that many were of Hispanic ancestry. The Olives employed Mexicans, including one Pedro Dominicus who was on the payroll at the time of the 1878 killing of homesteaders Mitchell and Ketchum by Olive cowboys in Custer County. Another man, "Mexican Leon," was reported by Abbott as having been murdered by Print Olive's brother Ira on the Republican River about 1878. Abbott also recalled that although white Southerners such as the Olives were strongly prejudiced against blacks and Mexicans, "they hired them because they worked cheaper than white men."²⁴ John Bratt remembered that in 1870, "Our employees, some twenty or thirty, were mostly Texans or Mexicans."²⁵ Five cowboys listed in the 1885 census of Sioux County were natives of Mexico and another had been born in New Mexico.

Most of the cowboys listed in the 1880 census were in their twenties, although several were teenagers. The same youthfulness was typical of the Sioux County cowboys in 1885, with men in their twenties making up nearly 66 percent of the sample. Slightly more than 9 percent were teenagers, while nearly 20 percent were in their thirties. Only four men older than thirty were listed as cowboys. Older men often worked as foremen or cooks, but John Graham of the Hunter Ranch, age thirty-eight in 1880, was still listed as a "herder."²⁶ Fourteen of the 1885 cowboys were recorded as being married though their wives were not with them. The youth of the cowboys in the census conforms to recollections by several Nebraskans. Nels Rowley, who settled in Cherry County, said he was seventeen when he got his first job in 1879 on a ranch near North Platte. Edward C. Abbott was eighteen when he made his first trail drive in 1879. James H. Cook was in his teens when he drove cattle from Texas in the mid-1870s. Bartlett Richards, later to become one of Nebraska's most prominent cattlemen, was not yet seventeen when he left Massachusetts in 1879 to work as a cowboy on a Wyoming ranch.²⁷

Cowboy Life and Work

Whether trailing a herd of longhorns from Texas to Ogallala or making the spring and fall roundups from the Nebraska ranges, the cowboy worked on horseback. The drives began in Texas in February or March, with the goal of getting the cattle to the Platte Valley by September 1 at the latest. "We try to get them up here earlier, by July 1-10," reported Seth Mabry in 1875. According to fellow Texas cattlemen Eugene B. Millett and Dillard R. Fant, "When this cattle-driving business first began, 500 was thought to constitute an immense herd, but now 2,500 to 4,000 are brought up at a time."²⁸

Managing herds of this size on the trail required fewer cowboys than one might expect. Millett and Fant said about eleven men—one the trail boss and the other the cook—were needed for a herd of 2,500. James H. Cook helped drive a similar-sized herd from Texas to Dakota Territory in 1876: "There were ten of us, including our trail boss, Mr. Mack Stewart, and the cook." James C. Dahlman, who came north with Texas cattle in 1878 and remained in Nebraska after his cowboy days were over, said eleven men could handle a herd of two to three thousand. One of these men was usually the horse wrangler, who took care of the cowboys' horses. The herd's owner furnished from four to ten mounts for each man so fresh horses would be available as needed. W. C. B. Allen, an Omaha Weekly Republican correspondent, visited a longhorn drive on the Republican River in July 1876 and

reported that the horses used by the cowboys became their personal property at journey's end. Whether this was commonly the case is undetermined.²⁹

Once numerous Nebraska ranches had been established by the mid- to late 1870s, cowboys could find employment here if they did not want to stick to driving herds from Texas. Like the trail hands, the open-range cowboy's busy season was in the spring and summer, when the main roundup took place and calves were branded. Sometimes a smaller fall roundup was held to cull marketable animals from the range for shipping. In his March 1878 address as president of the Lincoln County Stock Grower's Association, John Bratt estimated that there were some two hundred thousand head of cattle in Nebraska west of the 100th meridian, "giving employment to six hundred men."³⁰

The first systematic roundups began in Nebraska in 1875, the same year that the Western Stock District (Lincoln, Keith, and Cheyenne counties and adjacent unorganized territory) was created by the legislature and the Stock Growers' Association of Western Nebraska was organized. These developments were at the behest of the cattlemen "for the better regulation of handling stock, and our mutual protection in stock-raising." Roundups and shipment of cattle were limited to the period from May 15 to November 15, brand inspection was initiated, and rules were adopted for the roundups. The latter included designating various roundup districts, how roundup foremen were to be selected, and the number of cowboys each cattleman was required to furnish based on the number of cattle he owned. By the 1880s the spring roundup had become an interstate affair, coordinated by the powerful Wyoming Stock Growers Association, which counted many Nebraska cattlemen among its members. In 1884 the association designated thirty-one roundup districts, eight of which were entirely or partially in Nebraska.³¹

The young Bartlett Richards (seated, center) and several cowboy companions were photographed in Wyoming about 1882. NSHS RG2455-52

Although the roundup season was shorter than the trail season, the work was more complicated than simply moving cattle from place to place. As related by Dan Adamson, each roundup district might cover a large territory over which the herds of from five to ten "cow outfits" ranged. Each district appointed a foreman, and each outfit therein provided cowboys, horse wranglers, a cook, and a mess or chuck wagon. As with trail drives, each cowboy furnished his own bedding and equipment but the herd owner supplied the saddle horses, usually eight to ten per man. "Reps" from outfits outside the district came along to insure that cattle belonging to the owner for whom they worked were identified.

Adamson described the customary method of working a roundup district:

[E]ach morning all riders not with herds would meet at the roundup foreman's wagon, wagon bosses having instructions the day before to move their camps to some roundup grounds in the direction the roundup was working, usually twelve to fifteen miles distance. The roundup foreman would then send crews of men in charge of one of their number to ride over all the country between there and the new camp, reaching out on the sides twenty or more miles according to the nature of the country. The roundup foreman rode straight to the new camp and roundup ground . . . picked with the object to have good ground to hold and water herds. A large roundup outfit would be strung along a river or creek for two or three miles and even more.

Then the roundup foreman held up the different drives as they came in, being careful not to get too many cattle in one bunch, as it is difficult to cut them clean from the different brands. There were usually from seven to twelve hundred in a bunch, and there might be from two or three to five or six of these bunches on the roundup ground. Fresh horses were now caught up, and the work of cutting out the cows and calves in pairs was always done first, the roundup foreman instructing the different outfits what bunches to cut from. . . . Then the same routine was carried out in cutting out the dry cattle; the cattle still remaining being the ones belonging to that particular range were then thrown back on the country they were rounded up on, giving them quite a start so as not to catch them on the next day's drive. The different stray bunches were then thrown into their respective herds to be carried along with the roundup. All hands then went to dinner, fresh horses were then caught up, herders relieved, and the work of branding up the calves was started. Sometimes as many as four or five hundred calves were branded in an afternoon by one outfit; when the branding was finished up for the day, the cows and calves were turned loose on the range.³²

A June 1876 article by an individual the newspaper described as "one of the finest riders on the round-up" appeared in the North Platte Western Nebraskan. The correspondent wrote of the skills employed by the cowboys and their horses: "No horsemanship can excel that which is displayed by an experienced cow-boy. As they dash over the rough prairie at the top of their mustang's speed, [dodging] great numbers of holes, the work of prairie dogs and our family of sub-soilers, the utter disregard of their peril is something as courageous as it is rash. . . . No matter what distance the cutting horse has traveled, how fatigued it may be, the moment you ride it into the herd every muscle, every faculty, is on the alert and the intelligence they display is almost human."³³

While many cowboys were no doubt highly skilled in the techniques of their trade, contemporary accounts suggest that one did not need to be a superlative horseman, roper, or crack shot to do the job. Bay State foreman James Shaw in 1884 said, "Any man who is not afraid of work and who can ride a horse and possesses good common sense can get along well enough. A man doesn't have to throw a lasso like a Mexican vaquero nor shoot a revolver like a ten cent-novel Texas ranger to be a good cowboy. But he must have good nerve, not be afraid of getting tired once in a while, and he must stick to his knitting, rain or shine." Charley O'Kieffe, who worked as a cowboy on Sheridan County ranches, offered a similar assessment: "Among the scores of cowpunchers that I knew personally between 1884 and 1898, none were crack shots, although they could all shoot straight enough when the need arose, such as for the purpose of chasing off some sneaky coyote or ending the sufferings of a horse who had broken his leg and could not be saved. . . . Most of these boys were good horsemen, handy with the rope for legitimate uses, and all capable of doing the daily tasks on the average ranch."³⁴

Sensational stories about misdeeds committed by a small minority of cowboys sometimes led the public to stereotype all cowboys as wild, immoral, and prone to violence. Most readers had never encountered them doing the difficult and often dangerous work with cattle that occupied most of their time. Omaha Daily Bee, October 19, 1874

Sidney Plaindealer-Telegraph, April 4, 1883.

While the employers generally furnished the horses, the cowboy provided his own saddle, bridle, lariat, firearms, and clothing. Rolf Johnson saw cowboys in Sidney in 1879 and described their outfits: "The usual equipment of [a] herder or cowboy is a white, broad brimmed hat, a blue woolen shirt with wide collar and silk neck tie, leather leggings or buckskin breeches fringed at the seams, fine tight boots, an old army overcoat, a belt around his waist full of cartridges, one or two Colt's sixshooters, a bowie-knife, a Winchester rifle, a pair of big spurs, and last though most important, a small Indian pony with a big saddle." During his cowboy days in Wyoming Bartlett Richards wrote, "I wear a blue flannel shirt, blue trousers tucked in my tall boots, tremendous great spurs (everyone wears them), broad brimmed light felt hat, and leather chaperils which are like trousers." To carry small items, "I have a 'war-bag' i.e. a common flour sack, with one change of clothing in it, a towel, tooth and hair brush. The last was quite unnecessary and does not belong in a true 'cow-puncher's' outfit, or to tell the truth, any of the last three."³⁵

The cost of gear such as chaps, saddles, and revolvers no doubt varied over time and from place to place, but some contemporary data is available. In 1879 Richards paid \$10 for a pair of chaps and \$35 for a saddle. At that price the latter may have been a "California saddle" costing from \$30 to \$35, which was fancier than a "Texas saddle" priced from \$15 to \$24 according to an 1878 advertisement in the North Platte Western Nebraskan. Texas-rigged saddles featured double cinches instead of the "single fire" cinch of the California saddle. Even cheaper "common saddles" were advertised from \$5 to \$13.⁵⁰³⁶

A huge variety of firearms was available to the cowboys, including many Civil War percussion arms rendered obsolescent by the postwar availability of metallic cartridge types. Among the most popular of the latter were single and double action revolvers produced by Colt and Smith and Wesson, along with Winchester repeating rifles and carbines. Depending on the model, caliber, and finish requested, such revolvers ranged in price from \$13 to \$21 during the years from 1875 through the late 1880s. Model 1873 Winchester rifles and carbines cost from \$35 to \$40 during the mid 1870s, but increasing production brought the price down to about \$28 by 1880.³⁷

Most cowboys slept in the open, fully clothed, while on a drive or roundup, covered only by their saddle blanket or a tarpaulin. If it rained, they likely got wet. Sleep itself was at a premium because controlling the cattle day and night took precedence. A cowboy on an 1876 trail drive from Texas told a newspaper correspondent, "it is seventeen months since I have slept under shelter, or been inside of a house." Another hand working a Nebraska roundup the same year mentioned that he had not slept for three nights: "On enquiry his reply was last night, to-night, and to-morrow."³⁸

Cowboys on Thomas B. Hord's "77" ranch in Wyoming were photographed at their chuck wagon dinner during the 1880s. Hord soon built extensive feed yards near Central City, Nebraska, to fatten cattle from the Wyoming range. NSHS RG4232-5

The cowboys on trail drives or roundups were fed from a "mess" or chuck wagon and the cook worked longer hours than the other men. While there was no standard design, the North Platte Tribune described a locally manufactured chuck wagon for John Bratt's outfit that incorporated standard features as well as unique embellishments.

It was made by John Otterstadt of this city and has a box in the hind end the width of the wagon box, three and one-half feet high and eighteen inches deep, for light cooking utensils, with a door hinged at the bottom, which, when down serves as a table. A chest in the center of the wagon, divided longways, with top covers, is used as a receptacle for provisions. A stand on each side serves, one for the water barrel and the other for the stove. There is also a space at each end of the box holding the stove pipes and rope. The wagon is handsomely painted, there being on one side a steer, and on the other a horse, both bearing Mr. B's brands. Taken altogether it is a credit to its maker and will no doubt be the envy of the other outfits and especially the cooks.³⁹

As for food, Bratt recalled that "in the early round-up days we would depend much on wild game, shoulders and bacon, beans, syrup, sugar, coffee, soda bread or biscuits and sometimes honey." Later, canned goods were often available, along with baking powder biscuits. Absent wild game, the men could butcher a steer. Bartlett Richards in 1879 had fresh meat often along with potatoes, "canned tomatoes, oatmeal, rice, tea and coffee, sugar white and brown, always some kind of dried fruit—apples or peaches, prunes or blackberries, hominy, etc." One drawback was "everything is fried in grease." Ed Monroe did not fare as well on an 1883 roundup in the Sand Hills, complaining about "yellow soda bread strong bacon muddy coffee burnt beans."⁴⁰

During the spring and summer, cowboys rarely had time for recreation. Mac Radcliffe mentioned that during a roundup he and another cowboy staged an impromptu chuck wagon race that had not been sanctioned by the cooks, losing much of the cooking equipment in the process. John Bratt said cowboys on the range engaged in storytelling around the campfire and the occasional practical joke. The roundup Nels Rowley was working in 1881 laid over for two days so the men could rest before moving to another district: "We had a roping contest, riding, and horse races and a general good time." Early ranches were a long way from town, reading material was scarce, and cowboys had to make their own fun in their limited spare time. Employed on a Sheridan County ranch in the 1890s, Charley O'Kieffe recalled card playing and a variant of Indian wrestling called "stick-pulling." Otherwise, "there was really nothing much but broncho riding and playing practical jokes on the tenderfeet who showed up to join the work force . . . during the haying season."⁴¹

"Billy the Bear" laeger (right) was photographed with a friend sometime prior to the January 1883 blizzard that cost him his fingers and lower legs. Courtesy of the Dawes County Historical Society, Chadron

Working constantly on horseback, the cowboy's job was dangerous, particularly due to the nasty disposition and the size of the open range cattle he had to manage. Only the largest and strongest could stand the drive from Texas, and longhorns were generally kept on the range until four years old. By then a steer could weigh well over a thousand pounds. An Omaha newspaperman visiting a cattle drive on the Republican River noted, "the Texan steer is one of the wickedest and most unmanageable wild beasts in the world when not moving with the herd." A few years later a Nebraska cattlemen wrote that Texas cattle "are not afraid of a man, nor are they afraid of a horse, but they are afraid of a man on a horse. . . . To get off a horse in a herd of wild Texas cattle is almost worth a man's life and an experienced herder will never do it." Hans Gertler, working at John Bratt's home ranch, was knocked to the ground by a longhorn steer that had slipped the lariat. Only the steer's

flaring horns prevented Gertler from being gored.⁴²

While cowboys would not voluntarily go afoot in the midst of a herd (or at most other times for that matter), they were sometimes unhorsed during the mad scramble to control a stampede, an accident that could prove fatal. Stampedes often occurred at night, sometimes caused by thunderstorms, and the horses risked stumbling into animal burrows or plunging over cut banks during their headlong rush in the dark. "Teddy Blue" Abbott, among others, told of cowboys being killed during stampedes. In one instance, the cowboy and his horse were "mashed into the ground as flat as a pancake. The only thing you could recognize was the handle of his six-shooter."⁴³

In other cases, cowboys or ranch owners suffered severe injuries or death doing what seemed to be routine work. In 1880 John C. Henry, a Custer County cattleman, was "cutting out" from a herd at the Loup River roundup when his horse stumbled, threw him, and then fell on him. Henry died three hours later. Ed Wilder broke his leg when he was thrown from his horse while working cattle near Sidney in 1875. Less severe injuries could still lay up cowboys for a time such as when Keystone Ranch foreman Richard E. "Dick" Bean got his thumb tangled up in his lariat while roping a cow, nearly tearing it off. One of John Bratt's cowboys broke his collar bone and dislocated his thumb in a fall by his horse in July 1878. In a gesture that was probably not typical of most ranch owners, "Mr. Bratt generously assured him that his doctor bills and other expenses should be paid and be kept in regular employ."⁴⁴

The elements, including lightning and blizzards, were constant hazards to men whose work kept them outdoors. John Chipman, a Newman ranch cowboy, was killed by a stroke of lightning in 1878. Louis "Billy the Bear" Jaeger, who later settled in Chadron, got caught in a January 1883 blizzard while working as a cowboy in Wyoming. His frozen lower legs and fingers had to be amputated. Other cowboys drowned while crossing streams on horseback, including William Wheeler on the North Platte River in 1884 after his horse stepped into a deep hole and unseated him.⁴⁵

Sometimes cowboys suffered fatal mishaps that had nothing to do with cattle. Andrew Sillesen in March 1889 took a swig from a medicine bottle one night in the dark bunkhouse at Bratt's Birdwood Ranch, but the "medicine" turned out to be carbolic acid. At his funeral in North Platte, "six cowboys dressed in their round-up clothes and mounted on bronchos acted as pall-bearers, riding in front of the hearse, while following it another cowboy led the dead companion's pony with the 'chaps' thrown over the saddle, signifying that Andy had roped and branded his last steer."⁴⁶

Indians were also an occasional threat to lone cowboys riding in the vastness of the Sand Hills. James Williamson was killed near the Snake River on May 5, 1879, said to be by Brule Sioux from Spotted Tail's Rosebud Reservation located to the north. In late July 1880 Laing Brothers ranch foreman Jasper Southard disappeared during the annual roundup. Subsequently the agent at Rosebud learned that a small agency band had killed a white man in the Sand Hills while it was on a horse-stealing expedition to replace horses whites had stolen from the reservation. Six Indians were arrested and held at Fort Randall for trial but released for lack of evidence well before Southard's skeleton was finally discovered by a fellow cowboy in December 1882.⁴⁷

Fellow cowboy Louis "Billy the Bear" Jaeger carved James Williamson's original grave marker, which was later replaced by a marble tombstone. NSHS 2012.186_3s

The life of a cowboy, with all its dangers and discomforts, clearly had an attraction for adventurous young men, but the pay could not have been the main incentive. Throughout the period from about 1870 to 1890, the average monthly wage ranged from \$30 to \$40. In 1875 Texas cattleman D. H. Snyder said that trail drivers used to be paid \$60 to \$75 per month when the cowboys furnished their own horses but "now we furnish the horses and pay them \$25 to \$39 a month." "Teddy Blue" Abbott hired on for an 1879 trail drive at \$30 per month. Bartlett Richards, while working as a cowboy in 1880, was paid the same. Bay State Company foreman James Shaw told a Nebraska State Journal reporter in 1884 that "good men, including a cook, can be had at \$35 a month." Willa Cather's cousin Kyd Clutter, writing home to Nebraska from Wyoming in 1895, reported "cowboys are getting from \$30 to \$40 a month."⁴⁸

Texas cowboy Jordon Smith was convicted of the 1875 murder of Kearney farmer Milton Collins and sentenced to ten years in the Nebraska State Penitentiary. Shorn of his goatee and mustache and clad in nondescript prison garb for his mug shot, Smith appears far less dashing than when he was photographed in civilian clothes. NSHS RG2418-254/NSHS RG2966-3

Low wages were further diluted because most cowboys were laid off during the winter when the cattle were simply left to fend for themselves. When asked what became of these men, the Bay State's Shaw responded, "They go somewhere, either east or to the mountain towns, and get work at something else for the winter. A good many go to their homes in the east or south and come back in the spring." He added, "There is always a supply comes in when needed. The boys naturally come out for work, just as harvest hands turn up in farming communities."⁴⁹ John Bratt saw benefits in keeping most of his cowboys on the payroll year round, even if there was little for them to do in the winter. Stockmen who discharged their cowboys in the fall, said Bratt, did "more to make horse and cattle thieves out of them than anything they could do. The summer's wages of a cowboy would often be spent in a night. What was he to do through the winter? He had to live, and to live he was forced to steal."⁵⁰

Some cowboys drifted from ranch to ranch during the off season, picking up odd jobs in return for a place to sleep and eat. This practice was known as "riding the grub line." James Dahlman stayed on at the Newman ranch on the Niobrara one winter but the work had little appeal. It included chopping and hauling logs for fence posts and corral poles and building barns, ice-houses, and corrals. It was a far cry from the cowboy's preferred job of handling cattle from horseback and, according to Dahlman, "The Texas puncher was always sighing for spring."⁵¹

Cowboy Character

Conflicting stereotypes have grown up about cowboys' character and behavior, one version holding that they were honest, generous, big-hearted, and loyal while another portrays them as lazy, immoral, backward, and prone to violence. As Richard Slatta has observed, "cowboys were no paragons of virtue as many romantics and popularizers would have it. Nor were they the uncouth barbarians of the plains described by self-anointed spokesmen of civilization and culture."⁵² Perceptions of cowboys

often depended upon when or where observers encountered them, or whether they had actually met cowboys at all. That they were seen as "different" is reflected by published contemporary accounts that referred to them as "a peculiar race," "a rare bird," "a wonderful creature," or "a peculiar set of men."⁵³

During the early open range years, most townsfolk saw cowboys only when they finished weeks or months of hard, dangerous work on the trail or roundup and came to town to resupply and blow off steam with alcohol, gambling, or women. In this setting, violence often resulted. Sensational events, such as the killing of Custer County homesteaders Mitchell and Ketchum by Print Olive and his cowboys in 1878 and the trials that followed, shaped many Nebraskans' perception of cowboy behavior. Such episodes were widely reported in the newspapers. Most Nebraskans, even those living in cattle country, rarely saw cowboys engaged in the work with cattle that occupied most of their time.

Most of the fatal encounters were between cowboys themselves and they sometimes had racial overtones. In October 1875 a Texan got into a fight with a Mexican cowboy temporarily assigned to cook for the outfit. After sparring with knives and frying pans around the campfire, the Texan got in a fatal stroke and left his adversary "to bake in the fire like a Texas yam." In September 1879 the Omaha Weekly Bee reported that an Anglo cowboy fatally shot a Mexican at a ranch near Big Springs during a dispute over which of them was the best roper.⁵⁴

Instances of cowboys being involved in gunplay with civilians or law officers also occurred. Examples include the so-called "cowboy raid" on Kearney in October 1874, when several Texas herders "running the town" were wounded, one fatally, by citizens' gunfire and the September 1875 murder by Texas cowboy Jordon Smith of Milton Collins, a Kearney farmer who was protesting damage to his cornfield by the herders' horses.⁵⁵ In July 1879 Deputy Sheriff Joe Hughes of Ogallala killed Hunter and Evans cowboys William Shook and William Brueton in a shootout when the men resisted arrest for "promiscuous shooting" on the street. During the 1870s Nebraska newspapers recorded some fourteen fatalities from cowboy violence, some taking place in town and some on the range; the 1880 mortality census of Sioux County listed three additional cowboys who died from gunshots, whether accidental or deliberate not recorded.⁵⁶

Under the headline, "The People Want Relief from Bloodthirsty Texas Herders," the North Platte Western Nebraskian summed up public reaction to several episodes of cowboy violence in 1874 and 1875, but the article also seemed to concede that cowboys as a group were not to blame:

There are many number one fellows among the herders who come up the trail . . . yet there are a few drinking, bullying and desperate cusses among each outfit whose ambition seems to be to shoot or cut somebody. At Ogallala, not long since, one of the latter class poured five shots into a defenseless comrade while the latter was in bathing, and then escaped towards Texas: and now comes the sad news that a peaceable farmer by the name of Collins, living near Kearny, was shot to death without mercy, by a herder last week, who then, with his party, rode off without ceremony. Besides these two coldblooded and heartless murders, other conduct, not so bad, but of the same kind, has characterized some of the herders who came up the trail this year. . . .

Our citizens demand most emphatically that they shall be delivered from the possibility of injury from the source referred to. No objection is implied in this demand against the business that brings into the country cattle herders, by no means, but it is seriously insisted that proprietors of herds shall not employ men to do their driving and herding who are known to be drunkards, and worse than that, villains of the deepest dye, who do not hesitate to shoot on the slightest provocation and even seek opportunities to murder men as in the case of Collins. This is what the people demand to be delivered from; and it will be to the advantage of the cattle dealers to look after this matter and employ men in Texas, or elsewhere, to do their work who are law-abiding and reliable.⁵⁷

The Cowboys' Farewell

Oh! We are cowboys and the Platte river is our home, But soon we must leave it and hunt another home. For the grangers are around us and we're compelled to go To some other country, where we've got a show.

Chorus – Then farewell to old Platte river, We can no longer stay, Hard times and the grangers have driven us away. Hard times and the grangers have caused us to roam; Oh! We are cowboys and Platte river is our home.

Oh! It has not been longer, than two years ago, That we'd saddle up our bronchos and rounding up we'd go. We would lasso the mavericks and brand them one by one, But the grangers came among us and stopped that kind of fun. —Chorus

Oh! We always got good wages for this kind of work, Till the grangers came among us and took up all our dirt; And now we've got to leave them, nor do we wish them harm, And may God bless the granger on his newly made farm. —Chorus

Oh! We always love the grangers for they are a jolly set And if we had the money would stay with them yet, But our pocket books are empty and we have got to roam, And God will bless the cowboys in their newly made home —Chorus

Keith County News, April 27, 1888

The editor noted, "The verses were written by a cowboy and published in the Sidney Telegraph some time ago. The name of the author is unknown to this paper."

Perhaps in response to such outbreaks, it was reported in 1879 that several stockmen had decided they would not hire cowboys who insisted on carrying revolvers. This policy may have had some effect because two years later the North Platte Republican noted, "There were upwards of three hundred cow boys in town Monday, starting on the round-up. It was a good thing to see that but few of them carried revolvers. Only a few years ago these weapons were as plentiful in round-up parties as spurs and quirts."⁵⁸ After the July 1879 shootout in Ogallala, city fathers adopted an ordinance requiring cowboys visiting town to turn in their guns until such time as they were ready to leave for camp. A North Platte newspaper called it "a sensible precautionary measure which should be enforced in our city." It did not, however, mark the end of fatalities by gunfire in Ogallala.⁵⁹

The frequency of fatal cowboy violence reported by the newspapers seemed to remain fairly steady through the 1880s and, as in the 1870s, mostly involved cowboys, often fueled by alcohol, killing one another. The outbreaks usually took place in dance halls, saloons, or at ranches and rarely involved non-cowboys. Exceptions were at Minden in October 1882 where Hitchcock County Sheriff Jack Woods had trailed two cowboy rustlers. In the shootout that followed in a local restaurant, the fugitives killed the sheriff and two local men before escaping. Another episode was at Anselmo in April 1887, when two drunken cowboys shooting up the town were killed by Custer County Sheriff Charles Penn and his deputies. Sources suggest a total of about sixteen fatalities related to cowboy violence for the decade.⁶⁰

Once cowboys became fixtures on Nebraska ranches and were encountered more frequently, perceptions of their behavior and character began to change. While violent incidents still occurred and were reported in the local press, these outbreaks were usually attributed to the influence of alcohol or because one of the antagonists deliberately picked a fight. Such was the case when the Ogallala newspaper in 1886 reported a "cowboy riot" in nearby Julesburg, Colorado. Four drunken cowboys entered a local saloon and began "firing off their revolvers at every available object offering a mark—pictures, mirrors, decanters, and stacks of boxed cigars being shattered in their turn." Two of the men were arrested and fined, but no one was killed or injured.⁶¹

Contrasting with the Western Nebraskian's 1875 condemnation of "bloodthirsty Texas herders," the same paper in 1881 rose to the cowboys' defense when it reported "scores of cow boys in town this week getting ready for the round-up. They deported themselves like men, and gave the lie to the false stories that are told about them so often and so freely in papers published in the tender foot regions 'down east.'" When an apparently sensational and inaccurate article about cowboys appeared in the Philadelphia Times, the Sidney Telegraph editor was indignant: "If these 'tenderfoot' correspondents possessed a little more brains and good sense, it would be better for the human race. . . . Our cowboys of Nebraska and Wyoming are perfect gentlemen, full of life, energy, and all that makes a man." Bartlett Richards thought his fellow cowboys "swearing, vulgar fellows as a usual thing, but they are the most generous, kind-hearted men that ever lived, would give you their last cent and do any favor for you in their power. One only wishes that some morals could be planted in their breasts."⁶²

In another article, the Sidney paper again praised cowboys, while admitting that they were quick to seek revenge if someone "steals a horse or is hunting for a fight." Nevertheless, "there are fewer murderers and cut-throats graduated from the cow-boys than from the better educated class from the east who come out here for gain." Texas cattleman C. C. Slaughter in 1882 summed up his opinion of cowboys and how cowboy life had changed: "[T]he cowboy is not now the reckless semi-savage of ten years ago. . . . The cowboy is, as I have found him, thoroughly loyal to his employer. Of course when he reaches a town after his exile on the plains he makes the most of his opportunity to enjoy himself and may go to wild extremes. . . . But the cowboy is a very different character when you meet him in his camp or with his blanket and his horse upon the plains. If you were loaded down with money he would not rob you; such a thought would probably never enter his head, but if you were in want you could count to a certainty on his assisting you."⁶³

John Bratt devoted a chapter in his reminiscences to stories about some of the cowboys who worked for him during his twenty-five years in the cattle business. While there were a few miscreants among them, Bratt characterized most as "wholesouled, generous, big-hearted, and ever faithful." Although a bit of nostalgia likely crept into the elderly ranchman's recall of his Trails of Yesterday, as he titled his book, it seems clear that his relations with the cowboys were a highlight of his life.⁶⁴

By the later 1880s the day of Nebraska's open-range cowboy was nearly done. The wild, unruly herders of the early years had become respected community members who did not always have to frequent saloons or gambling halls to enjoy themselves. And the latter institutions, while still present, were no longer the main attractions once towns such as Ogallala and Sidney moved beyond their turbulent years as cattle emporiums. The changes are suggested by the Keith County News report of a fall 1886 gathering of local cowboys unwinding from the summer's work: "The Ogallala Cattle Co.'s punchers had oyster suppers at the 'Palace Restaurant' Wednesday and Thursday nights. The cow-boys enjoyed themselves immensely." The same issue noted, "The cow-boys from the north country had their annual fair and circus last night after a hard summer's work. The boys are perfectly good natured in their fun."⁶⁵

By 1888 the few remaining large Nebraska cattle outfits, such as the Bay State and the Ogallala Land and Cattle Company, were moving their herds to Wyoming and Montana, where open range was still available. Both the Sidney and Ogallala newspapers took note. When seventy-five Bay State cowboys came to Sidney in late May preparing for "what will probably be the last general round up through this section of the country," the editor noted, "As the cavalcade rode slowly out of town there were not a few among the watching spectators who regretted that the cowboy had gone, never to return to this region again."⁶⁶

A month earlier the Keith County News published a poem entitled, "The Cowboys' Farewell" that had been "handed in this week by the cowboys of the Platte, of whom a large number were in town during the present week, but there were only a handful compared with the crowds that gathered at Ogallala in the days when the Texas cattle drive and round ups were the only employment for an army of cattle men, commonly called cow boys. As the song indicates, the days of the cowboy are past, and they depart with the well wishes of the settlers, who, though in a position that conflicts with the cowboys' interests, are generally of the opinion that a more gentlemanly class of men never roamed in any country."⁶⁷

Robert "Arkansas Bob" Gillaspie was noted for his sense of humor and was widely mourned in Cherry County, Nebraska, when he died prematurely in 1906. Courtesy of the Cherry County Historical Society, Valentine

At Omaha's 1924 Legion Rodeo, Mayor James Dahlman reprised a few of the skills he employed while riding western Nebraska's open range during the late 1870s. NSHS RG2478-60

Nebraska Cowboys beyond the Open Range

A glance through the published histories of Nebraska counties located in cattle country or biographical sketches and obituaries that have appeared in the pages of the Nebraska Cattleman

magazine will reveal that not all the cowboys of Nebraska's open-range days simply rode off into the sunset. Many moved up to become ranchmen themselves, while others found new lives in law enforcement, politics, or business. Among notable examples are Bartlett Richards, who assumed management of the "33" ranch in Sioux County in 1883, helped found the First National Bank of Chadron in 1885, and purchased a Sand Hills ranch in 1888 that became the famous Spade. James H. Cook left cowboy work to become a market hunter and in 1887, bought a Niobrara River ranch from his father-in-law where he lived until he died in 1942. Today it is the site of Agate Fossil Beds National Monument. Texas cowboy James C. Dahlman went on to become Dawes County sheriff, Chadron mayor and, from 1906 to 1930 with one interruption, the "Cowboy Mayor" of Omaha. Louis "Billy the Bear" Jaeger, who froze his feet and fingers in Wyoming in 1883, settled in Chadron in 1885 and served as justice of the peace, city clerk, clerk of the county court, and deputy clerk of the district court before his death in 1930. John Finch, who worked for the Olives on the Loup, left the range in 1886 to run a drug store in Arnold for more than fifty years.⁶⁸

The first sheriffs of Scottsbluff and Sheridan counties, Thomas J. Fanning and John Riggs respectively, were former cowboys and Riggs later started his own ranch. Others, such as Robert "Arkansas Bob" Gillaspie, Nels Rowley, Eugene Hall, J. M. Gentry, Mac Radcliffe, and Sam Hudson filed homesteads or timber claims in the 1880s and 1890s and stocked them with a few cattle, forming the nuclei of ranches. Adding to their holdings with tracts patented by family members or by buying out relinquished claims, the ranchmen patiently assembled enough land to sustain their herds. More land became available when settlers sold out after being enticed by the 1904 Kinkaid Homestead Act to try farming in the Sand Hills.⁶⁹

The Northwestern Roundup: Former cowboys who attended this 1912 gathering of the Northwestern Roundup included: (back row, left to right) Tom Stansbie, Jim Gillaspie, John Neise, Archie Riordan, Bob Emery, Mose Howard, Joe Jennett, William Stedman, Irv Stotts, Zan Gillaspie, Tom Skinner, Yank O'Brien, Henry Stetter; (seated, left to right) Let Beckwith, Bob Miller, Bob Faddis, Alex McAlvey, Ed Monroe, William Welsch, Woodruff Ball, Sam Hudson, Johnny Water, Jake Stetter. Courtesy of the Cherry County Historical Society, Valentine, Nebraska

By the 1930s ranchers, including many descended from former cowboys, had reclaimed the Sand Hills and much of western Nebraska for grazing. Roundups had long since given way to fenced ranges, hay was harvested during the summer to sustain the herds in winter, windmills dotted the landscape, branding was done in corrals, and gasoline-powered equipment was replacing horses for many ranch duties.

By the early twentieth century, about all that remained of open-range cowboy life was nostalgia. It found expression with the founding at Valentine in September 1912 of the "Northwestern Roundup," a reunion of former cowboys. "Their meetings were to remember old times—days of the cow trails—round ups, cattle rustling and other routine or interesting happenings of 'bye-gone days.'" The organization met annually and had 250 members at its peak. By the time the Northwestern Roundup folded in 1921, many of the members were elderly and others had passed away, along with almost everything from the "old times" that had inspired them to meet in the first place.⁷⁰

About the Author

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Notes

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2. Richard W. Slatta, *Cowboys of the Americas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 196.
3. *Ibid.*, 221.
4. *Ibid.*, 4.
5. James H. Cook, *Fifty Years on the Old Frontier* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1923), 114.
6. Turner and Harris of Fort Worth, Texas, had expected to sell the cattle in St. Joseph, Missouri, but the sale fell through and they decided to take the herd on to Chicago, according to the *Nebraska City Peoples Press*, July 12, 1860.
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15. "Selah," Ogallala letter in *Sidney Plaindealer-Telegraph*, Nov. 25, 1884.
16. *North Platte Western Nebraskan*, Aug. 21, 1875.

17. Sidney Telegraph, Aug. 9, 1879.
18. 1880 U.S. Census, Keith County, Nebraska, "Sheidley's Ranch," and Sioux County, Nebraska, "Running Water" ranch.
19. 1885 Nebraska State Census, "Hat Creek basin," Sioux County, Nebraska.
20. Cook, *Fifty Years on the Old Frontier*, 5, 94; E. C. Abbott, *We Pointed them North: Recollections of a Cowpuncher*, ed. Helena Huntington Smith (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1939), 37.
21. Ord Quiz, Mar. 2, 1911; Ord Weekly Journal, Mar. 2, 1911; W. A. Anderson, "Amos Harris, First Negro Cowboy in the Loup Valley," unpublished ms., NSHS; Custer County Chief, Feb. 9, 1912.
22. Keith County News (Ogallala), Feb. 3, 1888; Sidney Telegraph, Aug. 8, 1885.
23. Slatta, *Cowboys of the Americas*, 168.
24. Abbott, *We Pointed them North*, 39.
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27. Marianne Brinda Beel, *A Sandhill Century*, Book 1: The Land (Cherry Co. Centennial Committee, 1986), 15; Abbott, *We Pointed them North*, 41; James H. Cook, "Trailing Texas 'Long-Horn' Cattle through Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 10 (Oct.-Dec. 1927): 339; Bartlett Richards, Jr. and Ruth Van Ackeren, *Bartlett Richards: Nebraska Sandhills Cattleman* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1980), 3.
28. Mabry testimony, Report of the Special Commission Appointed to Investigate the Affairs of the Red Cloud Indian Agency, July 1875 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1875), 527; Millet/Fant interview, Omaha Daily Bee, Aug. 7, 1875.
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35. Rolf Johnson, Happy as a Big Sunflower: Adventures in the West, 1876-1880, ed. Richard E. Jensen (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 53; Van Ackeren, Bartlett Richards, 4, 8.
36. Van Ackeren, Bartlett Richards, 13; North Platte Western Nebraskian, Apr. 27, 1878.
37. John T. Parsons, The Peacemaker and Its Rivals: An Account of the Single Action Colt (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1950), endpaper, 37, 74, 90; L. D. Satterlee, comp., Ten Old Gun Catalogs (1940, rpt. Gun Digest Association [1953?]) facsimiles of James Bown, Pittsburg, 1876 catalog, 55-56 and Homer Fisher, New York, 1880 catalog, 71-72; Harold F. Williamson, Winchester: The Gun That Won the West (New York: A. S. Barnes and Co., 1952), 74, 116.
38. Allen, "Cattle Trail on the Republican River"; "The Round-Up."
39. North Platte Tribune, reprinted in Sidney Plaindealer-Telegraph, May 30, 1885.
40. Bratt, Trails of Yesterday, 200, 202; Van Ackeren, Bartlett Richards, 4-5; Beel, Sandhills Century, Book 2: The People (1985), 271.
41. "Early Cattleman's Story of the American Range," [Mack Radcliffe], American Cattle Producer, November 1940, 17; Bratt, Trails of Yesterday, 217-18; "Experiences of Nels Rowley, as told by himself," Cherry County News, Aug. 8, 1938; O'Kieffe, Western Story, 164.
42. Allen, "Cattle Trail on the Republican River"; "Herder" in Sidney Telegraph, May 24, 1879; Bratt, Trails of Yesterday, 217.
43. Abbott, We Pointed Them North, 43. It might be noted here that no old-time cowboy would voluntarily try to ride a thousand-pound bull or jump off his horse to wrestle a steer to the ground by the horns, suggesting that several modern rodeo events have little connection to traditional cowboy work.
44. Dawson County Pioneer, reprinted in Sidney Telegraph, June 19, 1880; North Platte Western Nebraskian, June 25, 1875; Keith County News, Mar. 25, 1887; North Platte Republican, July 20, 1878.
45. Sidney Telegraph, Aug. 17, 1878; Allen Shepherd, et al., eds., Man of Many Frontiers: The Diaries of "Billy the Bear" Jaeger (Chadron, Nebr.: Dawes County Historical Society, 1994), 77-79; Sidney Plaindealer-Telegraph, July 12, 1884.
46. Keith County News, Mar. 22, 1889.
47. Shepherd, Man of Many Frontiers, 76; Nebraska State Journal, Dec. 6, 1882; George E. Hyde, Spotted Tail's Folk: A History of the Brule Sioux (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 296.

48. D. H. Snyder testimony, Report of the Special Commission, 580; Abbott, *We Pointed Them North*, 37; Van Ackeren, Bartlett Richards, 13; Shaw interview; Paul D. Riley, ed., "Cather Family Letters," *Nebraska History* 54 (Winter 1973): 607.
49. Shaw interview.
50. Bratt, *Trails of Yesterday*, 305.
51. Dahlman, "Recollections of Cowboy Life," 336.
52. Slatta, *Cowboys of the Americas*, 49.
53. See, for example, Harry T. Williams, *The Pacific Tourist: Williams' Illustrated Guide to the Pacific R.R. . . .* (New York: 1879), 32; "Lowell" letter, *Nebraska State Journal*, Oct. 20, 1874; Sidney Plaindealer-Telegraph, Aug. 18, 1883; Allen, "Cattle Trail on the Republican."
54. *North Platte Western Nebraskian*, Oct. 30, 1875; "State Jottings," *Omaha Weekly Bee*, Sept. 17, 1879.
55. *Omaha Daily Bee*, Oct. 19, 1874; *North Platte Western Nebraskian*, Oct. 20, 1874; *Kearney Times*, Sept. 23, 1875. After two trials, Smith was sent to the Nebraska State Penitentiary. His own account under the headline, "Whisky Did It," appeared in the *North Platte Western Nebraskian*, Dec. 25, 1875.
56. *Sidney Telegraph*, July 12, 1879; *North Platte Republican*, July 12, 1875. For a summary of violence during Ogallala's trail-driving days, see Karyn Stansbery, "The Law at the End of the Trail: Ogallala, 1873-1887," *Nebraska History* 79 (Spring 1998): 2-13.
57. *North Platte Western Nebraskian*, Sept. 25, 1875.
58. *North Platte Republican*, May 21, 1881.
59. *Ibid.*, June 21, 1879; *North Platte Western Nebraskian*, July 19, 1879. For shooting affairs in Ogallala in 1880 and 1884, see Stansbery, "Law at the End of the Trail," 8, 10.
60. Roy T. Bang, *Heroes without Medals: A Pioneer History of Kearney County* (Minden: Warp Publishing Co., 1952), 104-5; Solomon D. Butcher, *Pioneer History of Custer County* (Broken Bow: Merchants Publishing Co., 1901), 154-57.
61. *Keith County News*, Feb. 19, 1886.
62. *North Platte Western Nebraskian*, May 21, 1881; *Sidney Plaindealer-Telegraph*, May 27, 1882; Van Ackeren, Bartlett Richards, 9.
63. Interview with *Chicago Times*, reprint in *Sidney Plaindealer-Telegraph*, Nov. 11, 1882.
64. Bratt, *Trails of Yesterday*, 208, and Chap. 26, "Our Cowboys—Characteristics—Adventures."
65. *Keith County News*, Oct. 30, 1886.

66. Sidney Telegraph, May 26, 1888.

67. Keith County News, Apr. 27, 1888.

68. Van Ackeren, Bartlett Richards, 44, 50, 54-58; Cook, Fifty Years on the Old Frontier, 275; Fred Carey, Mayor Jim: An Epic of the West (Omaha: Omaha Printing Co., 1930), 56-57, 67-68, 160-73; Shepherd, Man of Many Frontiers, 80, 512; Arnold (Nebr.) Sentinel, July 21, 1938.

69. A. B. Wood, Pioneer Tales of the North Platte Valley and Nebraska Panhandle (Gering: Courier Press, 1938), 40; Rushville Centennial Committee, A Century of Progress: Sheridan County, Nebraska, 1885-1985 (Valentine: LT Printing, 1985), 11-12; Beel, A Sandhill Century, Book Two, 202; Nebraska Cattleman, Dec. 1969 (Gillaspie); May 1945 (Hall); Sept. 1945 (Gentry); May 1946 (Radcliffe); Mar. 1946 (Hudson); J. M. Gentry, "My Life in the Nebraska Sandhills," American Cattle Producer, January 1940, 25; "Early Cattleman's Story." W. D. Aeschbacher, "Development of the Sandhill Lake Country," Nebraska History 27 (July-Sept. 1946): 205-11 offers an accessible summary of the establishment of ranching in the Sandhills. McIntosh, The Nebraska Sand Hills, provides a detailed analysis of the occupancy process.

70. "Round-Up Days," Cherry County News (Valentine), May 20, 1937.