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Mike A. Mroz

Black Cowboys of the Cattle Frontier

“Did you know that one of the most successful mustangers (one who captured wild mustangs) in the American Wild West was Bob Lemmon, a Negro cowboy who captured mustangs by making the mustangs think [he] was one of them?”¹

Black cowboys, including Bob Lemmon, were among the many cowboys that roamed the open ranges and drove cattle across Texas and the rest of the cattle frontier during the nineteenth century. It was the work of the cowboys that gave Texas its nickname of “The Beef Empire of the United States.”² Scholars estimate that over five million cattle were driven north from Texas and sold to eastern markets between 1866 and 1885.³ During this time, ranch owners hired strong men with a skill set characteristic to the line of work of a cowboy. This selective preference was partially because few people in the Western Frontier actually possessed the skills required of cowboys. At the heart of this careful selection, ranch owners needed someone who was capable of making money for them; the cattle industry was a business. For ranch owners, the skills and competency that the positions required outweighed the color of a man’s skin. Black cowboys played an integral role in the development of the cattle frontier, which has often been overshadowed by that of their white counterparts. This paper will highlight the role black cowboys played in the emergence of the cattle frontier through a detailed analysis of responsibilities of cowboys, issues cowboys encountered along the drive, contributions of black cowboys to the cattle frontier, and personal accounts of black cowboys.

The historiography of the cattle frontier underscores the strong work ethic among cowboys. In his book *The Negro Cowboys* Philip Durham argues that a strong work ethic superseded any pre-existing racial tension or barriers between black and white cowboys. Durham

writes that, “The demands of their job made them transcend much of their prejudice. On a drive, a cowboy’s ability to do his work, to handle his share and a little extra, was far more important than his color.”⁴ Ultimately, a cowboy’s ability to perform his tasks not only warranted a level of respect among the members of his crew, but it also was essential for the successful completion of the cattle drive. In all, the cattle industry was a lucrative business for wealthy ranch owners. They needed resolute and reliable cowboys capable of driving thousands of wild cattle at once, where northern ranchers awaited, eager to buy breeding and feeder stock.⁵

Similar to Durham’s analysis, Gina De Angelis claims in her book *The Black Cowboys* that ranch owners needed harmonious cattle crews with limited conflict. In order to sustain levels of harmony and to prevent conflict from uprising, cowboys often forbade any member of the crew from drinking, gambling, or even swearing throughout the duration of the drive. De Angelis also points out, “as with ranch cowboys, the demands of their jobs often forced trail drivers to abandon or transcend any prejudices they might harbor against black comrades.”⁶ With no room for racial barriers or internal conflict to exist, the fate of the drive fell in the hard-working and diligent hands of the crewmembers.

Contrary to Gina De Angelis’s contention, other scholars such as William Katz argue that although the skin color of a cowboy was irrelevant in the eyes of a fellow crewmember, it certainly played a factor in the treatment of black cowboys after the completion of the drive. According to Katz, blacks faced more discrimination and segregation in larger, more stable western communities than in smaller, less developed communities.⁷ Once the crew reached its final destination, specifically in one of the heavily white-populated cattle towns, black cowboys often experienced racial discrimination and harassment. Katz also mentions that many “cattle drive towns enforced only an informal segregation in saloons, but the cowhand camaraderie

often times repeatedly challenged this racial barrier.”⁸ This statement made by Katz not only bears witness to the existence of racial barriers found in cattle towns, but it also compliments Philip Durham's argument that a strong work ethic superseded any pre-existing racial tension or barriers between a cowboy of color and a white cowboy throughout the cattle drive.

Contrary to the racial segregation that William Katz and Philip Durham claimed blacks often experienced, Nat Love, one of the most revered black cowboys in history, never mentioned any innuendo of racial segregation towards him during his short stays in the cattle towns.⁹ In his autobiography *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, he describes his time spent in Dodge City, Kansas, as fun, eventful, and entertaining. According to Love, the crew's main mission was to have as much fun as they could possibly afford. Love and his crew spent an overwhelmingly large portion of their money on whiskey, dancing, and whoring.¹⁰ At no point in Love's accounts did he ever provide any inclination to the existence of racial barriers that may have impeded him from partaking in the entertainment that was common to cattle towns.

Critics of Love argue that he omitted some truths from his accounts, including the existence of racial tensions between whites and blacks. It is important to note, however, that racial barriers existed not among the cowboys themselves, but rather with the white people that black cowboys came into contact with in cattle towns. Those racial tensions often tormented and restricted the liberties and freedoms of black cowboys during their stay. For example, some bartenders prevented black cowboys from sitting on a certain side of the bar reserved for whites only. Moreover, some saloons prevented blacks from patronizing white prostitutes.¹¹

Although racial barriers portrayed a common theme throughout the era of the cattle frontier, they served only as a small fraction of a much larger theme, which was the newly developing Western Frontier of the late nineteenth century. Scholars such as Colonel Bailey C.

Hanes hold this claim because they believe that the Western Frontier signified the era of the cowboy and the illustrious cattle industry. The Western Frontier is considered a large component that makes up much of the historiography of the cattle frontier. According to Hanes, it was the thriving cattle industry, highly skilled cowboys, entertaining rodeos, and large profits incurred that became the forefront for the development of the Western Frontier. Specifically, Hanes mentions, “it was the exciting performances of famous cowboys like Bill Pickett in the 101 Ranch Wild West Show that drew up to 20,000 people at a time to the newly developed territories of the West.”¹²

Similar to Hanes's account of a Western Frontier characterized by a powerful cattle industry, Matthew Ponsford argues that the Western Frontier evolved from the efforts of hard-working cowboys. Moreover, Ponsford credits much of the cowboys' success to a code of honor that existed between black and white cowboys. This *Cowboy Code* united the members of a cattle team, brought about steady profits, and ultimately contributed to the expansion of the newly acquired territory of the Western Frontier.¹³ Scholars such as Ponsford and Hanes believe that the cattle industry and the Western Frontier are interrelated, and therefore one cannot be discussed without the other.

The birth of the cattle industry occurred in Texas in the second half of the nineteenth century, during a period of rapid change in American history. This period of transformation resulted from significant events in the country's history, including the Mexican-American War in 1848, the abolition of slavery in 1865, and the American Industrial Revolution. These three historical events transformed and expanded the Western Frontier into an area for resettlement, which allowed for the establishment of booming ranches that supported the emerging cattle industry. Consequently, ranch owners were in need of a sufficiently large labor force. Upon the

abolition of slavery in 1865, ranch owners often supplied their labor force with black cowboys after many newly freed slaves migrated westward.¹⁴

As ranch owners fulfilled labor demands, they incurred large profits from the lucrative business. Much of their success resulted from the spread of industrialization into the Western Frontier. Between railroad expansion into the Southwest Territory and the increasing demand from eastern meat markets, Texas ranch owners acquired a new and efficient method of selling and transporting thousands of cattle for steep profits.¹⁵ This marked a major turning point in the development of the cattle industry and the United States.

Over time, historians wrote extensively about those methods, developments, and accounts, which greatly influenced the growth and development of the cattle industry. However, many scholars excluded from their scholarship one of the most influential factors that led to the overall success of the cattle industry: the significant role black cowboys played throughout the cattle frontier. Although scholars of the cattle frontier wrote various studies on the black cowboys, the scholars simply acknowledged the cowboys' presence rather than systematically studying the significant role they played. Moreover, no one has ever challenged the status quo by claiming that the cowboys' influence on the thriving cattle industry of the nineteenth century belonged not only to white cowboys, but to black cowboys as well.¹⁶

Much of the historiography of the cattle frontier was written during the pre-civil rights era, thus many scholars' writings suggest that blacks played only a marginal role in its development. However, extensive inquiry into the cattle frontier allows us to understand just how significant of a role black cowboys played in its development. While additional recorded personal accounts of black cowboys can adequately support their tremendous role, these narratives are almost non-existent. Primary sources of this subject are scarce because very few

blacks were literate during the era of the cattle frontier. However, the available sources provide insight into the lives of black cowboys and the role they played as integral participants in the development of the cattle frontier.

Nineteenth century cowboys were the backbone of the cattle frontier due to their hard working efforts. Cowboys performed many laborious tasks, while earning approximately five dollars a week and roughly twenty-five to forty dollars in monthly wages.¹⁷ Ranch owners also provided room and board and three meals a day as an additional compensation. Although cowboys experienced much greater economic opportunities and benefits than perhaps industrial jobs in the late 1800s, life for cowboys was extremely rough and demanding. Contrary to Hollywood's portrayal of the great hero of the Wild West, the cowboy was actually one of the least glorified jobs in the Western Frontier.¹⁸

The position of a cowhand required a specific type of individual capable of withstanding the rigorous labor demands in the cowhand's line of work. A cowhand was typically a young male, roughly around the age of fourteen or fifteen, who possessed a unique set of innate characteristics.¹⁹ Those characteristics included a strong sense of determination, perseverance, mental fortitude, and a tremendous work ethic. Many of those young, able-minded, and physically capable individuals were black. Scholars estimate that out of the 35,000 cowboys that traveled up and down the Texas cattle trails between 1868 and 1895, about one-third were black.²⁰ Other historians suggest that black cowboys constituted roughly one-quarter of a normal sized cattle crew.²¹

During the two to three-month period that a typical cattle drive endured, black and white cowboys performed and shared many of the same duties and responsibilities. Some of the most common responsibilities included steering the direction of the herd, roping any steer that strayed

from the herd, and standing watch at night throughout the drive. In order to ensure the drive went smoothly and efficiently, all members of the crew worked in unison. They helped one another drive thousands of cattle at a time to numerous selling points and shipping yards located in northern cattle towns such as Dodge City, Abilene, and Ogallala.²² Sometimes, cowboys rode as far as eighty miles a day up and down the cattle trails of Texas.²³

During the long mileage, the cattle team experienced exhaustion throughout each drive. “It was a twenty four-hour responsibility for every member of the crew, whether they were black or white.”²⁴ A cowboy’s capacity to do his job well was more significant than his skin color. All of these responsibilities represented a strong sense of dependability on one another’s performance. Together, black and white cowboys developed a “Code of the West,” which was a sense of mutual dependency, forged by their communal work.²⁵ That mutual dependency was one of many examples throughout the drive that portrayed each crewmember’s role as equally important to the overall completion of the drive and further development of the cattle frontier.

Beyond the many roles and responsibilities required of each cowboy, there were some unforeseen issues the crew often encountered throughout each drive. Cowboys commonly experienced minor problems such as encounters with rattlesnakes and wolves or a runaway horse. When a fellow crewmember suffered a rattlesnake bite and was unfit for duty, the rest of the crew took on his burden and responsibilities. Since the cowboys worked together as a team, any additional work that the crew acquired along the way were shared.²⁶

Some of the more difficult challenges the crew faced along the drive were the crossing of American Indian sovereign lands, stampedes, and river crossings. In his autobiography, Nat Love indicates conflict with Indians was a common threat to his cattle crew. As Love and thousands of other cowboys rode up and down the Texas cattle trails, passing through various Indian

territories, cattle teams usually incurred some form of toll from the native people. This toll was often transferred over in the form of a steer or money payment.²⁷ It is important to note, however, that not every Indian encounter culminated in a peaceful manner.

Oftentimes, the cattle team fended for their lives against violent Indian retaliations.²⁸ Most Indian attacks occurred during the day. However, in some instances, the posse encountered a surprise ambush in the middle of the night. This called for the implementation of an active night watch as cattle teams stopped for rest in sovereign Indian territories. The night watch was crucial, not just for preventing cattle from wandering astray but because it ensured the overall safety of the entire cattle team. No member of the cattle team was exempt from the night watch. Without the nightly watch, the cattle team ran the risk of failure for completion of their cattle drive; they entrusted their lives to one another.

Bill Pickett's rodeo technique of bulldogging was one of the most notable contributions made to the cattle frontier by a black cowboy. Bulldogging was a difficult and dangerous rodeo technique that involved jumping onto the back of a wild steer, then proceeding to take it to the ground by forcefully biting the steer's upper lip with one's teeth. The significance of Pickett's new and exciting phenomena was that it led to the creation of an entirely new rodeo event known as steer wrestling.²⁹ Over time, Pickett's spectacular rodeo performances generated large amounts of revenue for both the 101 Ranch Wild West Show and the state of Texas. Ultimately, Bill Pickett's impact on the Texas cattle industry and the rest of the cattle frontier earned him the prestige of becoming the first African American inducted into the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in 1971.³⁰ Bill Pickett's mark in history was just one of many contributions that black cowboys made to the overall development of the cattle frontier.

Another black cowboy that left a lasting impression in the history of the cattle frontier was Nat Love, who was known throughout the cattle frontier as “Deadwood Dick.”³¹ According to *The Chicago Defender*, Nat Love was “the most famous Negro cowboy who played a major part in the development of the Old West.”³² He was a brave, courageous, hard-working, and highly skilled cowboy. In 1907, Love published his autobiography *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love, Better Known in the Cattle Country as Deadwood Dick* where he narrated many of his personal accounts and listed his grandiose accomplishments.³³ Love’s account is extremely significant because it was the only full-length autobiography ever written by a black cowboy in an era when most blacks were illiterate.³⁴

Although Love’s autobiography mentioned little about the existence of racial barriers that he might have encountered as a black cowboy, it revealed much detail that was unknown at the time about the roles black cowboys played in the development of the cattle frontier. Love’s accounts suggested that black cowboys played more than a marginal role throughout the cattle frontier because black cowboys shared the same responsibilities as their white counterparts. Above all else, Love confirmed that equal participation existed between black and white cowboys during the long and enduring cattle drives, by which much of the cattle frontier was forged during the nineteenth century.

While it seems that there was no racial discrimination among the crew during the cattle drives, it sometimes occurred back home on the cattle ranches. “Being a black cowboy was hard work,” said Cleveland Walters, a black cowboy from Liberty, Texas. “When it was branding time, they’d put twenty cows in the pen and I was the one who had to catch them and hold them down. The brander was white—so in other words all the hard, dirty work was done by the black

cowboys.”³⁵ According to Walters, pawning off the hard and dirty work onto black cowboys was one of the most common forms of racial antagonism he experienced on the ranch.

Although it appeared that white cowboys at times delegated the harder work to black cowboys, the cowboys’ line of work encouraged the notion of teamwork. This form of teamwork implied that cowboys, both black and white, worked together for the overall completion of their tasks and responsibilities. Regardless of how easy or difficult one cowboy’s task was compared to another cowboy’s responsibilities, both proved just as instrumental to the outcome of their work. Moreover, both the individual and team efforts made by black and white cowboys exemplified an equally important role that brought success upon their ranch owner, which in effect, furthered the development of the cattle frontier. Against Cleveland Walter’s claim that the brander was typically a white cowboy, Will Crittendon, another black cowboy from Texas, argues that the responsibility of the “brand man” was his.³⁶

In an interview conducted by the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s, Will Crittendon attested to the many duties and responsibilities entrusted to him throughout his career as a cowboy. Crittendon recounted many of his tasks, which included branding the steers during the spring and fall round-ups, passing through dangerous river crossings along certain cattle drives, and breaking-in hundreds of horses for numerous ranch owners. Busting and breaking-in horses was such a common and easy task that “I’d contract to bust forty at a time,”³⁷ said the black cowboy from Cedar Grove, Texas. Although Crittendon claims the task was easy, breaking-in horses was another hard and challenging task that sometimes had dangerous or fatal outcomes.

It is important to note the significance of Crittendon’s horse-breaking accounts and how they greatly affected the delivery of thousands of cattle to wealthy buyers north of Texas. The “breaking of stock (taming horses) and getting horses ready to ride each morning was often the

work of the black cowboy,” explains Michael Searless.³⁸ It was also “some of the roughest work,” and black cowboys were oftentimes subjected to it “more than their white counterparts.”³⁹ Moreover, the duty of horse breaking was a tremendous responsibility because a horse was a cowboy’s most important tool and resource for his job. Without a tamed horse, a cowboy or cattle team was unable to herd and drive cattle across the frontier. In effect, it was proficient horse breakers and black cowboys like Will Crittendon that provided an opportunity for the successful delivery of millions of Texas cattle to meat markets across the country throughout the nineteenth century.

After closer examination of the relevant scholarship and the available primary sources, it is clear that black cowboys played a large part in the development of the cattle frontier. Their significant role was evident in a number of ways, one of which was through the many roles and responsibilities that were required of cowboys. Over time, black cowboys proved themselves both capable and worthy of those roles and responsibilities as they worked alongside their white counterparts during long and exhausting cattle drives.

Black cowboys also proved themselves just as competent as their white counterparts in resolving the many issues that the team encountered along the way. The way in which a cattle team negotiated those challenges throughout the cattle drives was through a reliance and dependence on every member of the team. Skin color held no bearing on each crewmember’s trust, dependence, and performance during the cattle drives; yet skin color sometimes influenced the types of jobs assigned to both blacks and whites back on the cattle ranches.

As black cowboys demonstrated their competency and dependability along the cattle drives, they also solidified their place in history through many of their contributions. Famous black cowboys like Bill Pickett and Nat Love proved that black cowboys were capable of

accomplishing great success. Moreover, Pickett and Love showed the rest of the country that black cowboys were not inferior to white cowboys. Their efforts and contributions to the cattle industry and cattle frontier were significant and long-lasting.

Many black cowboys' efforts and contributions to the cattle frontier were evident through the personal accounts of former black cowboys. As Cleveland Walters and Will Crittendon recalled some of the hardest work they dealt with as cowboys, it was clear that black cowboys sometimes acquired the least desirable tasks found within the job, while white cowboys received some of the most desirable tasks. Regardless of the caliber of work that a particular cowboy experienced, there was not a single task that was more significant than another. All of the work involved contributed to the overall success of the cattle industry, and ultimately the continued growth of the cattle frontier. After closer examination into the roles and responsibilities of black cowboys, it is clear that they played an integral role in the development of the cattle frontier; they should no longer remain in the shadow of their white counterparts.

¹ Rosemarie Tyler Brooks, "At Last! 'The Negro Cowboy,'" *Washington Round-Up* (Chicago, IL), July 10, 1965.

² Peter Argersinger, "The Cattle Frontier" (Lecture, History 466B: Trans-Mississippi West, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL, March 22, 2014).

³ Gina De Angelis, *The Black Cowboys* (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1998), 40.

⁴ Philip Durham and Everett Jones, *The Negro Cowboys* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1965), 44.

⁵ Durham and Jones, *The Negro Cowboys*, 32. The term "feeder stock" refers to the cattle sold immediately to meat markets and buyers across the country upon their delivery to the cattle towns. The term "breeding stock" refers to the cattle that were purchased with the intention of breeding more cattle that would later be sold as feeder stock. Cattle typically lost much of their weight after a long drive. Wealthy buyers purchased these cattle and fattened them up in order to reach their maximum potential market value and sold them later.

⁶ De Angelis, *The Black Cowboys*, 48.

⁷ William Katz, *The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History of the African American Role in the Westward Expansion of the United States* (New York: Harlem Moon/Broadway Books, 2005), 145.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ That Nat Love did not write about color prejudices should not suggest that they did not exist, but rather that extraordinary black cowboys faced fewer racial obstacles.

¹⁰ Nat Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love, Better Known in the Cattle Country as Deadwood Dick* (Los Angeles: Privately published, 1907), 54.

¹¹ Peter Argersinger, "The Cattle Frontier." (Lecture, History 466B: Trans-Mississippi West, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL, March 24, 2014).

¹² Bailey Hanes, *Bill Pickett: Bulldogger* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 42.

¹³ "Folklore and Folklorists," *Western Folklore* 22, no. 3 (1963): 209-11, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1498733>, accessed October 10, 2016. See page 9 for a more elaborate explanation of the Cowboy Code, which was also commonly referred to as "The Code of the West."

¹⁴ Like many whites during the late nineteenth century, blacks migrated westward in search for greater economic opportunities. In addition, many blacks migrated west with the hope of becoming cowhands. The position of a cowhand provided significantly less chance for racial antagonism to arise between blacks and whites than most other jobs in the country at the time.

¹⁵ De Angelis, *The Black Cowboys*, 38.

¹⁶ The status quo during the era of the cattle industry was that blacks were unworthy of the title of cowhand. Many believed that the title of cowhand was a prestigious title reserved only for white men. Hence, the term cowboy was coined because whites refused to acknowledge black males as men. Instead, they referred to adult black males as boys. Thus, a more degrading and less prestigious title of cowboy was given to blacks. Moreover, a common notion that existed during the nineteenth century was that blacks were incapable and unworthy of performing a task that many considered a white man's vocation.

¹⁷ Woody Phipps, "Trials of the Trail: African-American Cowboy Will Crittendon," <http://www.historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4934>, accessed October 10, 2016. At the time, no other job in America afforded workers respectable wages and working conditions as those found in the cattle industry.

¹⁸ Durham and Jones, *The Negro Cowboys*, 12.

¹⁹ Argersinger, "The Cattle Frontier," Lecture, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, IL, March 26, 2014.

²⁰ John Marvin Hunter, ed., *The Trail Drivers of Texas*, 2nd revised ed. (Nashville, Tennessee, 1925), 453. Cited in Durham and Jones, *The Negro Cowboys*.

²¹ De Angelis, *The Black Cowboys*, 48. A typical cattle crew consisted of usually eleven or twelve men, depending on the size of the herd.

²² Charles Poore, "Books of The Times: The Negro Cowboy in the History of His Country," *New York Times*, Feb. 4, 1965. Dodge City, Abilene, and Ogallala were three of the largest, most notable cattle towns and shipping points throughout the cattle frontier.

²³ Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, 43. The most commonly used cattle trails consisted of the Chisholm Trail, the Shawnee Trail, and the Loving-Goodnight Trail.

²⁴ Durham and Jones, *The Negro Cowboys*, 44.

²⁵ De Angelis, *The Black Cowboys*, 49. The Code of the West is a synonymous term for the Cowboy Code.

²⁶ Durham and Jones, *The Negro Cowboys*, 37.

²⁷ Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, 59.

²⁸ It is important to note that as westward expansion continued, white Anglo-Americans violated the sovereignty of native people. Due to much distrust, deceit, and many negative encounters with the white outsiders, the confrontations often turned violent.

²⁹ Hanes, *Bill Pickett: Bulldogger*, 3.

³⁰ Teresa Palomo Acosta, "Black Cowboys," *Handbook of Texas Online*, (2010), <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/arb01>, accessed April 2, 2015.

³¹ De Angelis, *The Black Cowboys*, 76.

³² "Negro Cowboys Helped Old West," *The Chicago Defender*, July 24, 1954.

³³ During a short pit stop through the town of Deadwood, South Dakota, Love participated in a roping and shooting contest on a Fourth of July weekend. Love annihilated all of the competition in all three events, earning himself the nickname of "Deadwood Dick." The people of Deadwood proclaimed Love the champion roper of the western cattle country and a hero of Deadwood.

³⁴ Katz, *The Black West*, 150.

³⁵ Sarfraz Manzoor, "America's Forgotten Black Cowboys," *BBC News Magazine*, March 22, 2013, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-21768669>.

³⁶ Woody Phipps, "Trials of the Trail: African-American Cowboy Will Crittendon," *Texas A&M University Press*, 1984, <http://www.historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4934>. The brand man was the cowboy who marked the cattle with a permanent mark, representing the cattle ranch they belonged.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Matthew Ponsford, "America's black cowboys fight for their place in history," *CNN*, November 28, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/11/15/world/black-cowboys>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*