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Can I Get a Yee-Haw and an Amen: Collecting and Interpreting Oral Histories of Texas Cowboy Churches

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CAN I GET A YEE-HAW AND AN AMEN: COLLECTING AND INTERPRETING
INTERPRETING ORAL HISTORIES OF TEXAS COWBOY CHURCHES

By

JAKE R. MCADAMS, Bachelor of Arts

JAKE R. MCADAMS, Bachelor of Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Stephen F. Austin State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY

Mary Nellie Burson, Ed. D.

Associate Provost and Dean of the

DECEMBER 2013


CAN I GET A YEE-HAW AND AN AMEN: COLLECTING AND INTERPRETING
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ABSTRACT

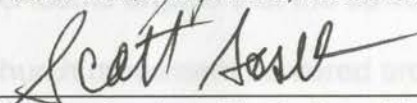
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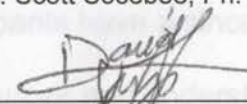
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ABSTRACT

With more than 850 Christian cowboy ministries worldwide and approximately 160 individual cowboy churches in Texas, the cowboy church movement is an immensely important religious movement that speaks volumes about contemporary culture. Cowboy churches' "Low Barriers Model" Christianity attracts many disenchanted with traditional evangelicalism's assumed sterilized and feminized religion. Despite the cowboy church movement's exponential growth since the late-1980s, few outside the movement understand the complexity cowboy churches envelop. Using Cowboy Christians' oral histories, Jake McAdams argues that the cowboy church movement is a suburban seeker church movement centered around the mythic cowboy identity in which participants have a sincere religious experience. Gaining invaluable primary sources and understanding the cowboy church movement in its historical contexts provides a "voice" to Cowboy Christians and allows interested individuals to better understand the complexities of contemporary Texas and American society.

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I want to thank all the Cowboy Christians that knowingly and unknowingly helped me complete my project. Truly, this project would have been impossible without your help. Of all the Cowboy Christians I interacted with over the four months of extensive research, I am particularly indebted to each of eighteen the interviewees: Janice Burton; Rex Crenshaw; Kenneth and Cynthia Danny; Rusty Highower; Stan and Caye King; Chris Maddox; Larry Miller; Gary Morgan; Ray and Paula Morris; Rodney and Kristi Spender; Tommy and Vivian Sublett; Russ Weaver; and Robert Wilson. Befriending each of you proved a real blessing that I will not forget. I especially want to thank Stan King for all of his support and interest in my academic and personal endeavors.

I also want to acknowledge the East Texas Historical Association for the generous grant to conduct my research and the various Association members that offered valuable critiques throughout my project. Additionally, I am deeply indebted to the continued support and guidance provided by each of my committee members: Dr. Paul J. P. Sandul; Dr. M. Scott Sosebee; Dr. David Rex-Galindo; and Dr. J. B. Watson. Certainly, this work would lack much of the insight it presents, and possibly not exist, had it not been for the

early discussions Sandul, Sosebee, and I had while sharing NUB's and beans.

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¹ Rodney and Kristi Spencal, interviewed by John McAdams, Neacogdoches, TX, July 2, 2013, Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, East Texas Research Center, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, TX (hereafter referred to as "ETRC").

² Kenneth and Cynthia Danny, interviewed by John McAdams, Washburn, TX, July 9, 2013, Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.

INTRODUCTION—LIVING WITH JOHN WAYNE AND JESUS

“[It is] not because you have a horse you get to come in, you know. Jesus, anybody can do it. . . . I would say we’ve got more people who are not actual cowboys here than cowboys because they’re comfortable.”

— Rodney Spencer, Impact Cowboy Church member¹

“This is the biggest religious movement in my lifetime . . . in this part of Texas, it’s huge.”

— Kenneth Denny, Cowboy Church of Ellis County member²

In 2001, Texas Country musician Pat Green released his album *Here We Go*, which features songs focused around Green’s life in Texas and adjacent states. Sandwiched between “George’s Bar” and “Me and Billy the Kid,” Green fits his less remembered song entitled “John Wayne and Jesus” in which Green recalls “meeting” John Wayne and Jesus as a Texas youth and both men, “had on their cowboy hats just like I pictured them.” Green continues singing that although his two heroes virtually sold out to Hollywood and MTV, he continues

¹ Rodney and Kristi Spencer, interviewed by Jake McAdams, Nacogdoches, TX, July 2, 2013, Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, East Texas Research Center, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, TX (hereafter referred to as “ETRC”).

² Kenneth and Cynthia Denny, interviewed by Jake McAdams, Waxahachie, TX, July 9, 2013, Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.

espousing these icons' teachings in Texas.³ "John Wayne and Jesus" is essentially a song of Texas nationalism that depicts Texans, to borrow a phrase from scholar John Bainbridge, as "Super Americans" that remain the final disciples of the United States' most influential pop icons: John Wayne and Jesus. These two figures embody the values and principles that, for many Texans, the United States and Texas were founded upon. John Wayne remains the ruggedly handsome, sharp-witted, fair, and courageous white masculine hero, the cowboy, which kills the bad guy and saves the damsel in distress. Jesus remains the moral and religious light, the eternal friend that offers salvation and fellowship and whom taught John Wayne how to act in the first place. As Green alludes to, these two icons are what American youth need, and their memories are constant reminders to remain fair, courageous, and Godly throughout one's life. Green might as well have entitled this song the "Cowboy Church Theme Song."⁴

The United States, especially the South and the West, has witnessed the dramatic creation and growth of the cowboy church movement. This movement has made newspaper and National Public Radio headlines as a unique brand of Christianity that encourages members to wear cowboy hats and ride horses to worship God. These popular op-ed pieces, though, highlight the abnormalities of cowboy churches and leave nonmembers to dismiss cowboy churches as the

³ "Pat Green—'John Wayne and Jesus,'" Cowboy Lyrics, accessed October 25, 2013, <http://www.cowboylyrics.com/lyrics/green-pat/john-wayne-and-jesus-2942.html>.

⁴ John Bainbridge, *The Super Americans* (New York City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961).

“Beer and Barbecue Church” where people play dress-up once a week and provide no substantial religious guidance. Nonetheless, the cowboy church movement continues to grow as Americans westernize their Protestant evangelicalism and sacralize the American cowboy. Cowboy churches largely maintain traditional evangelical theology and liturgy, such as the role of baptism and worship hymns. Nonetheless, cowboy churches differ from traditional evangelicals by presenting their Christianity with a western flare that capitalizes on American popular culture and citizens’ senses of history, specifically as it relates to the romanticized cowboy. This ever-growing movement provides places where cowboy church members, or “Cowboy Christians,” are encouraged to incorporate images and practices of assumed American rural and Western cultures into their worship services in which attendees can exclaim “Amen” and “yee-haw” within the same sermon.⁵

The lack of separation between the sacred and profane at cowboy churches, however, creates much confusion about the movement. Thanks to popular music, film, and the historic rodeo cowboy, many Americans associate cowboys with a riotous life of drunkenness, lasciviousness, and violence, which

⁵ Linda Owen, “Worship at the O. K. Corral: Cowboy Churches Shape Their Ministries for the Western at Heart,” *Christianity Today*, September 2003, 62-63 ; John Burnett, “Cowboy Church: With Rodeo Arena, They ‘Do Church Different,’” National Public Radio, last modified September 1, 2013, <http://www.npr.org/2013/09/01/217268202/cowboy-church-with-rodeo-arena-they-do-church-different>; and Gary Morgan, interviewed by Jake McAdams, Waxahachie, TX, July 11, 2013, Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC; and Impact Cowboy Church, worship service, Nacogdoches, TX, November 28, 2012.

fails to conform to so-called “Christian values” of sobriety, piety, and peacefulness. Because of this, many individuals not associated with the movement discount the legitimacy and significance of cowboy churches and even berate Cowboy Christians. In doing so, nonmembers believe that the cowboy church movement represents a new independent denomination, and others incorrectly define what “traditional” means based on this contemporary movement.⁶

Although cowboy churches are neither illegitimate nor homogenous, public confusion derives from the lack of available information about the cowboy church movement. The numerous popular education and news pieces about the movement mainly discuss the peculiarities of cowboy church worship, such as members’ attire and horse riding, and conspicuously lack quality interviews with Cowboy Christians. While Cowboy Christians readily use the internet to lasso perspective members and post their belief statements, these sites do not express the underlying cultural and social significance of the cowboy church movement nor adequately explain the movement’s growth. The institutional and academic scholarship about cowboy churches is sparser than popular pieces and nothing

⁶ Popular country songs such as country musicians Chris Ledoux and Garth Brooks’ 1992 song “Watcha Gonna Do With a Cowboy” and Jake Owen’s 2009 song “Can I Get a ‘Yee-Haw’” present cowboys and contemporary western culture as inherently profane and incompatible with perceived Christian values. Michael Allen, *Rodeo Cowboys in the North American Imagination* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998), 69; Anonymous to Stan King, 14 June 2013, unpublished letter, Impact Cowboy Church, Nacogdoches, TX; and Philip Stowe, Jr., *The Cowboy Church Movement: Lariat Ropes, Loud Mouth Women, and Loose Living* (Appleby, TX: Appleby Baptist Church, 2010).

exists that sufficiently chronicles the movement from its inception in the late 1970s. Because of the lack of primary and secondary sources, one must walk the proverbial mile in a Cowboy Christian's boots to understand this movement.⁷

To achieve this, I spent approximately a year conducting the "Can I Get a Yee-haw and an Amen" public history project with the Texas cowboy church community. This project entailed undertaking participant observation at cowboy church services, directing oral history interviews with eighteen Cowboy Christians throughout Texas, and donating the collected oral histories to the East Texas Research Center archive located at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas. During the project, I primarily worked with two churches that represent the heterogeneity of the cowboy church movement in Texas: the Baptist Cowboy Church of Ellis County (CCEC) in Waxahachie, which is approximately thirty miles south of Dallas; and the nondenominational Impact Cowboy Church (ICC) in Nacogdoches, which is approximately thirty miles north of Lufkin in East Texas. Baptist General Convention of Texas church planter Ron Nolen began the CCEC in 2000. As of the summer of 2013, the CCEC boasted more than 3,000 members and is considered the "flagship cowboy church for

⁷ Owen, "Worship at the O. K. Corral," in *Christianity Today*, 62-63 ; Burnett, "Cowboy Church," National Public Radio; "Our Beliefs," Cowboy Church of Ellis County, accessed July 5, 2013, <http://cowboyfaith.org/about-us/our-beliefs/>; "Home," Impact Cowboy Church of Nacogdoches, accessed, May 29, 2013, <http://impactcowboychurch.blogspot.com/search/label/About%20Us>; "We Believe," Shepherd's Valley Cowboy Church, accessed July 7, 2013, <http://www.shepherdsvalley.com/egan/index.php/about/belief>; and John W. Williford, Jr., "Ethereal Cowboy Way: An Ethnographic Study of Cowboy Churches Today" (doctoral dissertation, Regent University, 2011), 41.

Texas Baptists.”⁸ Stan and Caye King and Rex Crenshaw started the ICC in 2007 with approximately two dozen members in a rented building ten miles east of Nacogdoches. In the summer of 2013, the ICC claimed almost 300 members, owned fifty acres, and enjoyed a large presence in Nacogdoches. While I also consulted pastor Russ Weaver of the Shepherd’s Valley Cowboy Church in Cleburne and pastor Larry Miller of the Cowboy Church of Henrietta, the CCEC and the ICC account for the bulk of the “Can I Get a Yee-haw and an Amen” public history project. (Although the eighteen interviewed Cowboy Christians do not represent every Cowboy Christian in Texas, this demographically and geographically diverse sampling enables a critical, yet generalized, analysis of the cowboy church movement in Texas.)⁹

The following narrative, then, consists of two parts: first, explaining the cowboy church movement in Texas as a suburban seeker church movement centered around the American cowboy identity in which participants have a sincere religious experience; and, second, reflecting on my practice as oral and public historian. This resulting history is intended to contribute to both academic and public knowledge about the cowboy church movement.

⁸ Gregg Horn, “The History of the TFCC/AFCC” (unpublished, American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, Waxahachie, TX), 1.

⁹ Chris Maddox, interviewed by Jake McAdams, Waxahachie, TX, July 12, 2013, Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC; Stan King, interviewed by Jake McAdams, Nacogdoches, TX, June 4, 2013, Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC; and Caye King, interviewed by Jake McAdams, Nacogdoches, TX, June 17, 2013, Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC; and Rex Crenshaw, interviewed by Jake McAdams, Nacogdoches, TX, June 9, 2013, Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.

Understanding the current scholarship, or lack thereof, regarding the contemporary cowboy church movement is necessary to explain accurately the movement's significance. Scholars and others have written volumes about the historic and mythic cowboy. Ranging from historian Dee Brown's synthesis, *The American West*, to encyclopedic works, such as Time-Life Books' *The Cowboys*, to popular how-to books, and even cowboy poetry, numerous writers have chronicled seemingly every aspect of the American cowboy for multiple audiences. Although these works do not tell the cowboy church movement's history, examining them helps determine the historiographical gaps and popular conceptions of the American cowboy that lay at the heart of the movement.¹⁰

Also of importance are the few scholarly cowboy studies that examine the role religion played in the construction of the historical or mythical cowboy image. Many historians, including Brown, often associate religion with farmers and not cattlemen, especially not cowboys. While farmers doubtlessly participated in religion, cattlemen and cowboys also struggled to answer deep spiritual questions such as life's purpose, what is death, and if there is a supreme being. Monographs and anthologies about the historical cowboy, such as historians

¹⁰ Rocco Wachman and Matt Pellegrini's 2010 *Cowboy: The Ultimate Guide to Living Like a Great American Icon* (New York: Harper, 2010) explains to a popular audience what "living the cowboy life" requires of contemporary Americans. Ramon F. Adams's 2000 *Cowboy Lingo* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000) defines many words associated with ranching and rodeo. David Stevenson's 2005 *Cowboy Wisdom: What the World Could Learn From the Wit and Wisdom of the West* (Guilford: The Globe Pequot Press, 2005) is typical of popular books that explain the applicability of so-called "cowboy values" to contemporary society.

David Dary's *Cowboy Culture* and Paul Carlson's *The Cowboy Way*, overlook religion and focus instead on social, race, and labor history. As the life of cowboy itinerant preacher Ralph Hall and cowboy camp meetings of the late-nineteenth century depict, though, many cattlemen developed a devout brand of Christianity.¹¹

Other scholars study the popular memory of the mythic cowboy rather than the historic occupation. Studies including historians Albert Tucker's "Reel Cowboys: Cowhands and Western Movies" and Eric Hobsbawm's "The Myth of the Cowboy" explain that dime novels and popular entertainment romanticized the cowboy, often with xenophobic motivations, as a debonair hero that tamed the wild and lived off the land. Other studies, such as scholars Judith and Andrew Klienfeld's "Cowboy Nation and American Character" and communication scholar Jay Childers's "Cowboy Citizenship," explain that Americans adopted this mythic cowboy as their national icon during the Cold War to denote American exceptionalism and triumph over race, nature, and communism. American studies scholar Richard Slotkin expands beyond these works and discusses the "Myth of the Frontier" in twentieth-century American culture and politics in his hefty work entitled *Gunfighter Nation*. As the third volume in Slotkin's three-volume study of the frontier myth in the United States, he concludes that the constructed frontier myth shaped Americans' thoughts and politics since the

¹¹ Ralph J. Hall, *The Main Trail* (San Antonio, TX: Naylor Company, 1972).

colonial era, and the cowboy became the nation's hero during the twentieth century. Scholars even examine the popular memory of cowboy subcategories, such as historians Michael Allen's *Rodeo Cowboys in the North American Imagination* and Paul Reddin's *Wild West Shows*. Nevertheless, none of these scholars attempt to explain cowboys'—be they historic, contemporary, or mythic—relation to religion.

Cowboys' religious practices commonly fall to folklorists, lay writers, and novelists. Folklorists, such as Joseph Cadlo, for example, provide scholarship examining old cowboy songs as indicative of some historic cowboys' religious convictions.¹² By focusing primarily on songs, though, folklorists ignore religion in ranch-life and local church attendance. Many popular cowboy poetry and proverb collections, such as poet Virginia Bennett's *Cowboy Poetry* and writer James Owen's *Cowboy Values*, denote contemporary cowboy culture's obsession with religion and imply historical cowboys' devout religiosities with little evidence. Nonetheless, the proliferation of contemporary religious cowboy poetry and songs indicates a connection between Christianity and the cowboy myth that needs further exploration.

Scholar John Williford produced one of three extensive academic works examining cowboys' religious convictions, specifically manifested in contemporary cowboy churches. In his 2011 dissertation "Ethereal Cowboy

¹² Joseph Cadlo, "Life as Reflected in Cowboy Songs," *Western Folklore* 6, no. 4 (October 1947): 336.

Way," Williford confronts the cowboy myth, contemporary cowboy culture, and the cowboy church movement. As the first scholarly study of the movement, he aptly navigates between popular and critical thought to understand that Cowboy Christians use technology and symbolic interactionism to create a tightly knit and ever growing community of believers, much akin to sociologist Emile Durkheim's concept of mechanical solidarity.¹³ Williford's work provides a valuable foundation to build upon, but does not answer many underlying questions, namely, what is the movement's history. Additionally, Williford only examines three cowboy churches in the Southeast United States, without explaining any potential regional differences or even denominational variations. Furthermore, Williford unquestioningly identifies the cowboy church movement as a rural phenomenon due to members' perceived and stated cultural affiliations. Williford also provides minimal American religious or political contexts that help explain the movement's growth. These deficiencies demand further examination of the cowboy church movement, especially in the area where the movement began and remains strongest—Texas.

¹³ Emile Durkheim's notion of "mechanical solidarity through likeness" contends that solidarity (i.e., social cohesion) is based upon the likeness and similarities among individuals in a society and largely dependent on common rituals and routines. In the cowboy church movement, the actual devices fostering likeness and commonality are cowboy iconography and, during worship, performances and dress. Moreover, the continual appropriation of cowboy iconography and its dissemination are akin to such devices of solidarity as they are indeed about fashioning a shared sense (and definition) of community. See, Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1893; repr., New York: Free Press, 1997), 73-130.

Two later studies specifically examined the cowboy church movement in Texas. In 2011, Katy Williams completed her agricultural education and communications thesis for Texas A & M University titled "The Land-Grant Mission and the Cowboy Church," which examines cowboy churches' potential partnerships with universities to further agricultural education. Similar to Williford, Williams primarily analyzes cowboy churches' communication methods and her work largely ignores the movement's history. University of Florida religious scholar Sarah Moczygemba has substantially added to the critical understanding of the cowboy church movement's history and its social significance. In her 2013 Master's thesis "Rounding Up Christian Cowboys," Moczygemba discusses the cowboy church movement as a hybridization of the cowboy myth and Protestant evangelicalism and attributes the movement's growth to its promotion of masculinity. Most importantly, Moczygemba provides a more complete history of the movement than previous studies. While Moczygemba's conclusions are beneficial, she only performs ethnographic research with two cowboy churches affiliated with the Baptist's American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches in the Big Bend region. She defends her decision stating it allowed her to bypass the theological differences between the different denominationally affiliated churches that comprise the cowboy church movement. Her decision, however, leaves a large hole in the movement's history since it began with charismatic groups and separates the cowboy church movement from national Protestant trends, which

leads Moczygemba to conclude that the cowboy church movement is rural.

While these studies provide valuable understanding about the contemporary cowboy church movement, they do not sufficiently present the movement's history nor explain its significance in contemporary society. Additional religious, political, and suburban literature must be examined to better understand the cowboy church movement.¹⁴

As a religious movement, historic and recent religious trends must anchor any examination of the cowboy church movement. Works such as historians Nathan Hatch's *The Democratization of American Christianity* and Donald Mathews's *Religion in the Old South* are beneficial in contextualizing historic religious movements, especially the Second Great Awakening that championed many ideals subsequently permeating cowboy churches. The most valuable studies, though, are those written about post-1960 American Christianity. One book that spans such a chronological gap, however, is religious historian William McLoughlin's *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reforms* wherein he explains American history in terms of a long millenarian movement in which select, influential Americans identify as leading the nation and world into a new and more-perfect age, which saw great social and political changes caused by religious revivals. McLoughlin's work offers continuity to American Christian and social thought that many other scholars do not provide. Similarly, prominent American religious

¹⁴ Sarah Moczygemba, "Rounding Up Christian Cowboys: Myth, Masculinity, and Identity in Two Texas Congregations" (master's thesis, University of Florida, May 2013), 19.

scholar Stephen Prothero's *American Jesus* provides an easily-understood history of American Christianity, which encompasses Catholic, Protestant, and non-traditional views of Christianity. Prothero's work is especially helpful because it traces the American memory of Jesus and explains that groups re-remember Jesus as representative of, and responsible for, their cultures.¹⁵

Many religious scholars analyze post-1960 America from numerous perspectives, thus indicating the diversity and complexity of contemporary American Christianity. Sociologist and legal scholar Dean Kelley's seminal work, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*, presents an invaluable framework to analyze post-1960 American Christianity: the "strong church thesis." Kelley defines a "strong" church as one that requires extensive member commitments, has strict discipline that forces member conformity, maintains a rigid and often literal interpretation of the Bible that does not tolerate spiritual relativism, and has a strong missionary zeal to convert nonmembers. Kelley charts these "strong," or strict, churches are growing while "weak" ecumenical, or liberal, churches are declining. Kelley's framework is beneficial in explaining the cowboy church movement's growth in sociological terms and understanding how cowboy churches interact with traditional churches.

Since the cowboy church movement is indeed an evangelical movement, acknowledging religious sociologist Mark Shibley's *Resurgent Evangelicalism in*

¹⁵ William G. McLoughlin, *Revivals Awakenings and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change in America, 1607—1977* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), xiv.

the United States and historian D. G. Hart's *That Old-Time Religion in Modern America* help place the cowboy church movement within larger American evangelical trends. Of special note is Shibley's thesis of the "southernization of American religion and the Californication of conservative Protestantism."¹⁶ Shibley argues that Southern culture permeated and changed American religion during the 1970s and 1980s, but by Shibley's writing in 1996, American Protestantism became culturally-sensitive to draw members and essentially became popular culture. Hart further discusses the growth this trendy "contemporary Christian" culture and its political significance. Because Cowboy Christians share the same cultural heritage as Shibley's and Hart's subjects, these works historically contextualize the cowboy church movement.¹⁷

Religious sociologists Donald Miller's and Kimon Sargeant's American Protestant studies complement Shibley's earlier analysis of the new type of "Californicated" church. Miller examines three Southern California churches in his 1997 *ReInventing American Protestantism* to describe "new paradigm" churches: churches that have adopted contemporary worship styles to attract specific populations yet maintain morally strict theologies and literally interpret the Bible. Published in 2000, Sargeant studies the Willow Creek Community Church in Indiana and its unique quasi-denomination in his *Seeker Churches*. Sargeant

¹⁶Mark A. Shibley, *Resurgent Evangelicalism in the United States: Mapping Cultural Change since 1970* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 1.

¹⁷Dean M. Kelley, *Why conservative Churches are Growing* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1995), xviii, 84.

illustrates that Shibley's Californicated church and Miller's new paradigm churches are not confined to California, but really thrive throughout the nation. Miller and Sargeant both explain that these churches create liturgies and worship communities attractive to unchurched populations. As discussed later, these studies greatly compliment the cowboy church movement's overarching mentality and methodology.¹⁸

Nonetheless, these works are somewhat dated and do not account for the most recent trends within American Protestantism. For this, religious sociologist James Bielo's *Emerging Evangelicals* and evangelical theologians William Henard and Adam Greenway's *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent* are extremely beneficial. Bielo presents a history and analysis of the Emerging Church movement, which began in the mid-1990s with young evangelical pastors dissatisfied with contemporary evangelicalism and influenced by postmodern thinkers. Scholars and critics have labeled the emerging church movement as "postmodern Christianity," but adherents refute all labels and choose to describe the movement by what it is not. Despite the confusion over this new movement, members are dissatisfied with and criticize traditional evangelicalism, which they perceive as sterile, empty, and unauthentic. Most Emerging Church members highly value Bible-only sermons, explore worshipping God in nontraditional ways, and are very community-focused. While Bielo and other scholars approach the

¹⁸ Donald Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 1-2.

Emerging Church movement with great confusion, traditional evangelicals express even more confusion and, at times, out-right disdain towards it. Henard and Greenway's anthology is primarily filled with essays written by evangelicals explaining to an evangelical audience what and how sinful the Emerging Church movement is. *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent* helps provide a more complete spectrum of contemporary Protestant thought. Additionally, Emerging Church member Ed Stetzer's article included in the anthology describes the Emerging Church movement as comprising of three sections: those with traditional theologies and nontraditional liturgies; those with traditional theologies and liturgies but nontraditional meeting arrangements; and those with nontraditional theologies or liturgies. These works help explain many of the recent and controversial trends in American Christianity and outline the religious marketplace in which the cowboy church movement fits.¹⁹

As scholars Hatch and Prothero depict, religious movements do not occur within a vacuum, but are reflective of what social theorist Anthony Giddens and others refer to as the "duality of structure," whereby religion is both the medium and outcome of social, political, cultural, and other forces and social structures. Therefore, also reading cultural and political histories are important to understand the secular factors that helped breathe life into the cowboy church movement.

¹⁹ James S. Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 6, 45-46; and Ed Stetzer, "The Emergent/Emerging Church: A Missiological Perspective," in *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent*, ed. William D. Henard and Adam W. Greenway (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2009) 72.

One such work is David Fillingim's *Redneck Liberation* wherein Fillingim analyzes country music as blue-collar "theology," which most accurately depicts the listener's struggles and beliefs. Since most Cowboy Christians listen to country music, Fillingim's study provides a unique cultural and psychological context to the movement's members. While purely a secular analysis, Fillingim opens opportunities for future analyses into contemporary cowboy and blue-collar religiosity.²⁰

Political histories of recent American conservatism and the New Christian Right help contextualize the movement, especially since most Cowboy Christians identify as socially and politically conservative and Republican. While many contemporary religious scholars discuss evangelicalism's rise in political power, historian Lisa McGirr's *Suburban Warriors* provides a secular account of the growth of post-World War II conservatism. McGirr depicts the growth of contemporary political conservatism as a predominately suburban, college-educated, middle-class movement that succeeded in the 1980s due to grass roots activism and evangelical support dating to the late-1940s. Journalist Peggy Noonan's biography of Ronald Reagan, *When Character Was King*, continues

addressing historians Kenneth Jackson, Robert Felton, and Margaret

²⁰ Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), 5. Giddens's "duality of structure" is very similar to sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "habitus," which he defines as a "structured and structuring structure." See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (1979; repr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 171. David Fillingim, *Redneck Liberation: Country Music as Theology* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2003), 6.

the chronology where McGirr finishes in the early 1980s. Noonan's unapologetic portrayal of Reagan as the new right's messiah-type leader provides a good depiction of how many citizens, including many Cowboy Christians, remember the past president, whether accurate or not. Quite different than Noonan, historian Hyrum Lewis's article, "Historians and the Myth of American Conservatism," challenges historians to move beyond the well-examined "triumphalist narrative" of American conservatism, which focuses on its ascendancy, to examining post-World War II conservatism along an evolutionary paradigm. Integrating these different perspectives into an examination of the cowboy church movement greatly improves its academic relevance.²¹

Suburban literature is also necessary to more fully understand the cowboy church movement. As recent sociologists and demographers note, America is a suburban nation. Suburban scholars argue this is not a new phenomenon, but suburbia grew enormously after World War II and, subsequently, the American economy, politics, and character became more suburban-centric. Because the United States is a suburban nation, future scholars should address American suburbs and notions of suburbanism in future studies. Several early suburban scholars, including historians Kenneth Jackson, Robert Fishman, and Margaret

²¹ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 8; Peggy Noonan, *When Character Was King: A Story of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 133; and Hyrum Lewis, "Historians and the Myth of American Conservatism," *The Journal of the Historical Society* 12, no. 1 (March 2012): 42.

Marsh, chronicle suburban development in the western world, specifically the United States. These scholars discuss suburbs as geographical places, but also as mindsets that champion, and distort, notions of ideal space, simplicity, cleanness, and affluence. These early scholars discuss that suburbs are molded by, and perpetuate, tensions associated with race, gender, and labor, and that suburbs often reduce residents and nonresidents to stereotypes. Since suburbs have historically housed mostly white, Protestant, and affluent individuals, which many Cowboy Christians are indeed, these histories provide further insight into a robust suburban mindset and help define the cowboy church movement.²²

Later research discussing new urbanism and rural urbanism is also important to understand American land development patterns and the cowboy church movement. In her book *Building Suburbia*, architectural historian Dolores Hayden provides another history of American suburbia focusing on its design and rhetoric, specifically as it pertained to women and ethnoracial minorities. Hayden concludes, however, by discussing new urbanist communities that combine nostalgia with futurism to create a unique suburban environment. Paired with John Williford's cowboy church dissertation, Hayden's discussion presents valuable insight into the possible motivations Cowboy Christians have and help place them within the suburban spectrum. Scholars including Laura Barraclough

²² U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and U. S. Census Bureau, *American Housing Survey for the United States: 2009* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2011), 2; and Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 3-4.

and Paul Sandul also explore rural urbanism and “agriburbs.” In their examinations of California suburbs, these scholars present suburbanism and “rurality” as cultivated identities and spaces. Analyzing their arguments through the lens of place theory helps discern the real and perceived differences between rural and suburban, and understanding the cultural, social, and psychological interpretations of cowboy churches to their members.

The following chapters discuss the history and significances of the contemporary cowboy church movement, as well as explain the process of collecting and using Cowboy Christians’ oral histories within this public history project. Chapter one discusses the history and “essence” of this seeker church movement. Tracing its origins from religious services held at rodeos in the 1970s, the cowboy church movement’s growth coincides with the national rise of political conservatism and a new form of American Christianity. What apparently attracts members and has largely enabled the movement’s exponential growth over the past two decades is its “Low Barriers Model,” which aims to remove the perceived “unnecessary barriers” that “religion” puts between humans and God and cultivates a “real” and masculine Christianity for Cowboy Christians. Analyzing members’ oral histories about the Christianity provided by the cowboy church movement, or “Cowboy Christianity,” to what they describe as “traditional” Protestant evangelicalism, places the cowboy church movement within an established and ever-growing movement of American Christianity. I explain that

the cowboy church movement is not an isolated religious movement occurring along the North American rodeo circuit as other scholars, but rather another manifestation of the socially and culturally sensitive Christianity promoted throughout the nation.²³

Chapter two examines Cowboy Christians' identities and proposes a suburban trend for the cowboy church movement. While scholars and various publics present numerous definitions for "cowboy," understanding how Cowboy Christians define "cowboy" is paramount in discerning what a Cowboy Christianity is and why the movement is even called the cowboy church movement. As collected oral histories indicate, what a "cowboy" is to Cowboy Christians very really influences Cowboy Christians' everyday lives and beliefs as they attempt to emulate their icon. In doing so, most identify with the political right, explaining their decisions by Biblical instructions and cultural values associated with "rural America." Chapter two concludes by critically examining what the "rural America" Cowboy Christians belong to is in reality. This, again, presents a great deviation from other cowboy church scholars that firmly place the movement as rural. Using previous scholarship and collected information from surveyed Texas cowboy churches, I explain that the cowboy church movement is a type of suburban movement and predominately attracts suburbanites, whom, as historians have shown, commonly appropriate notions of

²³ Morgan, interviewed by McAdams.

“rurality” as central to self and group meaning making. Whether examining Cowboy Christians’ philosophies, occupations, or residences, the vast majority of Texas Cowboy Christians are suburbanites and the cowboy church movement represents another way for those suburbanites to own a piece of rural America and identify with historically and culturally important ideas.

Chapter three provides a reflection and critique of my oral history with the Texas cowboy church community. As eminent oral historian Paul Thompson notes, a major objective of oral history projects are to provide underrepresented groups a “voice” in society by recording their memories. Evidenced by wide-ranging public misunderstandings and lack of critical studies, the cowboy church movement is underrepresented and misrepresented in contemporary society. This chapter discusses that conducting, recording, and archiving these Cowboy Christians’ memories helps legitimize the movement to scholars and the public. I also describe the many roles I served (including director, interviewer, transcriber, and chronicler) and varying duties performed (ranging from community advocate to technical manager) during this public history project and how it compares to oral history theory and approved best practices. Additionally, this chapter provides reflections about my success, and challenges, as a public historian during “Can I Get a Yee-haw and an Amen” public history project.²⁴

²⁴ Paul Thompson, “The Voice of the Past: Oral History,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2003), 24-25.

Indulge a brief word about this project and the following chapters before continuing. Any study of religion and culture relies on and uses jargon and many technical terms. To clarify my usage of terms and help readers, here are several key terms that may have already appeared and certainly will in the following pages.

“Evangelicalism” is a word seemingly used by everyone, thus everybody is supposed to know the definition of Protestant evangelicalism. Nonetheless, scholars indicate it is an obscure, abstract term that has permeable boundaries. Kimon Sargeant explains “evangelicalism as a mosaic that includes groups as diverse as strict separatist fundamentalists and black Pentecostals.”²⁵

“Evangelicalism,” then, is the umbrella term that encompasses Protestant fundamentalists, charismatics, and those who refute those labels but self-identify as evangelical. The use of “evangelicalism” in this work refers to Protestant denominations and individuals that believe “a spiritual rebirth, acknowledging personal sinfulness and Christ’s atonement, is essential to salvation,” typically interpret the Bible literally, maintain a zeal to convert nonmembers, and have a shared religious experience that includes similar songs and modes of worship.²⁶

“Traditional evangelicalism” and “traditional churches” are a little easier to define. Similar to “evangelicalism,” these terms appear throughout much of the

²⁵ Kimon Howland Sargeant, *Seeker Churches: Promoting Traditional Religion in a Nontraditional Way* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000) 151.

²⁶ Shibley, *Resurgent Evangelicalism*, 20-21.

contemporary American Christianity studies, specifically the seeker church and Emerging Church literature. "Traditional Christianity" often refers to churches that maintain religious doctrines (theology) and worship performances (liturgy) that have changed little since the nineteenth century. Cowboy Christians most often identified "traditional churches" as those that maintained professional dress and a structured offering during worship services. For this study, "traditional evangelicalism" and "traditional churches" most often refers to non-cowboy churches that affiliate with evangelical or mainline Protestant denominations including Baptist, Assemblies of God, Methodists, and Churches of Christ and do not primarily provide contemporary worship services.

"Charismatic" is another theological distinction made within the cowboy church movement. Occasionally referred to as "spirit-filled," charismatic Christians, or "charismatics," believe in a more transcendent, yet immediate spiritual relationship and fulfillment of the Christian godhead. As scholar Donald Miller explains, charismatics have a much more emotionally and physically expressive worship than other evangelicals and believe in the personal reception and performance of "gifts of the Holy Spirit," which often include "speaking in tongues," prophesying, and healing. Charismatics also generally interpret the Bible literally. As Cowboy pastor Stan King explains, "Pentecostals" are different than "charismatics" in that every Pentecostal is a charismatic, but every charismatic is not a Pentecostal. Pentecostalism began in the early-twentieth

century as a new denomination that required demonstrating gifts of the Holy Spirit as confirmation of salvation, whereas charismatic Christianity grew as a charismatic renewal within other denominations during the mid-twentieth century and do not believe confirmation of spiritual gifts are prerequisites of salvation. Despite this difference, “charismatics” is used here as an inclusive term for Pentecostals and other charismatic Cowboy Christians.²⁷

“Mainline churches” are typically more theologically ecumenical, or willing to overlook theological differences, than evangelical churches. Episcopalians, Presbyterians, the United Churches of Christ, Lutherans, and the Methodists commonly comprise the mainline religious presence in a locale. Since the 1960s, the public, church leaders, and religious scholars, such as Dean Hoge and Dean Kelley, have discussed and attempted to explain the decline of mainline Protestantism in the United States.²⁸

²⁷ “Transcendence” refers to belief in a God or having an experience not of the world, or not “natural.” This is opposed to “immanence,” meaning of this world, in which believers experience God in nature and the mundane. Charismatics’ beliefs in practicing spiritual gifts enable them to transcend problems and forces of the earth. Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 14, 23, 93; and Stan King, pers. comm., June 17, 2013. For more concerning the history of American Pentecostalism, see Robert M. Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979).

²⁸ Ecumenism refers to involving people from different denominations, or multi-denominationalism. “Ecumenical churches” seek to unify all that identify as “Christian,” thus commonly minimizing doctrinal differences, which allows for spiritual relativism and celebrating individual diversity among members and nonmembers. For more information about the decline of mainline churches see Dean R. Hoge, Benton Johnson, and Donald A. Luidens, *Vanishing Boundaries: The Religion of Mainline Protestant Baby Boomers* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994); and Dean M. Kelley, *Why conservative Churches are Growing*.

“Nondenominational” is another term occasionally used. This term simply means a church or group of Christians that do not affiliate with any larger denomination. Within the cowboy church movement, nondenominational churches or fellowships commonly draw people from varying religious backgrounds and provide Bible-centered messages, which typically maintain a literal interpretation. Pastors and nondenominational church members are often charismatic, but rarely require members to agree about the extent of spiritual gifts.²⁹

“Unchurched” simply refers to people that currently do not attend a church. As discussed later, many unchurched in the United States, especially those drawn to the cowboy church movement, have an evangelical background. This might be because their older relatives or guardians grew up as evangelicals, they themselves grew up as evangelicals, or they encountered evangelical culture at some point in their life.

“Seeker” or “religious seeker” is commonly used parallel or synonymous to “unchurched.” Yet, this is not always the case as many seekers are in fact “churched” and might just be “church shopping.” Likewise, many “unchurched” are content in their spirituality and do not seek to join organized religion, least of all a Christian church. While a more detailed explanation of “seeker” is provided

²⁹ Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; and Stan King, interviewed by McAdams.

later, it is important to note that “seeker” and “unchurched” are not always the same.

CHAPTER 1—COME-AS-YOU-ARE CHRISTIANITY

There are also numerous “cowboy Christian” terms. For example, “Cowboy Christianity” refers to the Christian religion provided at Christian rodeo services and stationary cowboy churches that “Cowboy Christians” attend. “Cowboy ministry” and “cowboy ministers” refers specifically to the Christian rodeo services and those that minister in rodeo services. “Cowboy pastors” refers to the ministers of stationary, permanent cowboy churches. “Cowboy Christianity” and “Cowboy Christians” are capitalized throughout whereas other “cowboy Christian” terms are not, including “cowboy church movement.” This pattern is common among other religious literature, namely Donald Miller’s *Reinventing American Protestantism*. The purpose for this is to indicate the unique religion and community of believers associated with the cowboy church movement.

Jesus Christ and should live according to the minister's interpretation of the Bible. Christianity, especially Protestant evangelicalism, sets a premium on understanding and agreement among members; that is why the early Christian apostles, including Paul and Peter, supposedly wrote their instructing letters that comprise the majority of the New Testament in the first place. If all Christian worship services and sermons are intended to be understood, then why is understandability so important to Cowboy Christian Robert Wilson? What specific

¹ Robert Wilson, interviewed by Jake McDermott, Waco, Texas, TX, July 29, 2013, Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.

CHAPTER 1—COME-AS-YOU-ARE CHRISTIANITY

“To me, it’s just a bunch of people who enjoy serving the Lord in a peaceful, down-to-earth surrounding. It’s serving the Lord just like any place I’ve ever been, as far as that’s concerned. But the way we do it, it seems to be so much more pleasing and comfortable and comforting. We understand it.”

— Robert Wilson, Cowboy Church of Ellis County member¹

Ask a communicator what they desire from their audience and commonly the answer is understanding and, even more, agreement. For Christian ministers, especially evangelicals, their audiences’ understanding and agreeing with them is paramount as they believe that people can only gain spiritual salvation through Jesus Christ and should live according to the minister’s interpretation of the Bible. Christianity, especially Protestant evangelicalism, sets a premium on understanding and agreement among members; that is why the early Christian apostles, including Paul and Peter, supposedly wrote their instructing letters that comprise the majority of the New Testament in the first place. If all Christian worship services and sermons are intended to be understood, then why is understandability so important to Cowboy Christian Robert Wilson? What specific

¹ Robert Wilson, interviewed by Jake McAdams, Waxahachie, TX, July 29, 2013, Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.

qualities do Wilson and other Cowboy Christians think make cowboy churches understandable as opposed to other churches? Do you have to be a cowboy to “understand” the Cowboy Christianity provided at cowboy churches? If cowboy churches are understandable, then why do other churches not emulate them—yet alone understand them?²

While few scholars so far have asked these questions, the public increasingly ponders such inquiries as they drive through Texas and other states, noticing the increasing number of cowboy churches. In fact, many nonmembers see cowboy churches commonly with their barn-looking meetinghouse and rodeo arena and wonder if they are Christian at all and worship the cowboy. Some critics even mock the movement as a “feel good Christianity” that is chocked full of sin and unrepentant sinners who get together and play dress-up. While these criticisms hold some validity as academic questions, as later discussed, Cowboy Christians indicate that cowboy churches generally do not “worship” the cowboy and offer a “feel-good Christianity” as popularly understood. If this is the case, then what is the cowboy church movement? What type of person is a Cowboy Christian? What, if any, is the significance of this movement? Answering these

questions requires placing the proverbial microphone up to the Cowboy

² Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, 101.

Christians themselves and critically listening to their own testimonies about the cowboy church movement and how they fashion their own identities.³

Cowboy Christians recognize themselves as Christians foremost. They might also identify as cowboys, Americans, rural dwellers, teachers, medical professionals, middle class, blue collar, or even ex-convicts, but they remain Christians first. The cowboy church movement must thus be recognized as a religious movement because of members' proclaimed identities. The question remains however: what type of religious movement is this? Historians, sociologists, and others document the plethora of American religious movements since mid-century, each complete with unique cultural, social, psychological, and political markers. Similarly, the contemporary cowboy church movement has a definable history with political, social, economic, and cultural contexts from which it originated and continues to function.

This chapter explains the cowboy church movement as a transdenominational evangelical seeker church movement that originated by delivering an applicable message to a unique population at a specific point in history, and attribute's the movement's continued growth to maintaining cultural

³ Stan King, pers. comm., June 17, 2013; and Philip Stowe, Jr., *Lariat Ropes, Loud Mouth Women, and Loose Living*, 1. "Feel-good Christianity" is an increasingly popular phrase many evangelicals use to describe a Biblical interpretation and, thus practiced Christianity, in which people seemingly pervert strict Biblical teachings to make themselves feel good by excusing personal sins and focusing on the peace God supposedly provides to a believer. See Jen Pollock Michel, "The Feel Good Faith of Evangelicals," *Christianity Today*, last modified June 18, 2013, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2013/june/feel-good-faith-of-evangelicals.html>; and T. M. Luhrman, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship With God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

and social relevance in contemporary American society. Despite others' attempts, it is important not to disassociate the cowboy church movement from the broader American Christian movement attempting to perform Jesus' "Great Commission" of converting non-believers and provide a more authentic, or "real," Christianity. Examining the cowboy church movement's history, Cowboy Christians' oral histories, and cowboy church services provides much-needed insight into Cowboy Christianity.

The History Of The Cowboy Church Movement

The contemporary cowboy church movement became active in the mid-1980s, but it traces origins to rodeo services in the 1970s. By mid-century, rodeo attracted participation from contemporary working cattlemen and rodeo cowboys throughout the western United States and Canada. Rodeos became so popular by the mid-1900s that Hollywood produced rodeo themed movies, Nashville published rodeo themed songs, universities developed rodeo athletic programs, and rodeoing proved a large-scale, professional occupation. Additionally, many Western communities incorporated rodeos into county and community fairs, functioning as sources of economic boosterism and displays of civic pride. The

Certainty, moving picture stars such as Gene Autry and Roy Rogers convinced

¹Allen, *Rodeo Cowboys in the North American Imagination*, 25, 30.

cowboy, of course, stole the show within these performances as their central character.⁴

Still in the middle of the Cold War, Americans in the 1970s saw the cowboy as emblematic of America. This American cowboy, as represented in dime novels, television, and film, heroically braved an untamed natural environment, Native American “savages,” and thieving highwaymen. He conquered evil with his inherent good, saved the damsel in distress, and rode away alone at dusk. This romanticized, ruggedly individualistic, hyper-masculine patriot embodied American exceptionalism and upheld the renowned Turnerian frontier myth, which attributes the United States’ moral and economic “superiority” to the frontier. For mid-century United States citizens, the cowboy clearly defined America’s superiority over Soviet communists and provided many a way to flee the doldrums and hardships of reality. Appreciated for decades as an effective escape mechanism, Western movies provided Americans of all ages a chance to retreat from their complicated modern lives into the “simpler times” of the rural yesteryear. Conservative evangelicals further championed the cowboy as their mascot because he proved unafraid of evil forces, as portrayed in film by men in black hats, and turned to God as he worked with God’s creation.

Certainly, moving picture stars such as Gene Autry and Roy Rogers convinced

⁴ Allen, *Rodeo Cowboys in the North American Imagination*, 25, 35.

Americans of this “fact” with their cowboy Ten Commandments that instructed youth in civil and spiritual obedience.⁵

By the 1970s, however, actual rodeo cowboys rarely resembled their mythic namesakes and many lived “un-Christian” lives. One simple explanation for this reality is that rodeo cowboys traveled most weekends participating in various rodeo circuit events. These events often lasted late on Saturday nights and concluded on Sundays, which discouraged many from attending church services. Additionally, many rodeo cowboys participated in “un-godly” practices, especially drinking alcohol, which discouraged many to participate in religious lives. Furthermore, many rodeo cowboys did not meet, and even despised, churches’ Sunday morning “dress codes.” Because of these causes, many rodeo

⁵ The “Turnerian Frontier,” or the frontier myth, derives from historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s paper “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” delivered at the American Historical Association meeting on July 12, 1893. Turner argued that the American frontier is what made the United States great, as it provided Americans moral guidance and an opportunity for continual entrepreneurship. In other words, the frontier emerged as a place that required the creation of American institutions, housing stock, and social relationships that, for Turner, guaranteed the spread of American democracy and its necessary renewal forward—geographically and temporally. Yet, with the U. S. Census Bureau designating the “closing of the frontier” in 1890, Turner feared a national crisis in which the loss of the frontier sealed off the “safety valve” of American democratic spirit promised calamity. Turner’s momentous paper created the “Turnerian” school of thought among historians and writers and greatly affected national memory. For example, in *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), Richard Slotkin discusses in detail the importance and consequences of the frontier myth in American society, especially during the Cold War years. Slotkin explains this frontier myth enables a violent, racialized mentality in which Americans found encouragement and justification to enact domestic and international policies wrapped in a language of spreading democracy, which often marginalized or oppressed minorities or so-called “others” at home and abroad. Eric Hobsbawm, “The Myth of the Cowboy,” *The Guardian*, last modified March 20, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/mar/20/myth-of-the-cowboy>; and Albert B. Tucker, “Reel Cowboys: Cowhands and Western Movies,” in *The Cowboy Way: An Exploration of History and Culture*, ed. Paul Carlson (Stroud, Glos.:Tempus, 2006.), 203-204.

participants remained unchurched because the provided for Christian options proved irrelevant and incompatible with their lives. Moreover, according to former rodeo participant Russ Weaver, many unchurched rodeo participants even mocked and occasionally assaulted Christian rodeo participants.⁶

Within this seemingly hostile atmosphere, Christian rodeo participants began holding church services at rodeos by the 1970s. These early, nondenominational rodeo church services provided an informal environment for Christian rodeo participants to worship God on Sundays before that night's competition. Many prominent rodeo athletes, including Wilbur Plaughter and Mark Schriker, held services at the rodeos in which they participated. These services quickly gave rise to three Christian rodeo cowboy associations. Ted Pressley began the theologically Baptist "Cowboys for Christ" in 1970 that primarily ministered in the eastern United States and two charismatic organizations, Glenn Smith's "Rodeo Cowboys Ministry" and Plaughter and Schriker's "Fellowship of Christian Cowboys," began soon after and mainly along the western rodeo circuits. These early rodeo services attracted Christian and non-Christian rodeo participants and spectators and typically occurred in the arena on Sunday mornings. Despite starting small, these professional-circuit rodeo "come-as-you-

⁶ Maddox, interviewed by McAdams; and Russ Weaver, interviewed by Jake McAdams, Egan, TX, July 12, 2013, Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.

are” services gained popularity and experienced as many as 300 attendees at a single service.⁷

Rodeo services quickly spread to collegiate rodeos. Numerous religious scholars, including D. G. Hart and Donald Miller, explain the United States experienced an evangelical revival during the 1970s that witnessed the growth of charismatic Christianity. Antipathy of modernism, which young Christians perceived as sterile, materialistic, and out of touch with Jesus, and the political and moral liberalism of the 1960s counterculture proved leading motivations for this movement. To remedy these perceived social and religious failings, many reexamined contemporary Christian narratives with Biblical texts and found them wanting. Taking a literal interpretation of the Bible, these Christians stressed the importance of the Holy Spirit and Biblical authority, subsequently reimagining other evangelical and mainline Christians’ notions of sacred and reverence. Often appealing to like-minded youth, these young pastors met in untypical spaces and provided attractive, culturally relevant liturgies and teachings. Infected by this spirit-filled era and the professional-circuit rodeo services, charismatic collegiate rodeo athletes zealously sought to save the lost. It is these

⁷ “Tribute to Ted,” Cowboys for Christ, accessed August 19, 2013, 2013, <http://www.cowboysforchrist.net/tributetoted.html>; “Cowboy Church to Feature Hall-of-Famer Wilbur Plaughter,” *Sierra Star*, last modified May 1, 2013 <http://www.sierrastar.com/2013/05/01/62395/cowboy-church-to-feature-hall.html>; and Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

collegiate rodeoers who primarily developed the contemporary cowboy church movement.⁸

Key among this group were Russ and Randy Weaver. Sons of Assemblies of God preacher Jasper Weaver, Russ and Randy participated in rodeos throughout the northwest, and the family became charter members of the Fellowship of Cowboy Christians. Influenced by their father, older brother Russ attended two years of seminary school before transferring to Weber State University in Ogden, Utah, where Randy attended, in 1973. These two excelled in collegiate rodeo and participated at the College National Finals Rodeo in 1976 and 1977. At the 1976 College National Finals Rodeo, calf-roping participant and charismatic Christian George Allen Yocham persuaded Russ to use his ministerial training and conduct the first church service at the College National Finals Rodeo. Weaver agreed and held service at the annual rodeo until Ted Pressley began his College National Finals Rodeo ministry in 1980.⁹

These collegiate rodeo Christians intensified the fervor of the professional-circuit rodeo services in the early 1980s. With approximately ten years to grow their prestige and perfect their proceedings, the three rodeo Christian fellowships became prominent within the rodeo society before this zealous group of young rodeo Christians entered the professional circuit. The different fellowships

⁸ D. G. Hart. *That Old-Time Religion in Modern America: Evangelical Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2002.), 150-151; Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 182; and Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

⁹ Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

functioned as quasi-denominations with outposts throughout North America and the participant-preachers baptized numerous rodeo athletes and spectators. None of the fellowships, however, had any official denominational recognition until Russ Weaver and Paul Scholtz received appointments by the Assemblies of God to minister to rodeo cowboys in 1980. These appointments signaled the professionalizing era of cowboy ministry. Before Weaver's and Scholtz's appointments, cowboy ministry entailed rodeo athletes who primarily attended rodeos to compete and circumstantially also led church services for others. After these appointments, a growing percentage of rodeo participants self-identified as ministers, commonly had seminary training, and competed in rodeos solely to preach Christianity at rodeo services. Also during this professionalization period, cowboy ministers received financial support from Christian denominations and the different ministers coordinated with each other to cover the entire circuit and routinize services. This professionalization of cowboy ministry increased conversion rates, which in turn led to a growing acceptance of rodeo cowboys as Christians. Weaver explains that cowboy ministers successfully turned the rodeo society to God and away from some of its secular beliefs and actions during this professionalizing era.¹⁰

The widespread acceptance and growth of rodeo services led to establishing the first stationary and permanent cowboy churches in the mid-

¹⁰ Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

1980s. Preaching at every available opportunity, cowboy ministers quickly won rodeo cowboys' approvals and Russ Weaver and Jeff Copenhaver held the first Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association's National Finals Rodeo church services in Las Vegas, Nevada, in 1985. Billy Bob Barnett, owner of Billy Bob's Texas honky-tonk in Fort Worth, Texas, attended this service. Barnett appreciated Weaver and Copenhaver's message and invited Copenhaver to hold services in the indoor bull-riding ring at Billy Bob's Texas during the 1986 Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo. According to Copenhaver, over 200 attended these services, which led Barnett and Copenhaver to create a two-year contract to hold weekly church services in the honky-tonk. Although originally connected to the regional Fort Worth rodeo, Copenhaver's church at Billy Bob's Texas proved the first stationary contemporary cowboy church in the world.¹¹

Many cowboy ministers continued the rodeo ministry, working with various Christian associations and denominations to reach the rodeo culture. Maintaining their quasi-denominational function, the cowboy Christian associations provided a professional support network to cowboy ministers and Christian rodeo cowboys. These associations founded numerous regional groups throughout the United States, which evidenced, and encouraged, the growing number of cowboy ministers in the rodeo circuits. By working with the Christian associations and

¹¹ Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; and Jeff Copenhaver, "America's First Cowboy Church," Copenhaver Ministries, accessed August 22, 2013, <http://jeffcopenhaver.com/firstcowboychurch.html>.

denominations, cowboy ministers provided a coherent doctrine to Christian rodeoers that primarily modeled charismatic theology, especially the Assemblies of God's school of belief, thus, spirit-filled theology converted many rodeo cowboys.¹²

The charismatics' successes are largely due to appeals to the working class and the national growth of political conservatism. The charismatic theologies preached by rodeo cowboy ministers proclaimed Biblical literalism, an impending physical destruction of the earth, and a relief from life's hardships through salvation in Jesus Christ, which engendered an urgency to convert. Religious scholars Joel Robbins and Donald Miller maintain that such theologies historically attract lower socio-economic people by providing them a way to relieve their more abject lots in life. Charismatic Christianity's transcendent nature incited religious urgency for so-called American "patriots" during the Cold War and measured God's favor for the nation by a morality index. As historians Lisa McGirr and Edward Larson depict, the United States' mid-century modernization and perceived moral degradation activated evangelicals to collaborate with economically conservative libertarians and neoconservatives to legislate morality and military hawkishness. Attractive to evangelicals and conservatives, the pious, gun-slinging mythic cowboy became the movement's

¹² Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; "FCC Chapters," Fellowship of Christian Cowboys, accessed September 5, 2013, http://www.christiancowboys.com/?page_id=49; and "Chapters," Cowboys for Christ, accessed September 5, 2013, <http://www.cowboysforchrist.net/uschapters2.php>.

talisman. Furthermore, America's then-current president, Ronald Reagan, embodied everything good, even holy, about the new conservatism. He proved an economic conservative, he cultivated the persona of the hard-working cowboy by working at his California ranch, he professed a devout belief in God, and he opposed communism at every opportunity. This growth of national political conservatism, which contemporary Cowboy Christians self-acclaim, paired well with cowboy ministers' transcendent religions, thus enabling more stationary cowboy churches to develop in the early 1990s.¹³

By 1995, few stationary cowboy churches existed, but most that did were in Texas. After Copenhaver founded the cowboy church at Billy Bob's Texas, he moved locations several times before settling the church in Granbury, Texas, in the early 1990s and renamed it Triple Cross Cowboy Church. Several appreciated his model, namely Canadian cowboy minister Phil Doan who began a cowboy church in Calgary, Alberta, and Harry and Joanne Yates whom started a church in Nashville, Tennessee by 1990. As these early churches grew in size and influence, more cowboy ministers quit ministering on the rodeo circuit and founded stationary cowboy churches.¹⁴

¹³ Joel Robbins, "The Globalization of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 33 (2004): 118, 125; Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 5; Edward Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 261-262; McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 16; and Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 643-645.

¹⁴ Jeff Copenhaver, "America's First Cowboy Church," Copenhaver Ministries, accessed August 22, 2013, <http://jeffcopenhaver.com/firstcowboychurch.html>.

The Cowboy Church of Henrietta, Texas, has a direct connection to the rodeo services. Many of the founding members of the Cowboy Church of Henrietta attended a rodeo Christian fellowship in Iowa Park, Texas, (located approximately twenty miles northwest of Wichita Falls in North Texas) in the 1980s and early 1990s. This fellowship had minimal organization and met every other week to provide a nondenominational Christian message. In 1992, oil-field worker and recreational rodeo cowboy Larry Miller and several other Iowa Park members discussed starting a permanent Cowboy Church in Henrietta, where many of the Iowa Park attendees lived (Henrietta is approximately twenty miles southeast of Wichita Falls). In January 1993, Miller met with Henrietta Horse Sale Barn owner Danny McClain, who agreed to let Miller hold biweekly cowboy church services there beginning in March. After months of advertising, Miller saw approximately forty-five attend the first service, and subsequent bi-weekly meetings averaged approximately thirty-five attendees for the next two years. During this period, Miller held very relaxed, informal worship services that did not take an organized offering in which he provided a nondenominational message about seeking salvation in Jesus Christ, much like the rodeo services.¹⁵

In 1995, Miller and the church's leadership decided to hold weekly services. Miller also received an ordination from Copenhaver and the church legally incorporated. These monumental decisions formalized and legitimized the

¹⁵ Larry Miller, interviewed by Jake McAdams, Porter, TX, September 19, 2013, Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.

Cowboy Church of Henrietta, and the group's membership approximately doubled. Miller explains the church outgrew McClain's Sale Barn so the group bought property and constructed a forty-foot-by-forty-foot steel and aluminum building, complete with air conditioning, heating, and a stationary portable toilet on a hill overlooking U. S. Highway 287 in October 1997. The church sought a way to attract drivers' attentions and mark their church's new home. Following a brainstorming session, the church decided on a symbol that could portray their religious devotion to God and Jesus Christ, while simultaneously depicting their Western cultural affiliation and distinction from other churches: the Cowboy and the Cross icon. Following this decision, church member and western artist Terry Hill worked with other church members to design and create the original Cowboy and the Cross icon from a sheet of steel in January 1998. After erecting their new advertisement piece, the Cowboy Church of Henrietta quickly expanded. For the next three years, the church undertook numerous building projects to house their ever-growing membership, which reached approximately 550 in 2000.¹⁶

Russ Weaver's Shepherd's Valley Cowboy Church did not follow the typical establishment pattern of other early cowboy churches. By the time Copenhaver began holding services at Billy Bob's Texas, Weaver sought to expand his ministry beyond rodeo services. In the late 1980s, Weaver helped

¹⁶ The Cowboy Church of Henrietta holds the patent for the Cowboy and the Cross design. Miller, interviewed by McAdams; and "Our History," Cowboy Church of Henrietta, accessed September 18, 2013, <http://www.cowboychurch.embarqspace.com/#/our-history/4541892382>.



Figure 1—The original Cowboy and the Cross at the Cowboy Church of Henrietta. This steel and wooden monument is prominently displayed in front of the church's meetinghouse on a hill overlooking Highway 287. The Cowboy Church of Henrietta owns the patents of this now now-prominent Cowboy and the Cross design and allows other cowboy churches to use it freely. (Picture courtesy of Cowboy Church of Henrietta, https://scontent-a-dfw.xx.fbcdn.net/hphotos-ash2/421582_224780707618997_1388882683_n.jpg.)

found the Racetrack Chaplaincy of Texas and devoted much time to helping that organization provide religious guidance to jockeys and horse racetrack spectators. Gaining popular support, and perhaps sidestepping personal contradictions about government intervention at the heart of his more conservative political ideology, Weaver successfully lobbied the Texas Congress in the early-1990s to mandate the presence and pay of chaplains at all Texas horse racetracks. While his racetrack ministries took much time, Weaver continued rodeo cowboy ministry during his free time, specifically by training new cowboy ministers, and he kept abreast of Copenhaver, Miller, and the growing cowboy church movement in general. In fact, Weaver remained one of Copenhaver's confidants and continued the cowboy church at Billy Bob's Texas

when Copenhaver took personal time off in the late 1980s. Nevertheless, Weaver essentially worked himself out of a job by the mid 1990s because of the successes of his personally trained ministers throughout the nation.¹⁷

Weaver's popularity, though, made him the go-to person when syndicated Baptist radio personality Dawson McAlister sought to create a cowboy church in 1997. In 1996, Weaver desired to start a cowboy church like his friend Copenhaver and searched for a comfortable, neutral place conducive to attracting the unchurched. Weaver first looked at the Kow Bell indoor rodeo arena in Mansfield, Texas, but decided the facility insufficient to accommodate his church. Shortly thereafter, Weaver's friends, Reigning Horse Honor Roll members Doug and Valerie Milholland, called Weaver about an offer to start a cowboy church at the Walt Garrison Arena in Benbrook, Texas, and instructed Weaver to meet them there as soon as possible. When Weaver arrived at the meeting, he discovered Baptist radio host McAlister wanted the church and Weaver as pastor. Desiring to remain independent of larger denominational hierarchies and not wanting to hurt McAlister's career, the two founders decided to let Weaver pastor the church and rent the property from McAlister for a token amount. Weaver remembers having less than fifteen people at his first service at the Walt Garrison Arena in 1997. For the next three years, his membership seasonally fluctuated between thirty and one hundred attendants until Weaver

¹⁷ Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; and "About Us," The Racetrack Chaplaincy of Texas, accessed, August 24, 2013, http://www.racetrackchaplaincytexas.org/rtct_about.html.

bought property in Cleburne, Texas, and moved his Shepherd's Valley Cowboy Church there in 2001. After securing this property, Weaver's church grew exponentially to 300 members in two years and started planting other local churches.¹⁸

This partnership between Weaver and McAlister comprised a new type of cowboy church. Before Shepherd's Valley, cowboy churches did not affiliate with any specific denomination. Shepherd's Valley, however, affiliated with and taught Assemblies of God doctrine from its first meeting in 1997. Additionally, Shepherd's Valley consciously started as an interdenominational partnership between the Baptist landowner and the Assemblies of God pastor. Weaver and McAlister's new type of cowboy church set a precedent for interdenominational partnerships that many cowboy churches retain—seeking to save “lost souls” affiliated with the “Western Heritage Culture,” as Cowboy Christians call it, instead of rigidly holding to denominational dogmas. (Note, while the Western Heritage Culture is discussed in greater detail in chapter two, it generally refers to (white) conservatives who participate in “rural,” “Western,” or “country” cultural identifiers, including participation in rodeos, watching Western movies, dressing in cowboy hats and boots, and listening to country music.)¹⁹

¹⁸ Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

¹⁹ Though not discussed within the text, it is interesting to note historian David Lowenthal's “fabricated heritage.” According to Lowenthal, heritage “exaggerates and omits, candidly invents and frankly forgets, and thrives on ignorance and error,” to create “popular cult” around an fabricated heritage. This heritage provides a “declaration of faith in the past,” claiming

As these two cases indicate, the contemporary cowboy church movement slowly grew by 2000. Yet, these early churches had with mixed success. This changed in 2000 when Ron Nolen created the first Baptist-affiliated cowboy church in Waxahachie, Texas (approximately thirty miles south of Dallas): the Cowboy Church of Ellis County (CCEC). The CCEC initiated yet another new era for cowboy churches and provided the movement an effective growth structure. Nolen worked as a church planter for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, but he and his family also participated in rodeos. Similar to the 1970s and 1980s rodeo services, Nolen questioned if and where rodeo participants attended church services on Sunday mornings. His rodeoing son Matt informed Ron that most rodeo cowboys rarely attended Sunday church because of the lack of available options and personal desire. As an experienced church planter, Nolen remained aware of contemporary church trends and knew how to attract members. Aware of Copenhaver's, Miller's, and Weaver's successes, Nolen recognized cowboy churches as an effective means to attract unchurched rodeo participants and others that associated with the Western Heritage Culture. Nolen also looked to the successful Baptist seeker church Saddleback Church in Orange County, California, and its increasingly famous pastor Rick Warren to provide guiding methodology in reaching the "unchurched Harry and Mary."

tradition is right because it is simply tradition and engenders a powerful, almost religious faith. Heritage is strongly tied to "tradition" and is often invented to maintain the status quo, mainly hegemony. See David Lowenthal, "Fabricating Heritage," *History and Memory* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 6-7. Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

Looking at these examples, Nolen set about transferring much of Warren's ideas and proscriptions to a cowboy church model that attracted rodeo participants and other self-affiliates of the Western Heritage Culture.²⁰

Working with the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the First Baptist Church of Waxahachie, Nolen gathered financial support, advertised his first service for March 5 in the Ellis County Youth Expo center in Waxahachie, and prepared for a potential failure. The opposite occurred: 300 people attended this first service. For the next year and a half, Nolen held weekly cowboy church services in a corner of the expansive Expo center and maintained its large membership, unlike previous cowboy churches whose memberships drastically fluctuated in their beginning months. Nolen's seemingly applicable messages and laid-back worship services with a country-and-western flair attracted many previously churched and unchurched within about a sixty-mile radius of Waxahachie. Although affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas and using their resources, Nolen broke from traditional Baptist organizational practices by appointing elders and lay pastors instead of deacons. Following the early cowboy churches' model, Nolen also refused to take a structured offering

²⁰ Church planter is a recognized occupation and is similar to a religious entrepreneur. Funded and trained by larger denominations, church planters are charged to create new churches in areas, pastor the church for twelve to twenty-four months, and move to another area where the process begins again. American Christian writer Lee Stroebel popularized "unchurched Harry and Mary" in his *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary: How to Reach Friends and Family Who Avoid God and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), discussing that many unchurched unknowingly seek a relationship with God and provides ways Christians can reach the unchurched. Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; and Horn, "The History of the TFCC/AFCC," 1.

during services. Due to the Ellis County Youth Expo's location at the junction of Highway 287 and Interstate 35 E, paired with Nolen's message and unique worship service, the CCEC wanted to move its more than 300-person membership and build its own building approximately 200 yards west of the Expo center in 2001. Having firmly established the CCEC and enthused about this new type of church, Nolen planned to leave CCEC and start Baptist cowboy churches elsewhere in Texas.²¹

To fill his place, Nolen and the CCEC elders hired Gary Morgan as the new pastor. Although Morgan previously served as pastor for fourteen years in the Baptist General Convention of Texas, the CCEC proved untypical. Morgan grew up an unchurched rural resident in western Texas. After Morgan converted to Christianity in early adulthood, he attended seminary and pastored several small Texas Baptist churches west of Interstate 35. Although Morgan owned a few head of livestock and had an intimate familiarity with rodeo, he had admittedly been away from rodeos and unchurched Western Heritage Culture affiliates for several years. Nevertheless, Nolen's work in Waxahachie captivated Morgan during his first visit, and Morgan accepted the pastorship and moved his family to Waxahachie in June 2001. Morgan quickly discovered that he never attended any other Baptist church quite like the CCEC. Attendees freely walked around during the worship service and the music had a unique bluegrass and

²¹ Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; and memorial stone, Cowboy Church of Ellis County (CCEC), Waxahachie, TX.

country sound. Morgan also continued Nolen's practice of baptizing converts in horse troughs and this was certainly the first church Morgan pastored that owned a rodeo arena. All the same, Morgan witnessed the CCEC's ability to attract and convert unchurched over the next several years.²²

The number and influence of Baptist cowboy churches quickly grew during the early 2000s. After leaving the CCEC, Nolen continued planting Baptist cowboy churches in Northeast Texas. Nolen recognized the need for cowboy churches to have a communication network, training ground, and advocacy group within the General Baptist Convention of Texas. By late 2002, Nolen founded the Texas Fellowship of Cowboy Churches to serve that role and headquartered the organization in Waxahachie. While Nolen's church planting prowess is largely responsible for the growth of Baptist cowboy churches, his and other early Baptist cowboy pastors' work to perfect the "Low Barriers Model" cowboy church also helped. As Morgan explains, this model gets rid of services and formalities often associated with traditional evangelical "religion" (such as structured contributions, professional dress, and supposed feminized worship) and cultivates an environment attractive to unchurched individuals who self-identify with the Western Heritage Culture. While earlier cowboy churches did largely the same thing, it previously occurred more organically. Looking at long-

²² The CCEC were completing their rodeo arena on the church's recently-bought property when Morgan began pastoring the church in June 2001. Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; and memorial stone, CCEC, Waxahachie, TX.

established seeker churches in California and elsewhere, the North Texas Baptists led by Nolen and Morgan provided the church growth and theological undergirding that supported the Low Barriers Model—the quintessential mechanical device of cohesion in the Durkheimian sense. (The Low Barriers Model and the above mentioned characteristics of “religion” are discussed below in much detail) With Texas Baptists writing and distributing cowboy church-specific literature, and the Baptist General Convention of Texas providing monetary and personnel support, the cowboy church movement experienced widespread growth.²³

Following these early examples, cowboy churches quickly spread. Nolen aided many Baptists and Russ Weaver, Jeff Copenhaver, and previous rodeo cowboy minister Glenn Smith influenced many charismatic and nondenominational leaders. Recognizing the popular demand, Nolen and his renamed American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches hosted the first cowboy church training session in 2004 to educate interested people about the Low Barriers Model, as well as how to establish a cowboy church. These training sessions proved immensely effective, and many Baptist Christians founded new cowboy churches. An increasing number of Texas Cowboy Christians accompanied the increasing number of cowboy churches throughout the state. Larry Miller’s Cowboy Church of Henrietta expanded its original meetinghouse

²³ Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Horn, “The History of the TFCC/AFCC,” 1-2.

twice in seven years and built other structures on its campus, including an arena, to shelter its growing membership. Weaver's Shepherd's Valley Cowboy Church seemingly gained legitimacy during this period as its membership stabilized at one hundred and quickly grew in the early 2000s, and some Shepherd's Valley members even founded their own cowboy churches nearby to ease overcrowding. Additionally, Morgan and the CCEC reached its first building's 900-member capacity and began a new building project in 2005.²⁴

Weaver and Suzie McEntire's entrance into televangelism in 2007 further boosted the fast-growing cowboy church movement. Although Shepherd's Valley Cowboy Church's senior pastor, Weaver remained in contact with many of his old rodeo cowboy ministry friends. In 2007, Weaver's friend Suzie McEntire (once married to rodeo cowboy minister and athlete Paul Luchsinger) requested Weaver's help in developing a televised cowboy church program for RFD-TV, a satellite television station with programming focused toward rural America. Weaver accepted the offer and the station decided to make the two co-hosts: McEntire led the musical worship and Weaver delivered a message. The pair's Cowboy Church-TV quickly gained a large weekly audience and attracted national attention to the cowboy church movement.²⁵

²⁴ Horn, "The History of the TFCC/AFCC," 2; Miller, interviewed by McAdams; Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; and Denny, interviewed by McAdams.

²⁵ Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; and "About," Cowboy Church-TV, accessed July 29, 2013, <http://cowboychurch.tv/about/>.

By 2007, the cowboy church movement appeared firmly established. The three Christian rodeo fellowships founded in the 1970s (Cowboys for Christ, Rodeo Cowboys Ministry, and the Fellowship of Christian Cowboys) remained strong and expanded their memberships over the past three and a half decades. Additionally, the earliest cowboy churches, Jeff Copenhaver's and Joanne and Harry Yates's in Nashville, Tennessee, had moved locations, but still survived. Even the 1990s churches appeared grounded and attracted growing memberships and, no doubt, the Baptists managed a growing cowboy church network as well. Additionally, many cowboy church fellowships started during this time, such as the Cowboy Church Fellowship of the Assemblies of God that mirrored the Baptists' American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, and Dallas Baptist University integrated cowboy church ministry into their seminary training. The cowboy church movement even had its own televangelists and world missionaries. In 2013, the online cowboy church movement directory, CowboyChurch.Net, listed more than 850 United States cowboy ministries, which include stationary cowboy churches, rodeo ministries, and music ministries. Furthermore, the cowboy church movement claims churches in Canada, Australia, the Philippines, Russia, and Kenya, while countless more individuals stream cowboy church sermons online, and many traditional churches adopt worship characteristics attractive to Western Heritage Culture affiliates and incorporate aspects of the Low Barriers Model. Although it is now an international

movement, the cowboy church movement remains strongest in Texas, which claims at least 160 cowboy churches, including two Spanish-speaking congregations. The cowboy church movement is extremely attractive to many and daily influences thousands of peoples' lives.²⁶

Cowboy Christianity

Cowboy churches provide a unique worship experience for all attendees, complete with country-style music, come-as-you-are dress, and, commonly, refreshments. As indicated by Cowboy Christian Robert Wilson's comment at the beginning of this chapter, cowboy churches' laid-back services offer a worship experience similar to many traditional evangelical churches with a twenty to thirty minute message as the focal point of each Sunday gathering. Many Cowboy Christians explain the worship at cowboy churches is more "genuine," "authentic," and "real" compared to worship at traditional churches they previously attended. While this study is not a theological examination of the cowboy church movement, since the cowboy church movement is a religious

²⁶ "Hosts," Cowboy Church-TV, accessed July 29, 2013, <http://cowboychurch.tv/hosts/>; "Founders," Cowboy Ministers Network, accessed August 28, 2013, <http://cowboyministersnetwork.org/founders.htm>; "Ministry Directory," International Cowboy Church Alliance Network, accessed August 28, 2013, <http://iccanlink.ning.com/page/church-directory>; "AOL Churches," Arena of Life, accessed August 28, 2013, <http://www.amarilocowboychurch.org/aolchurches.html>; Maddox, interviewed by McAdams; "Missions Work," Jeff Copenhaver Ministries, accessed August 28, 2013, <http://jeffcopenhaver.com/missionswork.html>; Charles Higgs, *Western Heritage Ministry* (Dallas: Dallas Baptist University, [2011?]); and "Directories," CowboyChurch.Net, accessed August 28, 2013, <http://www.cowboychurch.net/directories.html>.

movement foremost, any analysis must discuss the cowboy churches' theologies and liturgies. This section briefly explains the theological teachings of cowboy churches and discusses a "typical" cowboy church worship experience. These observations only give an overview of the cowboy church movement and do not precisely explain every individual cowboy church or every Cowboy Christian's beliefs, because each church and member is, as obvious as this may be, unique. Nevertheless, these observations appear common in many Texas cowboy churches and, although generalizations, are fair generalizations.²⁷

Explaining Cowboy Christian theology is deceptively simple: each cowboy church preaches a doctrine that aligns with its denominational affiliation. Since the cowboy church movement is a transdenominational movement and not a single, unified denomination, individual cowboy churches commonly affiliate with larger, established Christian denominations. In Texas, the Baptist General Convention of Texas claims the most cowboy churches, then the Southern Baptist Convention, then charismatic denominations, including the Assembly of God, and several nondenominational churches, which are typically charismatic leaning. These denominations' theologies, as well as the statements of faith posted by various cowboy churches online, proclaim that there is one God, human salvation is attained only through belief in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit is

²⁷ Denny, interviewed by McAdams; Crenshaw, interviewed by Jake McAdams; Ray and Paula Morris, interviewed by Jake McAdams, Nacogdoches, TX, June 25, 2013, Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.

integral to Christians' lives, the Bible is the inspired word of God and should be interpreted literally, Christians should be baptized to fulfill Jesus' command and demonstrate their salvation, there is a literal Heaven and Hell, and that there will be a physical resurrection at a second coming of Jesus. Additionally, many Texas cowboy churches have pastors who have at least some seminary training. While the specifics may vary between churches, most cowboy churches hold to the basic theological tenants of evangelicalism broadly conceived.²⁸

The difference between cowboy churches and traditional evangelical churches is their congregational organization methodology: the aforementioned Low Barriers Model. According to Cowboy Christians, the Low Barriers Model removes many of the perceived "barriers" of traditional American "religion," which mainly center on church members' pretentiousness, which previously turned many Cowboy Christians away from Christianity. Although Morgan and Nolen first coined the term "Low Barriers," rodeo cowboy ministers and early cowboy pastors incorporated the same principles into their services. Because of this, the Low Barrier Model discussed here does not solely refer to the Baptist American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches official cowboy church model. Morgan and the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, however, did build upon the previous

²⁸ "Our Beliefs," Cowboy Church of Ellis County; "Home," Impact Cowboy Church of Nacogdoches; and "We Believe," Shepherd's Valley Cowboy Church.

methodological foundations and defined how a successful cowboy church should run.²⁹

While the Low Barriers Model primarily deals with cowboy church liturgy, it is founded on what Morgan calls the “essence” of the cowboy church movement: not expecting people to act like Christians before they are saved. Morgan explains that this means cowboy churches, especially the pastor and church leadership, do not expect people to conform to commonly-held standards of “living Christian lives” (which include sobriety, dressing “modestly,” and unadulterated monogamy) before “accepting Jesus as their savior.”³⁰ Other cowboy pastors, including Russ Weaver and Stan King of the Impact Cowboy Church in Nacogdoches, Texas, echo Morgan’s explanation as they describe it is necessary for people to enter a relationship with Jesus Christ before they will quit sinning. These pastors explain that they accept this theological premise because it enables them to reach the unchurched, which traditional churches have failed to reach because they expect people to conform to their moral and social standards before converting to Christianity and attending services.³¹

This “essence” and negative criticism of traditional churches is strikingly similar to many seeker churches of the late-twentieth century. Religious sociologist Donald Miller explains churches such as Calvary Chapel, the

²⁹ Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; and Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

³⁰ Morgan, interviewed by Jake McAdams.

³¹ Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; and Stan King, interviewed by McAdams.

Vineyard Christian Fellowship, and Hope Chapel in Orange County, California recognized the failure of traditional evangelicalism to attract many post-1960s college graduates disillusioned by traditional evangelicals' perceived obsessions with materialism and indifference to fulfill the "great commandment" to help others. These California seeker churches and others throughout the nation created "contemporary" worship services that combined contemporary sounding worship music with Bible-based messages that deemphasized attendees' attire and monetary contributions. Thus, within the context of both the 1950s wayward youth, which James Dean's *Rebel Without a Cause* has come to symbolize, and the iconic hippie of the 1960s counterculture, churches' aversions to dress and economic status helped these culturally and socially relevant groups to emerge.³²

Furthermore, Cowboy Christians focus their religious devotion around a personal "relationship with Jesus Christ." In an interview, King expresses great disdain for the term "religion," explaining "religion" has a negative connotation in contemporary American society, especially among the unchurched cowboy churches seek. King explains that unchurched Americans understand religion to be the cause of wars and death abroad. Domestically, religion is perceived as the accusatorial denominational superstructure that cares more about filling coffers than helping people. Morgan and Weaver expound upon this by criticizing traditional American Christians' perceived pretentiousness. These pastors and

³² Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 11-12.

other Cowboy Christians contend traditional churches' expectations of "church dress" and putting on a "big plastic banana smile" produces a religion that lacks a heart-felt commitment to Jesus Christ and fellow church members. While religious scholar Steven Prothero explains that a "relationship with Jesus" is classically evangelical, Cowboy Christians argue that traditional churches have failed to provide spiritual, moral, and practical guidance relevant to contemporary Americans, and have thus failed to provide meaningful "personal relationships with Jesus."³³

The Low Barriers Model attempts to rectify this by framing Christianity as an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ that does not separate members' lives outside of church attendance from their spiritual journeys. While this model encourages people to integrate Jesus and God into their daily lives, there is confusion between traditional notions of the sacred and profane. The most common example is Cowboy Christians' attire during worship services, which is commonly blue jeans, Western style shirts, and a cowboy hat for men. While many members do not dress like this, cowboy pastors preaching with a hat on causes many outside the church to think Cowboy Christians are less reverent in their worship. Cowboy Christians, however, explain this is not the case and

³³ Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; Morgan interviewed by McAdams; Janice Burton, interviewed by McAdams, Waxahachie, TX, July 15, 2013, Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC; Crenshaw, interviewed by McAdams; and Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 78.

remove their hats during prayer to show their reverence towards God, but wear hats during services because such is comfortable for attendees who identify with the Western Heritage Culture. Additionally, pastors use vernacular phrases during sermons to explain Biblical interpretations instead of seminary jargon foreign to lay members. In this context, the Low Barriers Model and the cowboy church movement can be understood as a “vulgar” religion. This does not imply Cowboy Christianity’s “sinfulness” in any way, but rather Cowboy Christianity’s comfortable use, even sacralization, of the profane and signifies it as a religion belonging to “common people.” The Low Barriers Model does not appeal to high-brow, traditionalistic American Christians, but rather seeks to meet contemporary Americans’ socio-cultural tastes, provide relevant guidance to their lives, and provide individuals a friend, confidant, and savior in Jesus Christ, which to Cowboy Christians represents a more “authentic” Christianity (discussed in greater depth below).³⁴

Characteristics Of The Low Barriers Model

The Low Barrier Model has several observable qualities that define cowboy churches. First, as mentioned, is the lack of an observable dress code. Again, Cowboy Christians explain that expectations of professional attire at traditional churches greatly deter many people, especially those of the Western

³⁴ Tommy and Vivian Sublett, interviewed by Jake McAdams, Nacogdoches, TX, June 17, 2013, Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; and Caye King, interviewed by McAdams.

Heritage Culture. Members discuss that people outside the “traditional church world” lack any desire to wear suits and expensive dresses once a week to attend church. Some Cowboy Christians do not even own professional or “church” clothes. Instead, Cowboy Christians encourage people to wear clothes in which they feel comfortable. Much of this traces back to the rodeo services when attendees wore what they planned to wear during the rodeo that evening. Additionally, several Cowboy Christians explain they work jobs (animal husbandry, farming, oil field operations, or industrial shift work) that require them to get dirty and felt ostracized for their appearance when they attended traditional churches in the past. Cowboy pastors and members not wearing professional dress encourages others to wear comfortable clothes and leaves attendees to wholly focus on the message. Cowboy Christians argue relaxed dress teaches people that Jesus accepts a person where they presently are in life and that people do not have to clean themselves up before coming to Jesus. Not having an obvious dress code also dissolves many recognizable socioeconomic differences between members and defines members as simply “Christian,” not rich or poor.³⁵

While seemingly less rigid and stigmatized than at traditional churches, the “lack of dress code” at cowboy churches actually creates a dress code, albeit less off-putting to members and nonmembers, based upon “taste culture” and is

³⁵ Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; Burton, interviewed by McAdams; Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; and Stan King, interviewed by McAdams.

commonly recognized as blue jeans, boots, and a cowboy hat. In fact, some Cowboy Christians who normally do not wear cowboy hats in public enjoy attending a cowboy church because they can now wear that specific cultural identifier unafraid of harassment or embarrassment. Similarly, Western style clothing, like any other clothing, has low-end and high-end merchandise, which enables careful observers to differentiate between socio-economic statuses among Cowboy Christians. Nonetheless, the Low Barriers Model's lack of observable dress code encourages greater member participation at church assemblies and attracts individuals uncomfortable with perceived pretentious people in traditional churches. Herein, lays the duality of the dress code (i.e., Anthony Giddens's "duality of structure"). On the one hand, the lack of a professional dress code stems from Cowboy Christians' critiques of traditional church practice and attempts to provide an oppositional and, as they argue, superior worship experience. On the other hand, the practice itself is a way to both foster cohesion through shared practice and, further, to provide a material marker of distinction individuals believe important to group membership and senses of belonging.³⁶

³⁶ Michèle Olivier and Viviana Fridman define "taste culture" as "clusters of cultural forms which embody similar values and aesthetic standards." "Taste Culture" is similar to Thorstein Veblen's "Conspicuous consumption" discussed in chapter two and Pierre Bourdieu's "cultural capital" mentioned later in chapter one. Michèle Olivier and Viviana Fridman, "Taste/Taste Culture," in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, accessed November 6, 2013, <http://educ.jmu.edu/~brysonbp/symbound/papers2001/Olivier.html>; and Sublett, interviewed by McAdams.

Not having a structured offering is another key component of the Low Barriers Model. Interviewed Cowboy Christians appreciate this component of the Low Barriers Model second only to not having an observable dress code. Cowboy Christians explain that continual fund requests perceived at traditional churches causes an unnecessary burden on members and does not align with Biblical Christianity. At the Cowboy Church of Ellis County and the Impact Cowboy Church in Nacogdoches, for instance, leaders do not pass around collection baskets during services but have locked boxes, called “church houses,” prominently displayed in the back of the sanctuary. Additionally, cowboy churches very rarely discuss money outside of the weekly announcements where leaders provide a report of the previous week’s funds and the projects such funds went towards. For example, Cowboy Christians who attended the Cowboy Church of Ellis County for more than eight years recall only hearing money requests from the pulpit during the mid-2000s building project and after three petitions, leaders stopped requesting funds. Cowboy Christians discuss that traditional churches they previously attended requested money from the pulpit at least once, sometimes twice, a month and the churches rarely posted budgets. They explain large building projects caused many requests and put congregations into hundreds of thousands, even millions, of dollars in debt. Some Cowboy Christians note that continual fund requests and lack of service improvements actually caused them to quit attending traditional churches. When

cowboy church leadership do mention contributions, members explain they do not mandate contributing unlike traditional churches, which argue monetary contributions are signs of members' piousness and an individual's duty to God. (While not a central analysis of this study, the cowboy church movement's lack of appealing to funds, coupled with dress and some other key defining characteristics of cowboy churches discussed further below, signals the movement as a contrast to the ever-growing popularity of the "prosperity gospel" messages provided by Joel Osteen and John Hagee. In fact, Cowboy Christian Kenneth Denny largely blames such preachers for the perceived decline of American Christianity.)³⁷

The lack of courting financial contributions has seemingly proven a profitable strategy because cowboy pastors state they rarely, if ever, struggle to fund budgets. Impact Cowboy Church pastor Stan King explains that contributions are often competitions at many traditional churches to see who can donate the most and get the most praise from their church, again functioning as what sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and others refer to as "cultural capital" and

³⁷ Sublett, interviewed by McAdams; Morris, interviewed by McAdams; Wilson, interviewed by McAdams; Maddox, interviewed by McAdams; and Denny, interviewed by McAdams. The "prosperity gospel" represents of another growing trend in American Christianity over the past several decades. Osteen, Hagee, and other prosperity gospel preachers uncompromisingly, and unapologetically, appeal to a more middle class, consumer-drenched theology that seemingly offers spiritual justification for the accumulation of wealth in modern society rather than a critique of such, which, again, is at the heart of Cowboy Christian beliefs. Also worth mentioning is that the prosperity gospel itself appears a suburban movement, thus pointing to two simultaneously competing and complementary religious movements emerging from the world's first ever suburban nation. See Katie Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

markers of distinction.³⁸ This perceived competition, as King defines it, discourages many Western Heritage Culture affiliates who believe their money is no one else's business from attending such services. Not requesting funds or reminding members to donate, not going into excessive debt to expand church facilities, explaining budgets, and providing relevant guidance and programs at church encourages Cowboy Christians, as they explain it, to donate more than if under an obligatory tithing process. Again, aside from any more consciously (and dismissive) Machiavellian perspectives, this has proven successful.³⁹

The Low Barriers Model also discourages cowboy pastors and leaders from using "church language" or "Christian-ese." Three of the interviewed cowboy pastors—Russ Weaver, Gary Morgan, and Stan King—received traditional seminary training and worked in traditional evangelical churches before pastoring cowboy churches. Cowboy pastors also remain connected to the international Christian community and have knowledge of contemporary Christian trends. Nevertheless, cowboy pastors refuse to use much, if any, theological jargon and theologically-loaded words in messages, such as "Calvinism," "Arminian," "Premillennialism," and "justification." Cowboy pastors accept that everyone can accurately understand Christianity and the Bible without seminary or secular

³⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," accessed September 13, 2013, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/bourdieu-forms-capital.htm>.

³⁹ Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; and Rusty Hightower, interviewed by Jake McAdams, Waxahachie, TX, July 8, 2013, Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.

education. Because of this, pastors explain Biblical teachings in vernacular terms so attendants can understand and integrate them better into their lives. Cowboy pastors, as they see it, thus emulate Jesus' example of using parables to achieve this. During most lessons, pastors relate personal stories or provide real-life examples to explain scripture and its application in twenty-first century America. As a cowboy-themed church, stories often involve animal husbandry or crop farming, but pastors also use contemporary films, comics, and political cartoons to convey their messages. Cowboy Christians explain that these parables and relatable stories help them understand and apply Biblical teachings better than the traditional churches they previously attended.⁴⁰

These three factors generate a very egalitarian and hospitable environment at cowboy churches. Since Cowboy Christians perceive traditional churches as rankled with pretentiousness, class dissonance, and cliques, the Low Barriers Model works to fashion an environment welcoming to all. While casual dress, vernacular messages, and not requesting funds are not directly intended to do this, Cowboy Christians explain these factors essentially level attendees, unlike traditional churches. Since it is difficult to judge people on their outward appearances, intellectual levels, or weekly donations, so Cowboy

⁴⁰ Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Impact Cowboy Church, worship service, Nacogdoches, TX, November 28, 2012; Cowboy Church of Ellis County, worship service, Waxahachie, TX, July 28, 2013; Maddox, interviewed by McAdams; Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; and Wilson, interviewed by McAdams.

Christians say, they are free to get to know others' characters without the social baggage. Recognizing this, the cowboy church movement fosters friendly, even familial, congregations. Cowboy pastors explain traditional churches have forgotten that Christians are supposed to know each other intimately and befriend strangers. Cowboy churches make attendees feel welcome, even "at home," during services. For example, the Cowboy Church of Ellis County and the Impact Cowboy Church accomplish this by posting members at all entrances to greet and shake hands with anyone that walks in and direct them to the complimentary coffee pot. At these two churches, members often walk around the sanctuary talking to friends, meeting new people, and showing a seemingly genuine interest in individuals' lives before services begin. The Cowboy Church of Ellis County even has a "shake hands with your neighbor" component at the beginning of each worship service where people are expected to walk around shaking hands for approximately five minutes while the worship band plays background music. While these practices make attendees feel welcome and comfortable, they, again, function as Durkheimian devices of community cohesion, or "mechanical solidarity." Indeed, as sociologist Emile Durkheim explains, such performances and beliefs as those found at cowboy churches, or any organized community, establishes a set of laws that draw members closer together and punish miscreants in some fashion. Even still, Cowboy Christians note that the sense of friendliness provided at cowboy church services

encourages many to be baptized and become active members in their local cowboy church. Many even discuss that the cowboy church has become their “family” and members get together for religious, social, and work activities outside of services several times a week. Cowboy churches’ friendliness is in stark opposition to perceived pretentiousness of traditional churches.⁴¹

Another characteristic of the Low Barrier Model is rarely, if ever, using deacons in the church leadership. While specific reasons for this vary between the churches, cowboy pastor Gary Morgan states cowboy churches typically do not select deacons because they have a negative connotation among many familiar with the “traditional church world.” Morgan explains that traditional denominations, specifically Baptists, ordain men as deacons, and most hold that title for the rest of their lives. Deacons are often entrusted to oversee church business affairs, which allow them to wield great power and generate considerable conflict. To circumvent this type of entrenched leadership and peoples negative attitudes towards deacons, cowboy churches commonly use a set of pastors, elders, and lay ministers instead of deacons. Cowboy pastors perform the administrative and pastoral roles similar to traditional churches’ pastors. The church employs them to deliver sermons, teach classes, perform

⁴¹ Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, 61; Caye King, interviewed by McAdams; Burton, interviewed by McAdams; Morris, interviewed by McAdams; Sublett, interviewed by McAdams; Hightower, interviewed by McAdams; Denny, interviewed by McAdams; Wilson, interviewed by McAdams; and Spencer, interviewed by McAdams.

marriages and funerals, and meet congregants' routine spiritual and emotional needs. Most cowboy churches often have associate pastors who manage specific programs such as the youth and rodeo ministries. Elders are typically unpaid and serve as pastors' advisory boards. Most churches that use elders have at least two at a time and they help pastors determine policy and program decisions, such as establishing regulations for church programs. Many larger churches, such as the Cowboy Church of Ellis County and the Shepherd's Valley Cowboy Church, also have trained volunteer lay pastors that fill in for pastors when they are unavailable to perform certain pastoral duties. By using this leadership structure, cowboy churches avoid the negative imagery and reputation associated with the term "deacon," incorporate more members into responsibility positions, and attract new members, which ultimately increases Cowboy Christians' volunteering at church and enhances the cowboy church movement's spirit of egalitarianism.⁴²

A final integral component of the cowboy church movement is the rejection of femininity. This factor is almost as defining to the cowboy church movement as the confusion of sacred and profane. Cowboy Christians proudly proclaim that the cowboy church movement "promotes men," to the point that some cowboy pastors consider women largely as an afterthought when preparing messages. Cowboy pastors note this emphasis on men is a response to their perception of

⁴² Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Hightower, interviewed by McAdams; Denny, interviewed by McAdams; and Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

the popular feminization and “neutering” of Christianity by traditional churches. As historians E. Anthony Rotundo, Stephen Prothero, and Michael Kimmel also explain, the feminization of American Christianity began during the Second Great Awakening of the early-nineteenth century and did not deviate from that path except the historical blip of “muscular Christianity” around the turn of the twentieth century, which celebrated the “manliness of Christ,” focused on Christianity as warfare, and believed “doctrine was for sissies, and the meek weren’t going to inherit the earth.”⁴³ While some scholars, such as medieval historian Caroline Walker Bynum, trace the feminization of Jesus and Christianity to the twelfth century, most largely blame nineteenth century evangelicals for this development as ministers operated within the domestic sphere alongside women, prided themselves for having contemporarily-understood feminine virtues of love and sensitivity, lauded women as virtuous and pure, emphasized stories about Jesus interacting with women, and described Christ in feminine terms.⁴⁴

Cowboy Christians explain this feminization is witnessed in contemporary churches primarily by the lack of male attendance, but also by decorating with

⁴³ Thomas Hughes, *The Manliness of Christ* (New York: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1896), quoted in Prothero, *American Jesus*, 93.

⁴⁴ Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; and Weaver, interviewed by McAdams. Caroline Walker Bynum’s influential book *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982) analyzes twelfth and thirteenth century Cistercian manuscripts arguing that Christians increasingly understood God and Jesus in feminine language and that women used Jesus’ teachings to gain authority and freedom. E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 171-172; and Prothero, *American Jesus*, 61-68.

doilies and flowers, holding hands during prayer, and even wearing nametags. Of course, such practices themselves might not be feminine, but, as gender historians point out, such practices have become seen as feminine and, hence, inferior, at best, or maladaptive, at worst. More importantly to Cowboy Christians, this perceived feminization of Christianity has destroyed God's design for the family with the husband as the family head and spiritual leader. In this regard, contemporary Christianity, to Cowboy Christians, is "overcivilized." As Rotundo explains, these circumstances are similar to the late-nineteenth century United States as women increasingly encroached upon the male's public sphere and men reasserted their virility and masculinity through violent sports, wilderness adventures, and muscular Christianity. Still, similar to earlier Americans' beliefs, the masculine Cowboy Christianity ironically rebels against some of the more fundamental gender stereotypes, namely women as the family's spiritual leader, and reasserts men's secular and spiritual powers within the family relationship while still enforcing other more traditional gender roles, such as child care and domestic service. Although it stems from what Cowboy Christians believe is a God-sanctioned belief, Cowboy Christians' masculine Christianity vastly strengthens men's power in family and social relationships, even while they experience an ever-diminishing sense of masculinity in the work place and society.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Morgan and Weaver both discuss in their interviews that if older males attend church,

For Cowboy Christians, this popular feminization of Christianity and their supposedly masculine savior must be remedied. Therefore, cowboy churches cultivate places where working men can worship God and learn that they can be both masculine and Christian. Moreover, cowboy pastors preach that God demands masculine men. Cowboy church leadership does not allow floral decorations in their meetinghouses like traditional churches, except in women's restrooms, but opt for Western décor, including saddles, blankets, lariats, spurs, fence posts, barbed wire, and burned wooden signs. Their lack of professional dress code invites men to come straight from work and wear comfortable clothes; and do not worry about the mud on your boots, for many meetinghouses have cement floors. The parable-like sermons encourage men, college educated or not, to listen to the message and recognize the pastor as a "good ole boy" and

there is an 85 percent chance that the entire family will attend church as opposed to a much lower percentage if only females attend. While these numbers are inflated, it appears they are referencing Robbie Low's article "The Truth About Men in Church," *Touchstone Magazine* (accessed August 20, 2013, <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=16-05-024-v>) in which Low discusses Werner Haug and Phillipe Warner's 2000 study "The Demographic Characteristics of the Linguistic and Religious Groups in Switzerland." Low uses Haug and Warner's study to explain that in families where fathers attend church, two-thirds of the children will become regular attenders, opposed to families whose fathers do not attend, even if the mother attends, two-thirds of the children will not attend church at all in adulthood. This evidences to Morgan and Weaver that fathers' examples are important influences in their children's religious lives. The cowboy church movement is not alone in perceiving and attempting to correct contemporary Christianity's perceived feminization. In *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), Michael S. Kimmel discusses that the Promise Keepers, "Jesus—Beer—Chips Men," and other interdenominational groups are evangelizing and specifically teaching men about the Bible and numerous internet blogs and communities, such as ChurchforMen.com, provide articles and advice bring masculinity back to Christianity. Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; Impact Cowboy Church, worship service, Nacogdoches, TX, May 29, 2013; and Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 251.

befriend him. Unlike Baptist cowboy churches, many charismatic and nondenominational cowboy churches have women pastors, but they are always subordinate to the male leadership. Cowboy pastor Gary Morgan even explains that he refuses to have many females in prominently seen locations on Sundays because he wants to create a very masculine environment.⁴⁶

Cowboy churches promote, and even celebrate, masculinity because that is to whom they primarily minister. King notes, "If you can get the men to come to church, the women will surely follow. Because they want to see their men be men, they don't want to be married to a wimp."⁴⁷ Once they get men there, cowboy pastors teach men that being a good, loving husband and father is one of the best ways to serve God. With this underlying message, sermons commonly instruct men to be caring, loving, trustworthy, and responsible family providers and to stop drinking, ignoring their families, and turning to violence. These sermons generally teach men to be better society members and family leaders according to Cowboy Christians' interpretations of the Bible.

The cowboy church movement, then, defines masculinity and disseminates it through weekly church services. To Cowboy Christians, "masculine" is physically and mentally tough; smart, but not too intelligent; unwilling to let someone demean him or his principles; a provider; and most of

⁴⁶ Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; Caye King, interviewed by McAdams; and Spencer, interviewed by McAdams.

⁴⁷ Stan King, interviewed by McAdams.

all, rural. As Cowboy Christians explain, each of these characteristics is found in John the Baptist (believed to be Jesus' relative and prophet) and their savior Jesus. They focus on stories such as Jesus aggressively cleansing the Jewish Temple (Mark 11), of John the Baptists' fortitude and living in the wilderness (Mark 1), and God's love of the rural and its inhabitants (Psalms 107). Nonetheless, "masculine" is also caring, sacrificing, and Christian. Cowboy pastors preach everyone, especially men, should take care of their animals and take better care of their families. While men, according to Cowboy Christians, remain the head of the house, they should value and appreciate their wives and spend time with their children because children need a male's influence. Furthermore, Cowboy Christians explain that while some sins are very appealing to men (specifically sexual immorality, drunkenness, and violence) it is manlier not to sin.⁴⁸

It is worth mentioning, although outside the scope of this study, gender scholars such as Kimmel and Rotundo note that men less economically successful often focus on non-economic markers to define and legitimize their masculinities. Especially in an American culture that celebrates wealth and assigns economic success as a marker of masculinity, as these and other gender scholars note, some less affluent Cowboy Christians, (i.e., may feel anxious about their masculinity) might appreciate Cowboy Christianity because it provides

⁴⁸ Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; King, interviewed by McAdams; Impact Cowboy Church, worship service, May 29, 2013; and Spencer, interviewed by McAdams.

a religious, non-material definition of masculine they can achieve. While a possibility, most male Cowboy Christians explain their attraction to the masculine Cowboy Christianity based upon notions of the cowboy as an archetypal masculine hero, which is discussed in chapter two.⁴⁹

Although cowboy churches promote masculinity, they do not ignore women. According to every woman interviewed, they never felt ostracized or denigrated for being female. In fact, some do not appear to notice cowboy churches' blatant elevation of masculinity. Female Cowboy Christians appreciate cowboy churches' emphases on male instruction because it has improved marriages and strengthened families. This overwhelming appreciation for the masculine Cowboy Christianity by women is interesting to consider. The first explanation to be offered by scholars is likely the accomplishment of cultural hegemony. That is, as Italian communist Antonio Gramsci argued, hegemony refers to a process of moral and intellectual leadership through which dominated or subaltern groups (in this case women) consent to their own domination by ruling classes (i.e., men), as opposed to being forced or coerced into accepting inferior positions, leading Gramsci to conclude that one group, "or at least a single combination" of groups, "tends to prevail, to gain the upper hand, to

⁴⁸ Antonio Gramsci, "Selections from the Prison Notebooks," in *Culture, Ideology and Social Process: A Reader*, ed. Tony Bennett, et al. (New York: Bedford Academic and Educational, 1981), 138.

⁴⁹ Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 81; and Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 250-251.

propagate itself throughout society.”⁵⁰ In this context, women’s acceptance of male authority and priority is symbolic of their acceptance of men’s invented superiority and their inferiority as natural. Indeed, as discussed, Cowboy Christianity seemingly enforces traditional gender roles within the family, such as men as providers and women as caregivers, while it simultaneously decreases women’s power within the family as spiritual leader.⁵¹

This Gramscian explanation, regardless of its relative truth or not, does not match with female Cowboy Christians’ oral histories however. In other words, rather than just dismissing what these women have to say about their own lives, it is worth accepting their understandings as genuinely held beliefs and return a sense of agency to them instead of making them a climax to a predetermined social theory (again, regardless of the theory’s strength to adequately explain the phenomenon under analysis). While some interviewed female Cowboy Christians resent “submitting” to their husbands, all overlook such submission and accept it as largely their lot in life. Their personal interpretations of the Bible and those espoused by cowboy pastors cause female Cowboy Christians to perhaps genuinely believe in traditional gender roles as God’s design for society. What further persuades members is that traditional gender roles are indeed seen as

⁵⁰ Antonio Gramsci, “Selections from the Prison Notebooks,” in *Culture, Ideology and Social Process: A Reader*, ed. Tony Bennett, et al. (New York: Batsford Academic and Educational, 1981), 198.

⁵¹ Denny, interviewed by McAdams; Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; Caye King, interviewed by McAdams; and Burton, interviewed by McAdams.

traditional, especially traditionally rural, and, therefore, must be right (a classically conservative point of view, by definition of the term). For those female Cowboy Christians who struggle with the seeming lack of power in the family social relationship, it appears they have accepted their lack of power as worth the increased “love” and attention their husbands give them and their children in return. Whatever individual women’s reasons might be for appreciating and even defending masculine Cowboy Christianity, the movement’s masculine slant appears profitable as cowboy pastors claim more family memberships and male participation than traditional churches.⁵²

While these Low Barriers Model characteristics explain a cowboy church service, cowboy churches’ meetinghouses embody the Model’s principles. While certainly not universal, many cowboy churches meet in corrugated metal buildings that resemble agricultural buildings such as barns or exposition centers. Mimicking Cowboy Christianity, these barn-like meetinghouses are practical; they are pragmatically functional and do not require exorbitant funds. Cowboy Christians most often explain the meetinghouse’s significance as “cheap” and “simple.” While these factors have real-life meanings in account books, the cheapness and simplicity of cowboy church meetinghouses is a conscious reaction to the exorbitant expense and ornateness of traditional church

⁵² Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; Morris, interviewed by McAdams; Caye King, interviewed by McAdams; Sublett, interviewed by McAdams; and Denny, interviewed by McAdams.

meetinghouses, especially more recent prosperity gospel megachurches. Cowboy Christians also express their meetinghouses are “comfortable,” not “stuffy” like traditional churches. Pastor Gary Morgan explains the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches recognizes the cultural comfort of metal buildings for Western Heritage Culture affiliates and incorporated them into



Figure 2—Front view of the The Cowboy Church of Ellis County campus at the junction of Interstate 35 E and Highway 287 in Waxahachie, Texas. The rodeo arena is located behind the left-hand building. (Photograph courtesy of Jake McAdams; on file in the Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.)

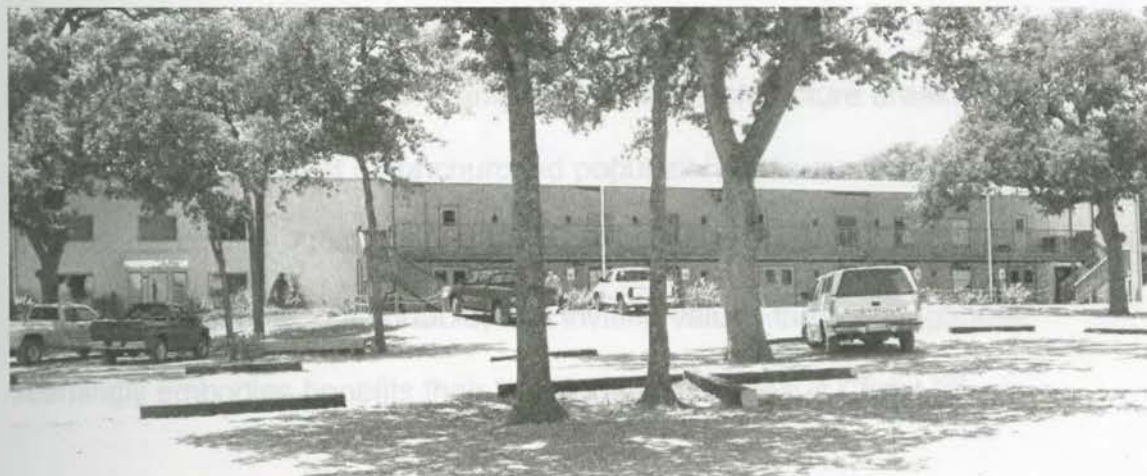


Figure 3—Front view of Shepherd's Valley Cowboy Church outside of Cleburne, Texas. The rodeo arena is located in front of and on the right-hand side of the building, which is not in photograph. (Photograph courtesy of Jake McAdams; on file in the Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.)

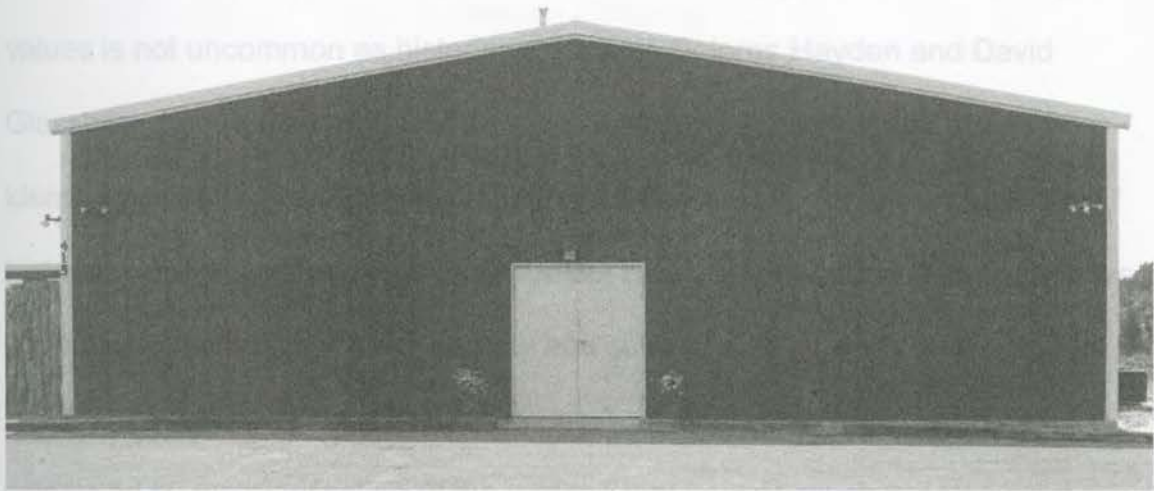


Figure 4—Front view of the Impact Cowboy Church in Nacogdoches, Texas. Two similarly designed ancillary buildings and rodeo arena are located behind building and are not in picture. (Photograph courtesy of Jake McAdams; on file in the Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.)

the Fellowship's cowboy church model. Morgan states that most who affiliate with the Western Heritage Culture feel comfortable in barn-like buildings because they attended rodeos, participated in events held in one, or own a metal building themselves. This personal familiarity with similar architecture breaks down another barrier to attract an unchurched population because it does not look like a traditional church. Although few Cowboy Christians enunciate this significance, most note the simple, comfortable, and inviting values the meetinghouse seemingly embodies benefits their "relationship with Jesus Christ."⁵³

⁵³ Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Crenshaw, interviewed by McAdams; Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; Maddox, interviewed by McAdams; Wilson, interviewed by McAdams; Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; Denny, interviewed by McAdams; and Morgan, interviewed by McAdams.

The concept of places, especially church meetinghouses, embodying values is not uncommon as historians, such as Dolores Hayden and David Glassberg, spend their entire careers explaining the “power of place” upon identity construction and the fashioning of sacred beliefs. As architectural historians Anne Loveland and Otis Wheeler also explain, church meetinghouses have always indicated what is socially and culturally important to members. In fact, it is contemporary meetinghouses not embodying long-held values as witnessed by the glorification of the profane that causes much scholarly and popular criticism. As Loveland and Wheeler explain, many contemporary meetinghouses, especially megachurches, intentionally askew common notions of the sacred and profane in their architecture, which provides members a more immanent, or “this worldly,” religious experience. This concept certainly applies to cowboy church meetinghouses as these meetinghouses are constructed (in every sense of the word) representations of Cowboy Christians’ beliefs and faiths, which in turn renews those beliefs at every gathering and helps solidify Cowboy Christians’ identities. (Cowboy Christians’ identities are discussed in detail in chapter two.)⁵⁴

⁵⁴ See footnote 26 in the introduction for explanation of immanent. Anne C. Loveland and Otis B. Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch: A Material and Cultural History* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 2, 257.

Seeking Cowboys

The cowboy church movement's conscious cultivation of social and cultural relevance to attract unchurched people designates it as a seeker church movement. From its theology, to liturgy, self-marketing, and popular misconceptions, the cowboy church movement resembles more-studied and longer-established American seeker churches. Numerous religious scholars, including Mark Shibley, D. G. Hart, and Edward Larson, explain evangelicalism grew greatly in the Southern and Western United States in the late-1900s. These scholars discuss an evangelicalism that adapted by the 1970s and, hence, provided Americans a more culturally sensitive Christianity and integrated into the American mainstream culture. Evangelicals flooded the economic and cultural marketplaces with Christian self-help books, novels, and music labels in the 1980s and 1990s. This new evangelical culture, what Shibley describes as "Californicated" evangelicalism, held great cultural capital and converted many suburban Americans. Many evangelical churches began holding additional "contemporary" services with rock-style worship music to attract youth and religious seekers; thus the term "seeker church." Some scholars, including Hart, Anne Loveland, Otis Wheeler, and James Bielo, point to televangelists like Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye, and Joel Olsteen, as emblematic of the entire seeker church movement and explain that seeker churches provide a "watered down" or

prosperity gospel theology. According to these scholars, seeker churches commonly construct mall-like meetinghouses with full coffee bars and book stores, thus marketing themselves as “culturally relevant” to attract the greatest number of people to fill pastors’ personal coffers.⁵⁵

There is another seeker church model, however, that maintains a strict, conservative theology. Dissatisfied with traditional evangelicalism, young Californicated pastors examined contemporary American Christianity and decided decades of church tradition had skewed “authentic” Biblical Christianity and churches no longer provided relevant guidance, which resulted in a loss of church membership. Correcting this, pastors provided Bible-based messages that members could apply in their lives. They also provided musical worship that aesthetically appealed to contemporary Americans and allegedly more-relevant programs for members. Even with strict theologies, these self-perceived culturally relevant churches successfully attracted and converted many unchurched and young Americans.⁵⁶

The cowboy church movement is part of this theologically strict and conservative seeker church movement. While there is much public and academic confusion about seeker churches, Donald Miller and Kimon Sargeant examine and aptly describe the culturally relevant, theologically strict American seeker

⁵⁵ Hart, *That Old-Time Religion in Modern America*, 149, 190; Shibley, *Resurgent Evangelicalism*, 24; Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouses to Megachurches*, 131.

⁵⁶ Shibley, *Resurgent Evangelicalism*, 84; and Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 17, 21-22.

church. Miller studies three seeker churches in Orange County, California, (the Calvary Chapel, the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, and the Hope Chapel) and notes that, these “new paradigm” seeker churches “hold certain doctrinal stances or respond to survey questions about the Bible, God, and the afterlife in theologically conservative ways.”⁵⁷ He explains these theologically-conservative new paradigm churches have twelve distinguishing characteristics:

They were started after the mid-1960s; the majority of congregation members were born after 1945; seminary trained clergy is optional; worship is contemporary; lay leadership is highly valued; they have extensive small group ministries; clergy and congregants usually dress informally; tolerance of different personal styles is prized; pastors tend to be understated, humble, and self-revealing; bodily, rather than mere cognitive, participation in worship is the norm; the ‘gifts of the Holy Spirit’ are affirmed; Bible-centered teaching predominates over topical sermonizing.⁵⁸

While not all cowboy churches have bodily participation in worship or affirm “gifts of the Holy Spirit” with evidence, especially Baptist-affiliated churches, they fit every other criteria Miller provides.

As discussed, the cowboy church movement began in the mid-1980s, with origins in the 1970s. While some Cowboy Christians were born before 1945, the

⁵⁷ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 151.

⁵⁸ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 20.

vast majority were born after 1950. Only three of the five pastors interviewed have seminary training, and Cowboy Christians indicate that lay leadership is essential to the vitality and function of each cowboy church. The country-style music and attendees freely walking around the meetinghouse in their relaxed attires certainly indicates the very contemporary and relaxed services of cowboy churches. Additionally, every interviewed Cowboy Christian discusses the importance for cowboy pastors to reveal personal sins and faults to relate to people, which then stirs members to change their lives. Numerous Cowboy Christians also appreciate their church working with other cowboy and traditional churches and that cowboy churches have more and personally relevant small-group missions than traditional churches. Furthermore, cowboy pastors' extreme emphases on Bible-centered teaching designates them as a conservative, new paradigm seeker churches as opposed to a liberal, "feel-good-message" seeker church.⁵⁹

Another defining characteristic of conservative seeker churches is the propagation of what members define as a "real" or "authentic" Christianity. Miller explains that members claimed "real" worship means without pretensions or people trying to be something they are not. Sargeant records this same concept

⁵⁹ Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Miller, interviewed by McAdams; Morris, interviewed by McAdams; Hightower, interviewed by McAdams; Crenshaw, interviewed by McAdams; Caye King, interviewed by McAdams; Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; Sublett, interviewed by McAdams; Denny, interviewed by McAdams; Wilson, interviewed by McAdams; Maddox, interviewed by McAdams; and Burton, interviewed by McAdams.

as “authentic” in his analysis of seeker church and quasi-denomination Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. Using Willow Creek material, Sargeant defines an authentic church and authentic Christianity as thus:

An authentic church is one whose leaders are open, honest, even transparent about their faith, their struggles, and their commitments.

Authenticity requires that you are true to your convictions not because your parents believed or because you have always thought a certain way, but because you have actively appropriated the convictions as your own...The criterion for authentic belief is individual engagement.⁶⁰

Cowboy Christians express comments resembling Miller’s and Sargeant’s definitions of “real” and “authentic.” Although the definition eludes Cowboy Christians, almost every interviewee define their church and worship as “real” because of their pastor and their cowboy church’s perceivably complete lack of pretenses. Although traditional evangelical churches can be a “real” or “authentic” church by these scholars’ definitions, what differentiates seeker churches is their “emphasis on cultural currency.”⁶¹ It is this cultural appeal—providing a culturally relevant musical worship; a culturally relevant meetinghouse; a vernacular, even vulgar, pastor; and culturally relevant missions and programs—that separates seeker churches from traditional churches. While the theologies differ slightly, cowboy churches alter their member programs,

⁶⁰ Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 166.

⁶¹ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 20.

liturgies, and sermons to specifically attract Western Heritage Culture affiliates.

Cowboy churches are not a wholly unique phenomenon. Rather, they are another manifestation of the well-established and growing American religious trend to create churches that provide a culturally relevant, yet theologically conservative, worship experience to unchurched Americans and those disillusioned with traditional evangelicalism.⁶²

— Vivian Sublett, Impact Cowboy Church member

"Yeah, a large majority [live in rural areas]. Let's put it this way, all that can afford, do."

— Russ Weaver, Shepard's Valley Cowboy Church pastor

The cowboy church movement is a successful seeker church movement. It provides a socio-culturally relevant, yet theologically strict, Christianity that attracts hundreds of individuals. Since cowboy pastor Jeff Gopenhaver began holding church at Billy Bob's Texas honky-tonk in early 1996, the cowboy church movement has grown to more than 850 affiliated ministries in the United States and numerous churches in Canada, Australia, the Philippines, and Africa. Texas remains the strongest center for the (now international)

⁶² Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 68; Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Miller, interviewed by McAdams; Morris, interviewed by McAdams; Hightower, interviewed by McAdams; Crenshaw, interviewed by McAdams; Caye King, interviewed by McAdams; Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; Sublett, interviewed by McAdams; Denny, interviewed by McAdams; Wilson, interviewed by McAdams; Maddox, interviewed by McAdams; and Burton, interviewed by McAdams.

CHAPTER 2—THE COWBOY CHRISTIAN LIFE

“There’s a lot of people that aren’t cowboys, but there’s a lot that are.”

– Tommy Sublett, Impact Cowboy Church member

“It’s just a brand.”

– Vivian Sublett, Impact Cowboy Church member

“Yeah, a large majority [live in rural areas]. Let’s put it this way, all that can afford, do.”

– Russ Weaver, Shepard’s Valley Cowboy Church pastor

The cowboy church movement is a successful seeker church movement. It provides a socio-culturally relevant, yet theologically strict, Christianity that attracts hundreds of individuals. Since cowboy pastor Jeff Copenhaver began holding church at Billy Bob’s Texas honky-tonk in early 1986, the cowboy church movement has grown to more than 850 affiliated ministries in the United States and numerous churches in Canada, Australia, the Philippines, and Africa. Nevertheless, Texas remains the strongest center for the (now international) cowboy church movement, claiming over 150 individual churches, including at least two Spanish-speaking congregations, and headquartering the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, the Cowboy Ministers Network, and Cowboys

for Christ. These churches have reached thousands of unchurched Texans and have baptized many who self-affiliate with what Cowboy Christians refer to as the Western Heritage Culture. As cowboy pastors Gary Morgan and Stan King explain, their churches' memberships are comprised of approximately 50 percent of previously unchurched.¹

Because of the cowboy church movement's unique brand of Christianity, many unassociated with the movement, as well as many Cowboy Christians themselves, hold misconceptions about the movement's purported "rurality," or notions of the rural. A casual, uncritical glance at the movement leads many to believe these men and women wearing cowboy hats and western garb at church services live the "cowboy life." Numerous scholars, including historians Richard Slotkin, Bruce Shulman, and Michael Allen, clearly depict that the American cowboy of contemporary popular culture is largely a mythic re-imagination of the historical Texas cowboy. Nonetheless, the "cowboy spirit" still represents the Turnerian frontier, and thus America: rural; rugged individualism; hardworking; simultaneously in tune with, and conqueror of, nature; romantic hero; and daredevil. With this popular perception of the American cowboy, perhaps little imagination is needed to understand why so many seek a religion that allows

¹ "Ministry Directory" International Cowboy Church Alliance Network," accessed August 28, 2013, <http://iccanlink.ning.com/page/church-directory>; "Missions Work," Jeff Copenhaver Ministries, accessed August 28, 2013, <http://jeffcopenhaver.com/missionswork.html>; "Directories," CowboyChurch.Net, accessed August 28, 2013, <http://www.cowboychurch.net/directories.html>; Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; and Stan King, interviewed by McAdams.

them to participate in this cultural representation of America and, by implication, themselves. Nevertheless, what type of people are Cowboy Christians?²

Are Cowboy Christians “Real” Cowboys?

To understand whom the cowboy church movement attracts, defining “cowboy” is crucial, especially since doing so helps determine if cowboys truly are present in the cowboy church movement or, at the least, what qualities are necessary before members deem themselves and others as “cowboy.” As previously discussed, numerous historians define and examine the historical hired hand and showman cowboys, as well as the popular cowboy myth. These scholars offer insights into Americans’ knowledge and interpretations of the American cowboy that contradict historical facts and connect the popular remembrance and representation of the cowboy to the mid-century growth of political conservatism (discussed in greater depth below). While these scholarly definitions and historical contexts are useful, understanding what a “cowboy” is to Cowboy Christians is what truly provides the answer to the question of whether the cowboy church movement has any cowboys. While Cowboy Christians’ definitions are critically examined below, presenting and understanding

² Hobsbawm, “The Myth of the Cowboy;” and Judith Kleinfeld and Andrew Kleinfeld, “Cowboy Nation and American Character,” *Society Journal* 41, no. 2 (March/April 2004): 48-49.

interviewees' definitions of "cowboy" returns a sense of self-meaning making and agency back to the specific interviewees under study.³

Rodeo participants are the first group to question as being a cowboy. As described in chapter one cowboy ministers specifically and successfully preached to rodeo participants, attendants, and event staff during the 1970s and 1980s. Deriving from the rodeo services, the early cowboy churches sought that same rodeo population. Understanding this history indicates early Cowboy Christians thus defined rodeo participants as cowboys. This is unsurprising as historian Michael Allen notes "cowboy" proved an inherited and common descriptor for rodeo participants by the 1970s. He explains that until the mid-1950s, most rodeo participants worked as cattlemen and ranch hands. As increasing numbers of rodeo participants came from small towns without any ranching experience, participants self-identified as cowboys to earn the respect of fellow participants and fans. The public acceded to this almost belligerent self-identification of 1950s rodeo participants and increasingly termed all rodeo participants cowboy whether they worked as cattlemen or not. Demonstrating a keen self-awareness, rodeo-participating Cowboy Christians Chris Maddox and

³ Discussed more fully in the introduction, David Dary's *Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Generations* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1989) and Paul Carlson's edited anthology *The Cowboy Way* are quality academic studies that examine the historical ranching and showman cowboy occupation. Paul Reddin's *Wild West Show* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), Michael Allen's *Rodeo Cowboys in the North American Imagination*, Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation*, and Bruce J. Schulman's *The Seventies: The Great Shift In American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002) trace the origins, interpretations, and significances of the popular American cowboy image.

Russ Weaver discuss this process as well, noting the public forced the moniker cowboy onto rodeo participants and that contemporary participants self-identify as “rodeo athletes.” Put simply, this reveals that the majority of Cowboy Christians deem rodeo participants as cowboys.⁴

Land and livestock owners are a second potential group of cowboys. This is a very wide-ranging group, however, comprised of people who own approximately five or more acres, one or more cows, possibly a horse, or occasionally participate in local rodeos. Sometimes people in this group are labeled “recreational cowboys” because they are often retired or manage their property for recreation or supplemental income. Many recreational cowboys interviewed at the Cowboy Church of Ellis County and the Impact Cowboy Church seemingly understand historical definitions and distinguish between “real cowboys” and themselves because animal husbandry is not their primary occupation. Despite recreational cowboys’ objections, non-landowning and non-cattle owning Cowboy Christians typically refer to recreational cowboys, and even dirt farmers, as genuine cowboys.⁵

These responses indicate a confused, malleable, even populist definition of cowboy among cowboy church members. While other cowboy church scholars

⁴ Allen, *Rodeo Cowboys in the North American Imagination*, 31; Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; and Maddox, interviewed by McAdams.

⁵ Denny, interviewed by McAdams; Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Hightower, interviewed by McAdams; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Burton, interviewed by McAdams; Sublett, interviewed by McAdams; and Morris, interviewed by McAdams.

indicate that full-time cattlemen attend cowboy churches, the information gathered at the Cowboy Church of Ellis County and the Impact Cowboy Church illustrate that occupational cattlemen are certainly the minority. Most commonly, Cowboy Christians state that either few members were cowboys, or that they personally are not, but many others are. These responses indicate a point of disconnection between Cowboy Christians' imagined worldviews and the actual demographic composition of cowboy churches. Nonetheless, Cowboy Christians—even those who admit few members are cowboys—do not recognize this as a contradiction precisely because of their liberal and varied definitions of cowboy.⁶

To Cowboy Christians interviewed for the project, a cowboy is an archetype embodying characteristics and values such as “hard-working,” “honest,” “close to the land,” “dependable,” “his word is his bond,” and various other phrases indicative of the romanticized “rural ideal.” Furthermore, place scholars (including geographers, sociologists, and historians) explain that places are consciously constructed material and imagined landscapes—often called “storied” or “first space.” They maintain that people often attribute specific values to places in which residents and nonresidents then actively use to construct their own sense of self and community. Historian Dolores Hayden further explains that

⁶ Williford “The Ethereal Cowboy Way,” 20; Moczygemba, “Rounding Up Christian Cowboys,” 8, 14; Morris, interviewed by McAdams; Sublett, interviewed by McAdams; Morgan, interviewed by McAdams, Wilson, interviewed by McAdams, Burton, interviewed by McAdams; Denny, interviewed by McAdams; and Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

“cultural landscapes” (i.e., the combination of the built, natural, and human environments), effect and are affected by cultural identities, social relationships, and even land development within any geographic region. These identities vary in each location, yet the rural United States, and by association rural residents, has an enduring legacy as a geography of political, moral, and economic superiority—the epitome of “American values.”⁷

This, of course, traces back to eighteenth and nineteenth century trends such as Thomas Jefferson heralding republican agrarianism, Romantics like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, and even Andrew Jackson, who championed the “common” rural dweller and frontiersman. Collectively, the United States has maintained a long reverence for the frontier and joined Frederick Jackson Turner in bemoaning its “closing,” as he interpreted the Federal Census, in 1890. In fact, some historians, like Patricia Limerick, argue it is precisely because of the difficulty facing American farmers during the late-nineteenth century that farm life became the topic of much public and political distress in the form of farmers’ alliances and Populist “revolts,” which ultimately led to increased glorifications of the American farmer, rural life, and, eventually, the cowboy. “Rural,” if not already so thanks to Jefferson and other Romantics,

⁷ Paul J. P. Sandul, “Harvesting Suburbs, Cultivating Memory: Legacies of Rural and Urban Land Boosterism in California” (due to be published by the West Virginia University Press in 2014), 18; and Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997), 15. See also Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996).

became synonymous with Turner's frontier and all of its positive values and representations by the late-nineteenth century. Subsequently, turn of the twentieth century Progressives, namely President Theodore Roosevelt, glorified the heartland and rural America as a counter, even remedy, to what they judged as a morally failing society and intensified efforts to assist rural dwellers. With mounting urbanization by World War II and mid-century modernization, many Americans longed for the perceived "simpler times" and "true American values" rural areas and dwellers supposedly maintained and rejuvenated—be they farmers, cowboys, or otherwise, though always white.⁸

The romanticization of the rural intensified as late-twentieth century suburbanites experienced the pit-falls of modernity and suburbia. Historian Bruce Schulman, for example, discusses that during the 1970s, America became a nation of "faux bubbas" living in "redneck chic." Schulman explains that suburbanized Americans essentially appropriated the rural ideal as prerequisite for a suburban life as suburbanites became "respectable citizens [who] . . . looked toward fishing holes and country scenes as their ideals."⁹ This occurred following decades of overwhelming political and social change brought about by

⁸ Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 45; Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 201; Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 3, 11, 24-25, 37-41, 46; Patricia Nelson Limerick, *Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1988), 130-31; and John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 130-133.

⁹ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 106.

Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society. Additionally, the numerous contemporary civil rights movements, including black, Native American, Hispanic, gay, and women's rights, forever altered the United States just as the Supreme Court "legalized murder" through abortion and seemingly outlawed public displays of Christianity. Under this secular "attack," many conservative Americans, whom President Richard Nixon famously called the "Silent Majority," maintained a deep resentment of government and championed so-called rugged individualism and meritocracy. This resentment proved strongest in the Southern and, especially, Western United States as the contemporary American West's regional identity lay, as historian Lisa McGirr describes, deeply "rooted in notions of the self-made, individualistic frontiersman."¹⁰ Historian Michael Allen serendipitously notes this identity most often manifests in popular cultural representations as the cowboy. He explains that the cowboy supposedly lives a life based on a set of superior principles, collectively called the "Cowboy Code," which includes such politically and ethically charged words and phrases as democratic, practical, innovative, courageous, anti-intellectual, individualistic, hospitable, and untamable, complete with an "aversion to city life and 'civilization,' fancy talk, and boasting."¹¹ Although

¹⁰ The Supreme Court cases *School District of Abington Township, Pennsylvania v. Schempp* (1963) and *Roe v. Wade* (1973) outlawed public prayer in public schools and legalized abortion.

¹⁰ McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 14.

¹¹ Allen, *Rodeo Cowboys in the North American Imagination*, 29-30.

strongest in the West, this archetypical “code” pervades American national consciousness regardless of location.¹²

The values historically attributed to the cowboy also define the American middle class. Historian David Glassberg explains that the middle class has looked to and appropriated the mythic West, specifically the cowboy, and subsequently constructed neighborhood, city, and regional identities centered on this hardworking, white, hero. The cowboy, like the miner, railroad engineer, and other Western characters, have morphed from their historical origins as poor, working class laborers to become respectable, even wealthy, American citizens—the “American dream.” This idealistic, mythic cowboy thus defines proper citizenship and allows the middle class to maintain the status quo and even assert its hegemony in the United States. The middle class, casting the cowboy as contributing so mightily to society and possessing talents that can increase personal wealth, encourages working class citizens to work harder to reach such a middle class status. In this case, glorifying the cowboy functions as the middle class’s self-affirmation and, more importantly, justifies their beliefs and actions. Nonetheless, attributing these values to the cowboy allows people, regardless of income or occupation, to self-identify with the cowboy because they

¹² The Supreme Court cases *School District of Abington Township, Pennsylvania v. Schempp* (1963) and *Roe v. Wade* (1973) outlawed public prayer in public schools and legalized abortion respectively. Glenn H. Utter and John W. Storey, *The Religious Right: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 1995), 3-7; and Kleinfeld and Kleinfeld, “Cowboy Nation and American Character,” 50.

perceive themselves as hardworking, close to the land, et cetera. In this way, the middle class maintains their hegemony by creating social cohesion by promoting their version of the cowboy. For most Cowboy Christians, then, accepting this definition of the cowboy and the rural indicates they do see a great abundance of cowboys among their ranks.¹³

Despite any sacralization of this archetypical cowboy, many Cowboy Christians still confess that they are not “real” cowboys, but are only part of the Western Heritage Culture. According to Cowboy Christians, the Western Heritage Culture includes anyone who currently or previously participates in or attends rodeos, raises cattle or crops, drives a pick-up truck, listens to country music, or (displaying populist sensibilities yet again) just wants to associate with the “rural lifestyle.” In this context, the Western Heritage Culture is seemingly very welcoming and has few, if any, barriers (hence the easy marriage with the Low Barriers Model discussed in chapter one). Additionally, as evidenced by Cowboy Christians’ occupations, which include industrial worker, teacher, farrier,

¹³ David Glassberg, *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 180-181, 193-4. Coined by Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci in the early-twentieth century, “hegemony” refers both to the dominant socio-political group and that group’s culture. Gramsci explains hegemonies gain power through political leadership and then disseminate their cultural norms throughout other groups to create culturally homogenous societies so non-hegemonic groups will not challenge the hegemony’s socio-political power. See Gramsci, “Selections from the Prison Notebooks,” in *Culture, Ideology and Social Process: A Reader*, 197-199. While hegemony’s are inherently oppressive and exclusive, French scholar Michel Foucault argues that hegemony’s enact such policies as a form of self-affirmation and are not malicious. See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Volume 1* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 123. See also discussion about gender relations and hegemony within the cowboy church movement in chapter one.

IT technician, rancher, and doctor, the Western Heritage Culture cuts across socioeconomic lines.¹⁴

Identifying with a culture instead of an occupation, which suburban historians Gwendolyn Wright and Becky Nicolaides argue has long been true of the American middle class, increases religious seekers' accessibilities to the cowboy church movement. This provides opportunities in several ways. First, the cowboy church movement is chiefly a religious one that attempts to "save" as many "lost souls" as possible. By explaining the movement's cowboy as an archetype embodying "rural" and "American" values and not limiting membership to just occupational cowboys, cowboy churches attract many who wish to don the title of "Cowboy Christian." Second, this enables members to construct an identity as a cowboy who upholds and embodies those inherent values.

Cultivating and accepting this identity further establishes egalitarianism among Cowboy Christians, which is at the heart of community formation and cohesion

¹⁴ Drawing heavily from religious theorist Peter Berger, sociologist Dean Kelley explains the process by which everyone sacralizes aspects of their culture as "an enterprise of world-building." Dean notes that when this constructed culture is "taken for granted," the society's world view has attained "its greatest solidity and reality," and culture then merges with the fundamental meanings of the universe, or "cosmos." Dean here quotes Berger who notes that, "Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. . . . By sacred is meant here a quality of mysterious and awesome power, other than and yet related to him . . . ' It is the sacred cosmos that 'provides man's ultimate shield against the terror of [separation from the social world],' a sacred canopy against chaos." The cowboy church movement then, represents a sacralization process by which members "merge" cultural identifiers, representations, and beliefs to an established religion, thus making the cowboy inseparable from God, legitimizing their lifestyles, and guarding against social alienation. See Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, 41-42; and Peter Berger, *The Social Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1967), 5-6, 20-26. Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Maddox, interviewed by McAdams; Denny, interviewed by McAdams; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; and Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

as conceptualized by scholar Benedict Anderson's "imagined community." After recognizing that they hold, or seek to hold, those values of the archetypal cowboy, Cowboy Christians deem themselves cowboys. Accepting this identity, they are able to identify further with the few working cattlemen, recreational cowboys, and rodeo participants who do actually attend cowboy churches, and with whom they are friends. This identity cultivation enables Cowboy Christians who do not own land, raise livestock or crops, or participate in rodeos to claim being a cowboy, even if it is only by association. Since the cowboy is intimately tied to both domestic and international tropes and identity markers as historians Michael Kimmel and Eric Hobsbawm indicate, Cowboy Christians' cultivated new identities encourage them to identify as "more American" than non-cowboys and claim their intellectual, and possibly familial, ancestors built the powerful United States of the modern world and, therefore, make the United States great. Put differently, Cowboy Christians are simultaneously the benefactors and contemporary representatives of a mythic United States.¹⁵

Sociologist Thorstein Veblen's concept of "conspicuous consumption" is helpful in understanding Cowboy Christians' appropriations of cowboy to

¹⁵ Becky Nicolaides, *My Blue Heaven: Life and Politics in the Working-Class Suburbs of Los Angeles, 1920-1965* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Gwendolyn Wright, *Moralism and the Model Home: Domestic Architecture and Cultural Conflict in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Sublett, interviewed by McAdams; Caye King, interviewed by McAdams; Morris, interviewed by McAdams; Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; Wilson, interviewed by McAdams; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 2006), 6; Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 99; and Hobsbawm, "The Myth of the Cowboy."

construct their identities. Posing in his 1912 *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen analyzed the leisure activities and lifestyles of Americans and discovered that the working class bought certain vicarious goods as the higher classes, namely clothing and house decorations, to identify with them. Through this process of conspicuous consumption, then, people can identify themselves largely outside of, or in spite of, their economic class simply through their purchasing prowess. Historians Bruce Schulman and Michael Allen also explain Americans increasingly practiced conspicuous consumption in the late-twentieth century to identify with the imagined Western culture, as evidenced by the increasing popularity of country music and popular creations of the “Coca Cola” and urban cowboy identities. Cowboy Christians similarly conspicuously consume their culture—listening to country music, driving pick-up trucks, and wearing certain clothes—because they want to identify with that culture. Cowboy Christians explain that these conspicuous consumers comprise a large part of the Western Heritage Culture and their church membership. Since Cowboy Christians attribute the United States’ moral, economic, and political “greatness” to the cowboy and the rural, which comprises the Western Heritage Culture, they mold themselves through their purchases and lifestyle choices, including attending a cowboy church, to become part of that ethos.¹⁶

¹⁶ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1912), 68; Mel Tillis, “Coca-Cola Cowboy,” *Mr. Entertainer*, 1979, MCA Records; Schulman, *The Seventies*, 114-117; Allen *Rodeo Cowboys in the North*

Displaying the Cowboy and the Cross symbol is an important means by which Cowboy Christians specifically employ conspicuous consumption and claim cowboy by association. Cowboy Christians associate numerous values with this symbol. Larry Miller, pastor of the Cowboy Church of Henrietta (where the symbol originated), notes it is purely a cultural identifier. Miller explains that the symbol of the cross is value-laden because it symbolizes to Christians their messiah's death and their personal salvation. While nothing can compare to the cross in Miller's mind, picturing a cowboy kneeling to God in prayer represents the humility that he, as a cowboy, should demonstrate. Other Cowboy Christians provide similar statements whereby the Cowboy and the Cross symbol represents a humble, submissive cowboy showing humility before God.¹⁷

Within this basic narrative, two vastly different interpretations arise, which illustrates the paradoxes that the cowboy entails for Cowboy Christians. As cowboy pastors Chris Maddox and Russ Weaver explain, cowboys, especially rodeo cowboys in late-twentieth century United States, do not inherently show humility, behave "godly," or routinely consider God in their lives, which is in opposition to the values Cowboy Christians say the Cowboy and the Cross embodies. The cowboy Maddox and Weaver describe is hyper-masculine, prideful, and, ultimately, sinful. This cowboy overcomes his sinfulness and,

American Imagination, 53-54, 197; Maddox, interviewed by McAdams; Denny, interviewed by McAdams; Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; and Morgan, interviewed by McAdams.

¹⁷ Miller, interviewed by McAdams.



Figure 5—Cowboy and the Cross prominently displayed in front of the Cowboy Church of Ellis County. Ron Nolen received Larry Miller's permission to use the Cowboy Church of Henrietta's design in the early 2000s and integrated it into the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches' model. (Photograph courtesy of Jake McAdams, on file in the Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.)



Figure 6—Cowboy and the Cross displayed in front of the Impact Cowboy Church. (Photograph courtesy of Jake McAdams, on file in the Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection. ETRC.)

through Jesus, gives his life to God and becomes one of God's warrior's. In this understanding, the Cowboy and the Cross represents the triumph of the cross over the cowboy. Another common explanation of the Cowboy and the Cross is that the cowboy represents the quintessential (though invented) everyman who is hardworking, conservative, practices resource stewardship, and is comfortable in nature. This cowboy is prideful, but not too proud as to forget everything he has is supposedly God's blessings on his life. This interpretation indicates the cowboy's devotion to God is organic and seemingly natural. While there are outliers (one family indicated it only represented congregational affiliation), most interviewed Cowboy Christians provide one of these two responses.¹⁸

An interesting pattern develops concerning respondents' lives and which interpretation they appropriate to the symbol. Most members previously unchurched or who participated in rodeos tend to explain the pictured cowboy as someone who had to change their life for God, thus, reflective of the triumphal cross narrative. Conversely, members already churched before joining the cowboy church typically explain the cowboy as thanking God for blessings, which follows the organic narrative. Whatever the case, the cowboy certainly has an appeal. The pattern indicates that the Cowboy and the Cross symbol, similar to

¹⁷ Spence, interviewed by McAdams; Morris, interviewed by McAdams; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Orenshaw, interviewed by McAdams; Hightower, interviewed by McAdams; Sullivan, interviewed by McAdams, and White.

¹⁸ Maddox, interviewed by McAdams; Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Sublett, interviewed by McAdams; and Denny, interviewed by McAdams.

the model cowboy, appeals to a variety of people, is interpreted variously, and helps to further create a group consciousness among Cowboy Christians.¹⁹

Cowboy Membership

The cowboy church movement's history indicates that its target audience shifted with time. While many rodeo athletes remain active in cowboy churches, including ten-time world title holder Trevor Brazile, cowboy church leadership admits the movement has failed to attract, and even lost, rodeo participants since the early 2000s. So, if the movement has failed to reach its original target population, who comprises the membership of this growing movement?²⁰

The cowboy church movement's unique brand of worship attracts people uncomfortable with traditional churches, especially those who self-affiliate with the Western Heritage Culture. As previously mentioned, Cowboy Christians work in a wide array of occupations, most of which are in the service sector and very few rely upon personal agricultural production for income. Many male Cowboy Christians work in factories, petroleum or natural gas drilling operations, law enforcement, real estate, or government bureaucracies. Many female Cowboy Christians are teachers, nurses, accountants, administrative assistants, or other

¹⁹ Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; Morris, interviewed by McAdams; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Crenshaw, interviewed by McAdams; Hightower, interviewed by McAdams; Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Burton, interviewed by McAdams; and Wilson, interviewed by McAdams.

²⁰ Bill Shaw, on-air interviewed by Danny Merrill, "KICKS 105," Lufkin, TX, November, 4, 2013; and Denny, interviewed by McAdams.

service technicians. Somewhat surprising at first glance are the amount of small business owners present in cowboy churches. While these jobs are common among the middle class and upper-working class as Schulman discusses, what unites cowboy church members is their disillusionment of other churches and appreciation of Western and rural culture. As discussed in chapter one, Cowboy Christians commonly bemoan traditional churches' perceived pretentiousness and "self-righteous" "traditionalism," which they argue is inapplicable to contemporary society. Cowboy churches attempt to correct these perceived pitfalls with the Low Barriers Model and encourage members to conspicuously engage the Western Heritage Culture. This oftentimes comes natural to Cowboy Christians as many grew up in rural locations or, more commonly, watched Western movies and television shows, such as *Rio Bravo*, *True Grit*, and *Bonanza*. In this sense, many desire to identify with the Western Heritage Culture as homage to their youthful heroes and nostalgia. Similarly, Cowboy Christians might relate with country music singer Toby Keith as he sang, "I should have been a cowboy," as members fantasize about being (or being with) a cowboy. What is unique to the cowboy church movement is that it allows people spaces to perform their desired identities surrounded by people who also do the same thing. According to Cowboy Christians, few other contemporary churches allow

interviewed by McAdams, Norma, interviewed by McAdams, Brent, interviewed by McAdams, Spencer, interviewed by McAdams, Margie, interviewed by McAdams, Marlene, interviewed by McAdams, Danny, interviewed by McAdams, Wilcox, interviewed by McAdams, Brent, interviewed by McAdams, and Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.
Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

them to “be themselves,” as they perform their identities while seemingly worshipping God.²¹

Another dominant factor in evangelicalism, and often one of its most resounding failures, is the race issue. Since the archetypal cowboy embodies middle class values, which historically disenfranchises and oppresses ethnoracial minorities in the United States, and Texas Baptists have historically had problems with race as well, many assume cowboy churches perpetuate a racialized worldview and are unwelcoming to racial minorities. Nevertheless, Cowboy Christians explain race relations as largely a nonissue. When asked about race in the cowboy church movement, especially as it concerns the participation of African Americans and Hispanics, Weaver responds, “How can they call us racist when [we] deal with that no pretense thing?”²² The obvious critique is that Cowboy Christians do not completely practice the “no pretense thing” of not judging people. Yet, from observations and numerous Cowboy Christians’ oral histories, it appears many Cowboy Christians do not encourage or support racial discrimination. Much of this is due to a sincere acceptance of Jesus’ “Great Commission” to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Mat. 28:29-20) and the Apostle Paul’s ministry to the Gentile world. While Cowboy Christians

²¹ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 106; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Caye King, interviewed by McAdams; Morris, interviewed by McAdams; Sublett, interviewed by McAdams; Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Maddox, interviewed by McAdams; Denny, interviewed by McAdams; Wilson, interviewed by McAdams; Burton, interviewed by McAdams; and Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

²² Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

accept this charge to spread Christianity, it does not contain a racialized missionizing like many of the nineteenth and twentieth century Christian missionary efforts. Since many Cowboy Christians come from the ranks of the recently unchurched, they empathize with other groups and recognize that all need Jesus and that Jesus is open to all people despite their skin color.²³

Racism further seemed the defining issue between “cowboys” and “rednecks.” Cowboy Christians identify as “cowboys,” “blue-collared,” “Christian,” and “good ole country folk,” but never “rednecks.” While few interviewed Cowboy Christians explain why they do not identify as redneck, Weaver, without elaborating, indicates a stark cultural difference between “rednecks” and “cowboys.” Black Cowboy Church of Ellis County (CCEC) member Robert Wilson indicates this difference is the issue of race. At the time of the interview, Wilson and his wife had attended the CCEC for three years and moved there from a local mixed-race Church of Christ. Although this sixty-seven year old man has not served, nor intends to serve, as a lay pastor at the CCEC, he has become an active church volunteer in the predominately white congregation. Wilson explains that he and his wife feel treated identical to other church attendees although they are black nor self-identify with the Western Heritage Culture. He further explains

²³ John W. Storey, “Pagodas Amid the Steeples: The Changing Religious Landscape,” in *Twentieth Century Texas: A Social and Cultural History*, ed. John W. Storey and Mary L. Kelley (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2008), 149-150, 152; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Caye King, interviewed by McAdams; Morris, interviewed by McAdams; Sublett, interviewed by McAdams; and Maddox, interviewed by McAdams.

that while he has never witnessed any indication of racism among CCEC members, he is “not stupid enough to know that we don’t have some rednecks in here.”²⁴ Wilson’s testimony indicates that racism is the defining characteristic of a “redneck,” whereas “cowboys” are more egalitarian and willing to recognize people in a similar socioeconomic class. Since definitions can disregard facts and mean anything anybody wants them to, as indicated by Cowboy Christians’ definitions of cowboy, this does not mean that Cowboy Christians are free from racial prejudices and discriminations in reality.²⁵

A quick demographic survey of the CCEC’s and the Impact Cowboy Church’s (ICC) memberships indicate that race is not as detrimental an issue than at some other traditional churches. At the CCEC, cowboy pastors Morgan and Chris Maddox report they have “a decent smattering of black folks,” approximately ten, and numerous Hispanic members.²⁶ They also note a few interracial families attend the CCEC, and the local American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches supports a Spanish-speaking cowboy church south of Waxahachie, Iglesia Bautista de los Vaqueros. While this represents some level of racial and cultural tolerance and diversity, one CCEC member expresses that he does “not support the mixing of the races,” but does not think it is sinful, like some other Texas Baptists, and believes biracial individuals need salvation like

²⁴ Wilson, interviewed by McAdams.

²⁵ Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

²⁶ Morgan, interviewed by McAdams.

everyone else.²⁷ Nonetheless, it appears that this CCEC member leaves, as Wilson phrased it, his racial ideas along with the manure on his boots at the meetinghouse's front door.²⁸

The ICC is seemingly more racially progressive than the CCEC. Numerous Hispanics and interracial Hispanic-Anglo families attend the ICC. Additionally, cowboy pastor Stan King has an adopted black teenage son, and a black-white interracial family with three children placed membership in the summer of 2013. While not over abundantly racially diverse, the group appears to welcome anyone that comes through their door. King's and the ICC's purported lack of racism specifically brought Tommy and Vivian Sublett to the church in 2011. The Subletts explain that as foster parents, they care for one to three medically fragile children at any time, many of whom are not white. While attending their previous church in Houston, a mid-sized Baptist church, the nursery workers refused to handle the Subletts' non-white foster children and the Sublett's subsequently left organized Christianity because of perceived racial intolerance at many traditional churches'. After moving to Nacogdoches, the Subletts met King and showed interest in the ICC, but expressed concerns about Cowboy Christians assumed racial prejudices. Yet, King convinced the Subletts of the church's tolerance by pointing to his black son. The Subletts soon after

²⁷ Denny, interviewed by McAdams.

²⁸ Maddox, interviewed by McAdams; Dennis Anderson, *Interracial Marriages in Light of the Scriptures* (Nacogdoches, TX: Appleby Baptist Church, 1999), 3-4, 8; and Wilson, interviewed by McAdams.

placed membership and, as they report, have not experienced any racial discrimination. While race certainly remains an issue to some, cowboy church leadership adamantly oppose any racial discrimination within the cowboy church movement.²⁹

Despite the general renunciation of racial prejudices, the cowboy church movement's color-blind language is suspect, especially in lieu of closet rednecks as Wilson and the other CCEC member referenced earlier indicate. While not discounting Cowboy Christians' stated beliefs, the cowboy church movement's colorblind rhetoric largely resembles what historian Howard Winant describes as the "neoconservative racial project" in his article "Behind Blue Eyes." Winant discusses the "politicization of whiteness" in the United States since the 1960s and argues citizens have rearticulated and reinterpreted racial differences to maintain white supremacy. Unlike the "new right racial project," which Winant explains is "based on white racial nationalism" and presents "itself as the tribune of disenfranchised whites," the neoconservative racial project "preserves white advantages through denial of racial difference."³⁰ According to Winant, neoconservatives recognize racism comprises a set of core problems that the United States historically faced and, therefore, use color-blind rhetoric and

²⁹ Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Caye King interviewed by McAdams; Morris, interviewed by McAdams; Sublett, interviewed by McAdams; Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; and Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

³⁰ Howard Winant, "Behind Blue Eyes: Contemporary White Racial Politics," *New Left Review* 225 (Sept.-Oct. 1997), accessed October 31, 2012, <http://www.soc.ucsb.edu/faculty/winant/whitness.html>.

policies, which ignore race, to correct those difficulties. Neoconservatives attack affirmative action policies, arguing that it perpetuates America's racial problem instead of alleviating it. Winant further discusses that the neoconservative project climaxed under Reagan's presidency and proved particularly useful as "it served to organize and rationalize white working class resentments against declining living standards."³¹ In other words, color-blind language, first, helped neoconservatives guard against what might have been a white working class alignment with other non-white working class members. Second, and perhaps more important, color-blind language allows the white working class to adopt a narrative of victimhood at the hands of government intervention concerning their declining living standards—especially intervention they claim favors non-whites, which is statistically inaccurate.

Cowboy Christians express very similar rhetoric as Winant's neoconservatives. They describe a mythic post-racial America, arguing that physical and mental differences among races are nonexistent. Yet, Winant warns, the neoconservative "perspective is not as inclusionary as it superficially appears."³² Cowboy Christians resent government programs, such as welfare, that conservatives associate with minorities, thus further stigmatizing welfare. Additionally, Cowboy Christians' explaining that the popular cowboy culture does not appeal to minorities distinguishes a sense of otherness that separates races,

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

especially white and black. Finally, scholars Laura Barraclough, Richard Slotkin and others explain that rural and frontier characters, such as the cowboy, have been—and remain—explicitly tied to notions of whiteness in which racial and ethnic minorities must adhere before group acceptance. These characteristics firmly place the cowboy church movement as white.³³

Cowboy Politics

As indicated by their racial attitudes, the cowboy church movement is politically conservative. While this is unsurprising, analyzing the movement's historical contexts and members' beliefs is imperative to understand the movement's significance in contemporary Texas accurately.

The cowboy church movement originated during a time of intense national political conservatism. During the 1960s, Americans became increasingly skeptical about the national government. Many responded to President Lyndon B. Johnson and the rise of the so-called New Left of the 1960s with an entrenched anti-authoritarian, individualistic, and even libertarian stance demanding lower taxes and reducing welfare programs. McGirr and Schulman note that the suburban middle class largely led this charge as their affluence increased and they perceived Johnson's growing welfare state as stealing their

³³ Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Denny, interviewed by McAdams; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; Laura A. Barraclough, *Making the San Fernando Valley: Rural Landscape, Urban Development, and White Privilege* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 269; and Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 19.

money. The irony behind this though, as McGirr notes, is that the welfare state largely created the middle class' affluence due to land development subsidies and government contracts. The Vietnam War also led to increased taxes, even on private schools that the white middle class increasingly sent their children to in response to public school desegregation, and issued the apparent defeat of American democracy by the communists. This apparent defeat, coupled with the early-1970s Watergate scandal, caused a national "crisis of confidence," as President Jimmy Carter infamously termed it, and led many Americans, especially middle class conservatives, to demand a complete overhaul of American politics.³⁴

At this juncture in history, the United States' popular culture seemingly directly interacted with politics. Schulman notes the 1970s became the decade of the Southern entrepreneur as Southerners' continued migrations throughout the nation and, more importantly, the Sunbelt increasingly attracting industries essentially "Southernized" the United States, specifically the middle class. Facing modernization, development, and perceived government failure, Americans increasingly regarded the mythic, by-gone West and South, which the contemporary Sunbelt assumingly maintained, with a nostalgic reverence. This Southern and rural glorification is most noticeable in country music's growing popularity as Americans increasingly tuned their dials to Merle Haggard's "Okie

³⁴ McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 37-39, 149-151; and Schulman, *The Seventies*, 112, 141.

from Muskogee” and John Denver’s “Thank God I’m a Country Boy.” By the mid 1970s, country proved the most popular genre, launching variety shows hosted by country musicians like Johnny Cash and Glenn Campbell. Americans also routinely watched television shows such as *Gunsmoke*, *Bonanza*, *McCloud*, *Little House on the Prairie*, and *The Andy Griffith Show* that depicted either a nostalgic American West or contemporary, yet quaint, patriotic American South. At the same time, Western movies remained popular as John Wayne and, then, Clint Eastwood morphed into Americans’ ideals of the West, championing loyalty and virtue in an era often labeled “tumultuous” or, for the 1970s, “The ‘Me’ Decade.” Many of these cultural productions encouraged conservatism and, almost blind, devotion to the government wrapped up in notions of “patriotism” and “traditional” values, which scholar Eric Hobsbawm explains are inventions.³⁵

Much of this commercialized Southern culture, though, challenged the “old establishment” of the northeast and liberal intellectuals whom citizens blamed for the nation’s disparity. A new breed of Southern hero emerged that, while rigidly adhering to a sort of “Cowboy Code,” his code did not completely align with “civilized culture.” For example, Clint Eastwood’s 1976 “The Outlaw Josey Wales” went outside approved laws to achieve his frontier justice. Country music further challenged “proper” citizenship as artists such as Waylon Jennings, Willie

³⁵ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 79, 116-117, 257; and Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Roger (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

Nelson, and Johnny Cash played songs such as “Folsom Prison Blues” and “Momma’s Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys” that glorified delinquent behavior and challenged the “good Southerner” image. Furthermore, popular story-song artists such as C. W. McCall and Jerry Reed made careers singing about busting through police barricades and trying to outrun police during an interstate beer run. Similarly, television show *The Dukes of Hazard* glorified the escapades of its moonshining, daredevil protagonists Bo and Luke as they raced through the Georgia countryside in their “General Lee,” outsmarting the corrupt elected official, Boss Hog, and his incompetent cronies. These popular cultural representations that morally and socially elevated the “common” Southerner captivated Americans as they enunciated citizens’ discontents with, and distrust of, elected officials. As Charlie Daniels sang in 1975, it appeared the “South [was] gonna do it again.”³⁶

While somewhat different, both strains of commercialized Southern culture transmitted values scholars note are inherent to the invention of tradition within the American South, especially with regards to the long-standing myths associated with the Lost Cause. These cultural constructions expressed an idealized longing for the rural, which remained simple, morally pure, and democratic. Additionally, rural residents underwent a transfiguration of sorts, from

³⁶ McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 151. “Convoy” (1975) is one of C. W. McCall’s most famous songs and Jerry Reed popularized “East Bound and Down.” Both songs became theme songs for movies, *Convoy* (1978) and *Smokey and the Bandit* (1977) respectively. Charlie Daniels Band, “The South’s Gonna Do It Again,” *Fire on the Mountain*, 1975, Sony Records.

“hayseeds, hillbillies, and boobs” as satirist H. L. Mencken liked to call them in the 1920s, to “respectable citizens” who worked hard and paid their taxes. These popular cultural representations of the working class and rural milieu even expressed a nostalgic longing for the poor, evidenced by country musician Loretta Lynn’s 1970 number one hit “Coal Miner’s Daughter,” about her impoverished, Kentucky childhood. These songs, television programs, and films went as far to suggest that the poor, specifically the rural, Southern poor, with their “common sense” and “traditional” logic could correct the country’s failings if given the opportunity.³⁷

Religion, specifically Protestant evangelicalism, proved another unique characteristic of the South and spread with the popularity of Southern culture. As religious scholar Mark Shibley explains, Southern migrants took their unique, experiential Southern evangelicalism with them when they migrated during the twentieth century and planted churches throughout the nation. Once planted, churches served as community centers and sources of stability for the recent migrants and attracted resident suburbanites desiring a stable, seemingly traditional community in the ever-changing 1960s and 1970s. This

³⁷ The Lost Cause is the refers to a historical narrative that argues the American South both fought the Civil War in defense of state’s rights and individual liberties (not slavery), as well as epitomized a more gallant, simpler way of life. See Dwight T. Pitcaithley, “A Cosmic Threat: The National Park Service Addresses the Causes of the American Civil War,” in *Slavery and Public History: The Tough Stuff of American Memory*, ed. James Oliver Horton and Lois E. Horton (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 171-172; Schulman, *The Seventies*, 117; 197, 200; and David Fillingim, *Redneck Liberation*, 34, 66.

evangelicalism taught individualism, such as personal salvation, and a contempt for what they recognized as the liberal, women-liberating, abortion and gay supporting federal government. This Southernized evangelicalism grew ever larger and gained national legitimacy as pastors and televangelists such as Jerry Falwell, Oral Roberts, and Pat Robertson led Americans in denouncing the perceived sinfulness and moral decay of the modern, multicultural United States and laid the blame firmly on Washington and liberal intellectuals. With their charismatic orations, appeals to "tradition," and seemingly commonsensical recommendations, these and other evangelists made the "New Christian Right" a political and social force that remained strong well into the twenty-first century.³⁸

These factors culminated in the popular demand for a conservative and "traditionalistic" small government, which, of course, never truly existed. As shown, Americans heralded the rural and its working poor residents as politically "traditionalistic," meaning, as scholar Tex Sample notes, that they simply wanted to be "left the hell alone" by outside forces to pursue life in their own communities (again, the irony is that they receive the most aid from the federal government).³⁹

Many late-twentieth century middle class conservatives echoed this call as they disdained the welfare programs and taxes that "stole" their money and gave it to the unemployed and racial minorities. They further lamented the perception that

³⁸ Shibley, *Resurgent Evangelicalism*, 2-3, 35; McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 48; and Schulman, *The Seventies*, 93-96.

³⁹ Fillingim, *Redneck Liberation*, 66.

their tax dollars supported the incompetent and corrupt administrations of Presidents Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Jimmy Carter. If not enough, the United States' loss to communism in Vietnam and Cuba and economic "stagflation" experienced in the late-1970s surely evidenced to conservative Americans that the United States needed a return to a "traditionalistic" government, not the continued growth of the liberal welfare state largely created by Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. From this popular angst, encouraged by popular cultural representations, came the political conservative coalition of anti-statist libertarians and normative conservatives. This coalition included so-called war hawks as Barry Goldwater, evangelicals like Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, and intellectual neoconservatives like William F. Buckley. This predominately middle class coalition heralded God—the Christian God that is—guns, national defense, anti-elitism, patriarchy, white privilege, and a reinstatement of "traditional family values."⁴⁰

The cowboy became this conservative coalition's icon as the counter pole of the hippies and liberals of the 1960s. Conservatives fervently cried out that the nation needed the cowboy, with his rugged individualism and courage, to

⁴⁰ For example, the creation of the first National Bank and suppression of the Whiskey rebellion during George Washington's presidency and the *Gibbons v. Ogden* (1824) Supreme Court case illustrates that the federal government always "meddled" in citizens personal matters especially when it came to one's right to make money and spend money. The working poor and middle class receives much government aid in the form of student loans, Federal housing loans, government contracts, Medicaid, and Medicare. Schulman, *The Seventies*, 199-200; and McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 150-152.

alleviate its ills. The cowboy, as John Wayne and Clint Eastwood represented, stood ready to clear leather and shoot down the liberal leviathan and, as Buckley called them, “social engineers” emanating out of the 1960s and early 1970s. The cowboy was nothing if not “traditionalistic,” and, as conservative activist Phyllis Schlafly made clear, legalizing abortion and making a constitutional amendment that granted women equal rights, among other items, was anything but traditional.⁴¹

After a decade and a half, this conservative coalition achieved its dream of a cowboy riding into the White House by electing Ronald Reagan, the ranch owning, horse riding, tax hating, anticommunist, in 1980. Under Reagan, sometimes called the Reagan Revolution, conservatives saw some reduction in taxes (though Reagan also famously raised them and expanded Medicare), deregulation, employment increases (but not relative wages to price increases), the beginning of the end of the Cold War, and a Christian president that, unlike the Bible-thumping Jimmy Carter, restored “traditional” and “godly” morality to the United States (even if 1980s film director Oliver Stone’s Gordon Gekko character reminded movie goers that the Reagan age meant a celebration of wealth). This conservative revolution continued through the early 2000s as Americans voted in a majority-Republican congress in 1994 and the transplant-Texas cowboy

⁴¹ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 177, 187; McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 214; and William F. Buckley, Jr., “Mission Statement,” *National Review Online*, accessed November 1, 2013, <http://www.nationalreview.com/articles/223549/our-mission-statement/william-f-buckley-jr>.

George W. Bush to President in 2000. While conservatives' national control waned under Bush's presidency primarily due to extended wars, over-extension of "morality" legislation, and the 2008 economic recession, the conservative movement greatly influenced, if not outright dominated, United States policies since the 1970s.⁴²

The cowboy church grew and originated within this historical context. Although many attended colleges, 1970s and 1980s rodeo ministers disdained intellectuals and the wealthy. They also remained skeptical of government intrusion, in the classically liberal sense of the term. Yet, whether out of genuine belief or an internal contradiction of said beliefs, they supported expanding military and intervening in what happened "behind closed doors" as it concerned what they viewed as morality issues (e.g., homosexuality). While many females participated in rodeo ministry, including Suzie McEntire, ministers did not support the women's liberation movement because it subverted "Biblical" gender roles as they interpreted them and produced "feminized" men, such as film writer/director Woody Allen, artist Andy Warhol, singer Mick Jagger, and actor Alan Alda. Despite popular culture counter representations to each of these, be they Clint Eastwood, Steve McQueen, or Johnny Cash, with a "cowboy" president in office, the professional National Final Rodeo in Las Vegas, and the continued popularity

⁴² Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 643-644; Schulman, *The Seventies*, 225, 235; and Hyrum Lewis, "Historians and the Myth of American Conservatism," *The Journal of the Historical Society* 12, no. 1 (March 2012): 29.

of country music and Westerns, the cowboy proved mainstream, even “big business,” by the time Jeff Copenhaver started his cowboy church at Billy Bob’s Texas in 1986.⁴³

Cowboy churches, like cowboy entertainment, attract the middle-class “faux bubbas” and “half rednecks” that comprised Reagan’s Grand Old Party. Russ Weaver’s and Larry Miller’s church plantings indicate this continued during the 1990s with the conservative movement’s further rise. Cowboy pastors, for example, certainly disdain government and maintain a nostalgic romanticization of the rural, which mirrors the political philosophy espoused by the movement’s patron saint: Ronald Reagan. Furthermore, Cowboy Christians pride themselves on not incurring debt and “living within their means,” which they believe all should do. While not expressly tied to the conservative movement, the early cowboy church movement evoked much of the imagery and rhetoric of the conservative movement, including the glorification, and sacralization, of the “common working man” and bemoaning the lack of “traditional values” in the contemporary United States.⁴⁴

Since the early-2000s, the cowboy church movement more closely mirrors, and contributes to, the continuing strength of the conservative movement and the values it professes. Cowboy churches propagate culturally and politically

⁴³ Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; and Schulman, *The Seventies*, 178.

⁴⁴ Schulman, *The Seventies*, 117; Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; Miller, interviewed by McAdams; and Stan King, interviewed by McAdams.

charged imagery and identities. As explained, the American cowboy's embodied values have not changed for Western Heritage Culture affiliates since the 1970s and 1980s; it continues to symbolize a conservative, "traditional" way of life. Cowboy Christians juxtapose their definitions of cowboy to a modern, largely suburbanized, America that has "lost its roots," even if such roots never truly existed. Identifying with the "historical" American cowboy, legitimates Cowboy Christians as "rooted," and thus "truer" Americans. Additionally, categorizing the cowboy as a laborer, as many Cowboy Christians do, remarkably resembles earlier conservatives' representations. Furthermore, historian David Fillingim explains the mid-century popularity of country music as allowing citizens to attach themselves to the cowboy in an "effort to keep alive traditions and ways of understanding the world that were endangered by the changing social realities" of urbanization and modernity.⁴⁵ He further notes, globalization, not urbanization, has functioned as the force of change more recently and that people look to the supposed "traditional" working class and cowboy as a way to "preserve certain values" and a certain fabricated heritage. In this frame, the cowboy church movement largely continues the process mid-century conservatives began and even uses their identical imagery.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Fillingim, *Redneck Liberation*, 81.

⁴⁶ Crenshaw, interviewed by Morris, Caye King, interviewed by McAdams; Morris, interviewed by McAdams; Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; Denny, interviewed by McAdams; Hightower, interviewed by McAdams; Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; and Fillingim, *Redneck Liberation*, 28, 40, 82.

Cowboy Christians accept the preservation and, in many cases, what they acknowledge as a re-cultivation of a “traditional way of life” as their charge. Most Cowboy Christians note their political philosophy as “conservative” or their party allegiance as “Republican,” including pastors. This conservatism includes an adamant disdain for “big government,” taxation policies, and “wasteful” welfare programs, which for them, as historian Linda Gordon demonstrates, narrow on programs historically associated with ethnoracial minorities and women, such as food stamps, but not programs that often benefit less affluent whites, like housing or college loans, or subsidies to private companies, big or small. Additionally, Cowboy Christians, resembling earlier conservatives, express disgust towards intellectuals and elites and insist a necessary reliance on what they call “common sense.” These sentiments further mirror the irony McGirr and Schulman point out with the conservative movement: a large percentage of Cowboy Christians are college educated.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 8. See Linda Gordon, *Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935* (New York: Free Press, 1994); and Nancy MacLean, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Opening of the American Work Place* (New York: R. Sage, 2006). Interestingly, Antonio Gramsci theorizes that “common sense” is one of the most powerful ways hegemonic groups exert and maintain control. According to Gramsci, common sense is “the folklore of philosophy, and it is always half-way between folklore properly speaking and the philosophy . . . of specialists.” He continues noting that common sense, then, is the philosophy of non-hegemonic groups and is inextricably linked, and controlled, by hegemonic groups. In this way, groups maintain hegemony by making “everyone a philosopher” and showing that their policies are “common sense.” In other words, Cowboy Christians, in a Gramscian perspective, are both hegemonic leaders and the willingly led that want to disseminate their philosophy to non-hegemonic “folk” to gain hegemony. See “Selections from the Prison Notebooks,” in *Culture, Ideology and Social Process: A Reader*, 201-203.

As part of the New Christian Right, the moral status of the United States and the world is most important for Cowboy Christians. While Cowboy Christians are not as publicly outspoken as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, or even conservative news pundit Glenn Beck, Cowboy Christians bemoan America's perceived moral decay, evidenced by an assumed increase of abortion and widespread endorsement of homosexuality and gay marriage. To Cowboy Christians, these policies indicate the godlessness of political leaders, even as some more extremist within the conservative movement infamously charge that President Barack Obama is not Christian, but a Muslim (hence, even if not "godless," he prays to the wrong God). Furthermore, Cowboy Christians point to increased divorce rates, although many have been divorced, and increasingly secularized public education as a sign of the United States' loss of "Christian morals." Cowboy Christians claim these recent trends destroy God's design for the family and undermine men's roles in the home and society, which again are common critiques of the new conservative movement and Christian Right.⁴⁸

Furthermore, Cowboy Christians profess great levels of "patriotism" and support for the United States Armed Forces. There are several reasons for this

⁴⁸ Statistics indicate abortions are decreasing in the United States annually. "U. S. Abortion Statistics: Facts and Figures Relating to the Frequency of Abortion in the United States," Abort 73, accessed October, 26, 2013, http://www.abort73.com/abortion_facts/us_abortion_statistics/; Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Denny, interviewed by McAdams; Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; Caye King, interviewed by McAdams; Eugene Cho, "Is He a Christian, a Muslim, or Just a Cactus? Why Can't We Just Believe President Obama?," *Huffington Post*, last modified October 4, 2010 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eugene-cho/is-he-a-christian-a-musli_b_744657.html; and McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 248, 260.

support. First, many Cowboy Christians or their family members served or serve in the military. Because of this, Cowboy Christians empathize with service personnel and respect their actions. Second, many Cowboy Christians grew up during the Cold War. Similar to President Reagan and his contemporary conservatives, Cowboy Christians express an ideal of American exceptionalism that is only secured, and best shown, through military force and service. Again, disregarding the founding generation's anxieties concerning democracy, military largess, and lack of evangelical fervor, Cowboy Christians view the United States as the bulwark of the holy pillars—democracy and Christianity—in the world and believe, as other conservatives, it is the United States' manifest destiny to maintain them at all costs. Cowboy Christians' immanent Christianity and proclamations of experiencing God's blessings further perpetuate this belief.⁴⁹

Similar to other Christian conservatives, Cowboy Christians believe they have a political role. Certainly, they can help defend this "Christian nation" by joining the military. Many cowboy churches also display the American and military flags in their meetinghouses and participate in patriotic missions, such as welcoming soldiers home and sending active soldiers care packages.

Additionally, most cowboy churches hold patriotic services as community outreach activities for national holidays such as Veterans' Day and the Fourth of

⁴⁹ Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Wilson, interviewed by McAdams; Morris, interviewed by McAdams; Peggy Noonan, *When Character Was King*, 86; and Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

July, complete with patriotic music, such as country musician Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA," recognition of attending veterans, and even teaching national history lessons. While Cowboy Christians claim pastors "do not discuss politics in the pulpit," that means pastors do not explicitly tell people how to vote.⁵⁰ Cowboy pastors encourage members' civic participation through voting and, especially, to pray without ceasing for political leaders so they might follow what Cowboy Christians believe as Biblical principles, including anti-homosexuality and anti-abortion, and protect the nation from Muslim terrorists and secular humanists. Ultimately, the cowboy church movement most closely resembles neoconservatism, as hinted at in the previous section.⁵¹

Most Cowboy Christians affiliated as conservative before joining their cowboy church, but pastors provide assumed Biblical authority and God's encouragement to vote conservatively. Analyzing through a lens of conspicuous consumption, the cowboy church movement's cultural and intellectual environment places such great respect on conservative values and political support that members thinking or doing contrary risks alienation. This is not

⁵⁰ Maddox, interviewed by McAdams.

⁵¹ Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Caye King, interviewed by McAdams; Crenshaw, interviewed by McAdams; Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; Denny, interviewed by McAdams; Hightower, interviewed by McAdams; and Morgan, interviewed by McAdams. Neoconservatism proved a lasting product of the 1970s as it tempered the radical libertarian wing and enabled the rise of the right during the 1980s. Neoconservatism combines "necessary" government regulation and war hawkishness with a disdain for government intervention. Although begun without a moral component, Ronald Reagan attracted evangelicals to neoconservatism during his presidency, which added a more robust, specifically evangelical, morality to the political philosophy. See Schulman, *The Seventies*, 204; and McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 259-260.

meant as condemnation, but rather the opposite. It should come as no surprise that many Cowboy Christians emulate the beliefs, values, and ideals of their cohort believers and pastors. Taking interviewed Cowboy Christians at their word, many genuinely and passionately believe they are correct and that they do not simply “react” as much as “join” with others in solidarity through likeness.⁵²

For all the lament of government intervention though, Cowboy Christians do practice high levels of charity. Despite their beliefs in rugged individualism and “pick-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” work ethic, the Cowboy Church of Ellis County (CCEC) and the Impact Cowboy Church (ICC) participate in extensive church missions. Cowboy Christians understand it is their Christian mission, not the government’s job, to help impoverished families and drug-addicted individuals. The CCEC lists forty church missions, including victim relief for disaster victims and Celebrate Recovery, which is a Bible-based, twelve-step-like recovery program. The ICC works closely with local foster children and provides meals to numerous families at Thanksgiving and Christmas. They also participate in various national and international missions such as Soles for Souls, which gives shoes and other hygiene products to impoverished people and disaster victims. Cowboy pastors Russ Weaver and Larry Miller also indicate their

⁵² Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Caye King, interviewed by McAdams; Crenshaw, interviewed by McAdams; Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; Denny, interviewed by McAdams; Hightower, interviewed by McAdams; Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; and Miller, interviewed by McAdams. See introduction, footnote 12 for more about solidarity through likeness.

churches participate in a large amount of charity work. Cowboy churches' community interactions are certainly a means of church advertising, but Cowboy Christians express a genuine belief this is a necessary factor of Biblical Christianity, which traditional churches have largely neglected. While there is no doubt the cowboy church movement is politically conservative, its participation in charitable missions illustrates it is primarily a religious movement, instead of a political movement espousing religion.⁵³

Suburban Cowboy

While the few treatments of the cowboy church movement, as explained in the introduction, mostly narrow on ideological undercurrents and even technological endeavors, an original contribution of this work has been to place the movement with a more concrete historical context. This includes accounting for the suburban trend that has defined post-World War II America and has led some historians, such as Kevin Kruse and Thomas Sugrue, to exclaim that in order to better understand latter twentieth century United States history, "suburbs belong at center stage."⁵⁴ Defining "suburban" using innovative, contemporary historiography is thus imperative to examining the cowboy church movement and

⁵³ Cowboy Church of Ellis County, *Cowboy Church Ministry List* (Waxahachie: Cowboy Church of Ellis County, 2013); Hightower, interviewed by McAdams; Burton, interviewed by McAdams; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Crenshaw, interviewed by McAdams; Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; and Miller, interviewed by McAdams.

⁵⁴ Kevin Michael Kruse and Thomas J. Sugrue, *The New Suburban History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 1.

to further determine if and to what extent the cowboy church movement really is a suburban movement.

Even while suburbs and suburbia completely pervade the contemporary United States, people struggle to define aptly this widespread phenomenon. While many geographic and demographic statisticians attempt to define it through strict population numbers and rigid physical boundaries, social science and humanities scholars define suburbia more liberally or, rather, more culturally. For example, the oft-heralded “father” of suburban history Kenneth Jackson defines suburbia as more than a landscape or planning model, but a “state of mind based on imagery and symbolism.”⁵⁵ Historian Robert Fishman clarifies Jackson abstract definition somewhat, noting that the historic “prototypical suburban community might be described as the union of the country house, the villa, and the picturesque traditions, reinforced by the particular concerns of the [e]vangelical movement.”⁵⁶ Although profoundly insightful about cultivations of a potential suburban mentality, complete with spiritual impetus, these definitions are quite dated. Writing during the early-2000s, the same time the cowboy church movement began experiencing dramatic growth, historian Dolores Hayden defines suburbia as, “the site of promises, dreams, and fantasies. It is a landscape of the imagination where Americans situate ambitions for upward

⁵⁵ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 5.

⁵⁶ Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1987), 53.

mobility and economic security, ideals about freedom and private property, and longing for social harmony and spiritual uplift.”⁵⁷ Historian Paul J. P. Sandul adds, “The historical understanding of a suburb regarding its geographical location near a city is . . . misleading.” He continues, first, “[That definition] does not encompass all of what suburbia represents or all the suburban types that have come into existence.” Second, and most importantly:

Another difficulty with an emphasis on physical location and place is that it risks reducing the importance of imagery and imagination, of storied space. Suburbia is as much a cultural symbol and intellectual creation, even lived space, as a geographical, material place. Suburbia’s critics . . . have made this abundantly clear. A connection between the values people have and the kinds of communities they create, and vice versa, seem palpable too.⁵⁸

Moreover, these scholars indicate that suburbia, not rural America that suburbia appropriated, has become the “American dream” where potential riches are made and “traditional values” are both realized and defended. Put differently, suburbia represents a constructed mentality stemming from a quest to realize private fantasies and improve individuals’ positions in life while not disrupting the social balance of power.

⁵⁷ Dolores Hayden, *Building Suburbia: Green Fields and Urban Growth, 1820-2000* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 3

⁵⁸ Sandul, “Harvesting Suburbs,” 86.

To construct their definitions of "suburbia," scholars look to historic characteristics of suburbanites and socio-cultural values suburbs portend to mediate through land development. Above all, scholars note the middle class' direct relationship with suburbia. While there are working class, impoverished, and wealthy suburban developments of all colors and sizes, the middle class still resides in suburbia most abundantly. This is largely due to the middle class' investment and purchasing power, which nicely couples with their desire to elevate themselves socially, politically, and economically above other classes, even to an extent that the middle class condemns the upper class, as historian Robert H. Wiebe contends, for being too internationalist and unconcerned with the plight of the "home folk." Because of the middle class' predominance, suburbia is historically a product of affluence and embodies certain moral and land development values. Morally, middle class suburbanites have historically prized the rural ideals of hard work and individualism. Furthermore, as Fishman argues, many practiced evangelical Christianity, which caused them to bemoan and ultimately leave the city with its vices of drunkenness, gambling, and prostitution behind. In fact, scholars go as far as to say that evangelicalism itself led to the rise of the Romantic, more rural suburban ideal in the mid-nineteenth century, such as Llewellyn Park outside Manhattan and Riverside outside Chicago. Middle-class suburbanites' evangelicalism also enforced notions of the nuclear family and "traditional" gender roles with the wife managing the home

and the husband financially providing for the family. These middle class men also sought to “tame” nature through property ownership and landscaping, thus culminating in the quintessential suburban development of a single-family residence with a manicured lawn. Through this process, suburbanites attempted to recreate the countryside and attributed values of beauty, health, purity, whiteness, and righteousness to suburban landscapes.⁵⁹

These values, as mentioned, persisted after World War II as the increasingly decentralized and idealized suburb became the United States’ primary land development model. With excess national wealth and seemingly limitless resources, land developers, the federal government, and banks developed numerous suburbs throughout the United States, such as the famous Levittown, New York. During this era, California emerged as the prototypical suburban state, boasting developments such as Lakewood in Southern California, but Texas also experienced extensive suburbanization during this period.⁶⁰

Nonetheless, suburbanites soon realized suburbs did not provide the promised economic and social mobility. While dating as far back as the late-nineteenth century, Americans became increasingly skeptical of suburbia and modernity by the 1970s (the same time the United States claimed a majority

⁵⁹ Robert H. Wiebe, *Self-Rule: A Cultural History of American Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 141-143; Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias*, x, 4, 173; and Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 38-41, 54, 62.

⁶⁰ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 234, 249, 265, 288; and Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 147.

suburban population), and longed for the “simpler times” of yesteryear and the rural life. Although suburbanites had long yearned for the rural, it intensified during late mid-century and Americans heralded heroic icons such as the cowboy and the blue-collar worker of industrial lore. The middle class remained the bedrock of suburbia and, as the number of United States suburbs increased, so did the political conservative movement, which developed largely, though not exclusively, in the Sunbelt suburbs stretching from those outside Jacksonville, Florida to Orange County, California. Following President Reagan’s election, these middle class values became synonymous with “American values” and metaphorically, if not literally, transformed the United States into a middle-class suburban nation. Simultaneously, decentralized suburbs developed farther from urban centers than ever before into “technoburbs,” “edge nodes,” and “exurbs” as suburbanites continued their escapes from the perceived complexities and problems of more urbanized and racially-mixed areas. Suburbanism, then, is the combination of creative imagination and land development policies that portray residents’ values of hard work, individualism, purity, and property ownership as definitions of “proper” citizenship and maintenance of so-called traditional values associated with the conservative middle class.⁶¹

services themselves reflect a suburban movement. The ecology crunch

⁶¹D. J. Waldie’s *Holy Land: A Suburban Memoir* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005) presents a very dark portrayal of mid-century suburban living as one of suicide, economic instability, and degradation of community. Conservatism did not grow universally or exclusively throughout the Sunbelt. For example, Long Island Catholic women successfully defeated the Equal Rights Amendment’s ratification in New York while Texas passed it. Jackson, *Crabgrass*

Three key factors define the cowboy church movement as a suburban phenomenon. First, the location of meetinghouses and Cowboy Christian residences illustrates that suburbs, not rural areas, are the most influential areas in the movement. Second, the very fact it is a seeker church movement philosophically connects it to larger suburban trends. Thirdly, Cowboy Christians' definitions of suburbia and rural sacralizations indicate the movement rests upon an ideal of "rurality," which is intimately linked to rural urbanism and suburbia. These three factors routinely manifest in Cowboy Christians' built environments, oral histories, and religious messages and, thus, help define the cowboy church movement as an American suburban product and project.

Geographically locating the cowboy church movement presents an obvious, yet often misinterpreted indication of its suburban connections. Understanding the movement's history is certainly helpful with this examination. Since rodeo ministers held services at stops along the rodeo circuit and not at specific, more permanent sites, they are thus difficult to define as suburban. Certainly, historian Michal Allen's analysis of twentieth century rodeo culture indicates a large percentage of rodeo participants and observers lived in suburban areas, but the collected evidence does not strongly indicate the rodeo services themselves reflect a suburban movement. The cowboy church movement, however, beginning with Jeff Copenhaver's church at Billy Bob's

Frontier, 272, 288; Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias*, 17, 202-203; Dolores, 173-174; and Schulman, *The Seventies*, 243-244.

Texas in Fort Worth, certainly locates cowboy churches physically in suburbs. As the movement grew, many early churches began in suburban areas, including Harry and Joanne Yates's congregation in Nashville, Tennessee, and Russ Weaver's congregation southwest of Fort Worth. Currently, the most prominent Texas cowboy churches, including the Cowboy Church of Ellis County, Lone Star Cowboy church in Montgomery (north of Houston), and the Arena of Life Cowboy Church in Amarillo, are all located in suburban areas. Additionally, many of the cowboy church fellowships and training programs are headquartered in suburban locales, including the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches and the Cowboy Church Fellowship of the Assemblies of God. In other words, despite appearing rural with cowboys, horses, tractors, and bucking bulls, the movement's leadership is predominately located in suburbs. Moreover, CowboyChurch.Net and a drive through Texas' suburbs indicate the cowboy church movement is growing very rapidly in increasingly developed and sprawled out suburbs. While explanations of this growth receive more attention below, the simple fact of the movement's large growth within suburban areas indicates its suburban bona fides.⁶²

Although many meetinghouses are noticeably located in suburbs, other scholars and journalists note cowboy churches in rural areas. The obvious

⁶² Allen, *Rodeo Cowboys in the North American Imagination*, 32-33, 53-55; Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; and "Texas Directory," CowboyChurch.Net, accessed August 28, 2013, <http://www.cowboychurch.net/texas.html>.

critique is that these meetinghouses discussed are actually located in exurbs, or developed areas on the rural fringes where new suburban residents mix with long-residing residents. The oftentimes more accurate critique is that while the cowboy church meetinghouse might be located in a rural area, a large percentage of its members are suburbanites. Of the eighteen Cowboy Christians interviewed, thirteen note they live in rural areas and the other five state they live in either cities or suburbs. Upon further investigation, however, the majority of interviewees either live inside city limits or, more often, live in developed neighborhoods outside the city limits. As Hayden and suburban scholar Laura Barraclough discuss, subdivisions outside city limits and exurbs are growing trends among suburban land developers. Additionally, almost all interviewed daily drove into town to work and shop instead of working around their house, which is a classic suburban characteristic. This evidence indicates that even if the church meetinghouse is rurally located, it is not necessarily a rural church in terms of membership.⁶³

Another key factor indicating the cowboy church movement's suburbanism is categorizing it as a seeker church movement. As discussed in chapter one, seeker churches provide socio-culturally relevant worship to attract unchurched

⁶³ I checked Cowboy Christians' residences by entering the addresses provided on their "Biographical Sketches" into Google Earth and examining the extent of surrounding development to determine if they lived in developed or undeveloped neighborhoods. Collected biographical sketches are on file in the Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection at the ETRC. Moczygamba, "Rounding Up Christian Cowboys," 35, 46; Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 185, 192; and Barraclough, *Making the San Fernando Valley*, 2.

that self-affiliate with specific cultures. According to religious and social scholars, religious movements, especially the seeker church movement, are a defining characteristic of American suburbs. Fishman's and Hayden's above definitions indicate the historically close connection between evangelicalism and suburbia as suburbs represented asylum for evangelicals—a middle landscape in which to live full lives, complete with urban conveniences, without interacting with the perceived corruption and sin of cities. Scholars discuss entire suburbs, such as Clapham outside London, England, thrived as evangelical retreats and Hayden notes late-twentieth century American suburban advertisements and ideas maintain religious-like reverence. Cowboy Christians also express an urban phobia similar to historical suburbanites, stating the farther removed from urban areas, the “simpler” and, ultimately, more pure one's life becomes. To Cowboy Christians, suburban areas, which they commonly refer to as “rural,” resemble a place of near-perfection, almost like the Garden of Eden.⁶⁴

Suburban scholars also explain churches have become key features within American suburban landscapes, especially seeker churches, which grew within suburbia largely as a suburban critique. Whether theologically, socially, culturally, or all the above, traditionalistic churches holding to seemingly outdated theologies and liturgies, did not vastly appeal to suburban youth after 1960 and

⁶⁴ Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias*, 53; Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 6; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Caye King, interviewed by McAdams; Crenshaw, interviewed by McAdams; Spencers, interviewed by McAdams; Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Denny, interviewed by McAdams; Wilson, interviewed by McAdams; and Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

many left organized Christianity. To correct this, religiously minded suburban youth changed their worship to attract other suburban youth and provide a “functional” religion. Suburbs proved the ideal place for such churches as they had ever-increasing populations, were sufficiently distanced from the “sinful” cities, and had an existing infrastructure that enabled leaders to promote their churches. Moreover, suburbs felt comfortable and seeker church leaders wanted members to feel comfortable at church. Recognizing this, seeker churches modeled themselves after suburban landscapes and suburbia’s prominent place in Americans’ minds. An extreme example is Robert Shuler’s Crystal Cathedral, which began at Orange, California’s, drive-in movie theater. Most commonly, seeker churches adopted suburban architecture as American suburbs seemed plagued by shopping mall-like churches with recreational child care facilities designed to make their suburban memberships comfortable. Moreover, the rise of megachurches—such as the Cowboy Church of Ellis County, the Lone Star Cowboy Church in Montgomery, and the Arena of Life Cowboy Church in Amarillo—are only possible because of the population concentration in suburban areas. Religious scholars, including D. G. Hart, further note suburbanites are responsible for creating and popularizing the contemporary Christian music genres (e.g., Christian Rock and Christian Rap) and “contemporary” church services, which are both seeker-sensitive tactics. The seeker church movement

¹⁹ Miller, *Resounding American Protestantism*, 4, 12; Loveland and Muehle, *From Membership to Megachurch*, 103, 112; Sisson, *Resurgent Evangelicalism*, 8; and Hart, *The City-Zone Strategy in Modern America*, 190.

undoubtedly, and possibly the entirety of American Christianity, became a suburban performance in the late-twentieth century.⁶⁵

While some seeker churches wholly embrace American suburbia, the theologically conservative, new paradigm seeker churches the cowboy church movement resembles largely started as a negative critique of suburban America. These suburbanites saw modernity, as championed by the suburb, as banal, insincere, even sinful and sought a more “authentic” Christianity. The quest for authenticity espoused by these seeker churches resembles the skepticism and anti-authoritarianism that defined, according to Schulman, the 1970s. By championing the nuclear family, emphasizing the individual, and creating strong communities of believers, these conservative seeker churches provided a stark alternative to the perceived sterility and lack of community in contemporary, commercialized, face-less American suburbs (making them strange bedfellows with more Marxist critiques of American suburbs as maladaptive, most notably leveled by New York intellectuals and the Frankfurters). Additionally, these churches sacralized the vernacular through their messages, dress, and liturgies, which, again, aligns with contemporary suburban trends of suburbanites increasingly adopting and glorifying the working class and rural themes. Nonetheless, these churches began and grew in suburbs by attracting like-

⁶⁵ Miller, *Reinventing American Protestantism*, 4, 17; Loveland and Wheeler, *From Meetinghouse to Megachurch*, 109, 119; Shibley, *Resurgent Evangelicalism*, 5; and Hart, *That Old-Time Religion in Modern America*, 190.

minded suburbanites and providing both nostalgia through their conservative theology and an embrace of a modern, even futuristic, culture through their relaxed dress and cutting-edge music.⁶⁶

Again, this is the model of the cowboy church movement. Not only do cowboy churches begin in and largely attract suburbanites, they also criticize United States suburbanism and embrace manifestly rural images, hence the cowboy and his horse. As discussed, Cowboy Christians indicate disenchantment with traditional churches and construct spaces to make people comfortable. Certainly, cowboy churches sacralize the vernacular and profane and denounce other religious options as superficial and suburbia as pretentious. The cowboy church movement's cultivations of strong communities and working within those communities replicates other suburban critiques expressed by conservative seeker churches and new suburban communities such as the new urbanists. (Specifically, cowboy church scholar John Williford indicates that the movement embodies both nostalgia and futurism, which are defining attributes of New Urbanism.) The most obvious indictment of the cowboy church movement as suburban is pastor Gary Morgan explaining Ron Nolen modeled the church on Baptist pastor Rick Warren and his Orange County, California, megachurch seeker church, Saddleback Church. Recognizing the movement as a suburban

⁶⁶ Sargeant, 8, 30, 171; Miller, 1, 110; John Archer, "The Places We Love to Hate: The Critic Confront Suburbia, 1920-1960," in *Constructions of the Home: Interdisciplinary Studies in Architecture, Law and Literature*, ed. Klaus Stierstorfer (New York: AMS Press, Inc, 2010), 52-53; and Fillingim, *Redneck Liberation*, 81-82.

seeker church indicates it is a religious manifestation of contemporary land development trends to expand the reach of suburbs and enable suburbanites to make sense of their lives. The cowboy church movement, then, can be understood as a religion that enables suburbanites to seemingly withdraw further from developed areas by evoking imagery of the cowboy and cultivating a sense of the rural.⁶⁷

This cultivated mentality is the linchpin of the cowboy church movement as it combines notions of Christian, cowboy, and American identity with Cowboy Christians' uncomfortable suburban realities. Memory and identity scholars, including Maurice Halbwachs and David Glassberg, explain that a person's identity is a social and cultural construction influenced by interactions with family, peers, and cultural landscapes. As a religious organization, especially one that appears more "real," the cowboy church movement provides a strong community of memory that shapes Cowboy Christians identities around notions of "rurality."⁶⁸

In *Making the San Fernando Valley*, urban geographer Laura Barraclough examines the horse suburbs of Southern California to describe the process of "rural urbanism" as the "production of rural landscapes by the urban state,

⁶⁷ Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; Caye King, interviewed by McAdams; Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; Denny, interviewed by McAdams; Wilson, interviewed by McAdams; Williford, "The Ethereal Cowboy Way," 30-31; Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 201; and Morgan, interviewed by McAdams.

⁶⁸ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 23; Glassberg, *Sense of History*, 9-10; and Sargeant, *Seeker Churches*, 185.

capital, and other urban interests” to create and negotiate “American identity.”⁶⁹ She argues that rural urbanism is produced through a process of myth making and promoting symbolic meanings of the American frontier and rural, which is expressed through notions of “rurality.” Barraclough explains rurality is a mindset constructed by combining rural exceptionalism with heroic white myths, such as the cowboy. Rural urban developers, then, construct spaces that embody the middle class’ politically conservative and evangelical values, specifically through large-lot homesteads that architecturally and aesthetically evoke a “rural atmosphere.”⁷⁰ This cultural landscape exemplifies a sense of privacy, property ownership, naturalized purity, and individualism, which, Barraclough further notes, is exclusive and mirrors other suburban trends such as gated communities. Barraclough states that rural urbanites view their residences as the “last bastion of [Los Angeles]’s rapidly disappearing rural heritage.”⁷¹ Although contradictory to hallowed ideals of rugged individualism and small-government, residents often expressed a sense of government entitlement, specifically because they are preserving their type of “American heritage.” This, of course, is common among white, middle class suburbanites as Kenneth Jackson explains. Barraclough further defines the values of rurality as:

⁶⁹ Barraclough, *Making the San Fernando Valley*, 2.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

[The belief] that rural shapes human character, community dynamics, and the social order in superior ways, instilling in children and adults strong moral character, independence, humility, concern for community, and commitment to democratic participation. By contrast, [rural suburbanites] believe that urban and suburban lifestyles lead to moral weakness, criminality, greed, corruption, poor decision-making abilities, political apathy, and a lack of concern for one's neighbors, animals and the environment.⁷²

Cowboy Christians construct identities almost identical to these Californians, which, despite any groans otherwise, place it squarely within a suburban context.⁷³

The cowboy church movement capitalizes on concepts of rurality, as evidenced in the built landscape and Cowboy Christians' espoused values. The common cowboy church meetinghouse illustrates that Cowboy Christians physically construct a rural atmosphere. The meetinghouse's location, commonly on large lots, provides a sense of privacy and allows members to associate the church easily with the rural because of the more open spaces. The meetinghouse's architecture represents another physical manifestation of rurality as Cowboy Christians conspicuously erect structures resembling buildings seen in rural areas and associated with animal husbandry. They also decorate the

⁷² Ibid., 206.

⁷³ Ibid., 8, 9, 141; and Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontiers*, 4, 207-208.

interior to replicate the rural countryside and seemingly create a rural atmosphere in which to worship God. Furthermore, cowboy churches' rodeo arenas provide members safe locations to perform seemingly rural actions with the comforts of more "civilized" areas, such as kitchens and air conditioned bathrooms. Moreover, providing horses for people that do not own horses helps draw more people into a community of memory constructed around the rural hero. Away from the meetinghouse, many Cowboy Christians living in developed areas outside city limits own ranchettes (large-lot residences) within developed neighborhoods. In fact, Gary Morgan notes ranchettes are likely the most common residential type among the Cowboy Church of Ellis County's members. Similar to the meetinghouses, these ranchettes provide the semblance of rural living, complete with the most cherished value of privacy, while maintaining many suburban qualities, such as single-family homes, municipal infrastructure, and easy commutes to work. These qualities, plus the token reality of Cowboy Christians who actually do live in rural areas, encourage Cowboy Christians to identify as rural while remaining largely suburban.⁷⁴

These Cowboy Christians further identify as rural through attributed values. When asked to explain the differences between urban, suburban, and rural areas, most Cowboy Christians define them solely as a set of values or

⁷⁴ Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; and Spencer, interviewed by McAdams.



Figure 7—Rodeo Arena at the Cowboy Church of Ellis County. (Photograph courtesy of Jake McAdams; on file in the Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.)



Figure 8—Rodeo arena at the Impact Cowboy Church. (Photograph courtesy of Jake McAdams; on file in the Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.)

national morality and their beloved rural landscape as spreading development qualities, not geographic characteristics. Virtues such as “simple,” “slow-paced,” “peaceful,” and “straight forward” tops this list. Interviewees generally agree that raising children in rural areas away from cities and suburbs is ideal because they interact with nature and participate in animal husbandry, which teaches children the virtue hard work and how to cope with loss and, ultimately, makes them better adults—again, a defining characteristic of the suburban ideal as it appropriated rurality.⁷⁵

Cowboy Christians sufficiently romanticize the rural and rural residents and cowboy pastors routinely provide Biblical “proof” of these concepts, however anachronistic. Listening to a sermon at a cowboy church often depicts God, specifically Jesus, as a rural resident and shepherd. Using the Psalms and passages of Jesus as a shepherd, pastors construct guiding narratives that illustrate God endorses the idealized rural life. The Bible also proves to Cowboy Christians that other supposed rural values like hard work, individualism, and traditional gender roles, as they perceive them, are legitimate. Furthermore, Cowboy Christians associate cities with the traditionalistic Jewish Pharisees whom Jesus condemned and whom ultimately killed their messiah. Finally, Cowboy Christians blame city dwellers and other suburbanites for destroying the

⁷⁵ Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Caye King, interviewed by McAdams; Crenshaw, interviewed by McAdams; Spencer, interviewed by McAdams; Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; Maddox, interviewed by McAdams; Wilson, interviewed by McAdams; Weaver, interviewed by McAdams; Hayden, *Building Suburbia*, 38-43; and Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias*, 56-60.

nation's morality and their beloved rural landscape as sprawling development continually encroaches upon the rural.⁷⁶

The cowboy church movement represents to Cowboy Christians the last frontier, the last piece of the American rural uncorrupted by contemporary society. After their failed physical attempts to claim, or reclaim, an authentic rurality in spite of continually expanding suburban areas of through national politics, many suburbanites depend upon the cowboy church movement to provide a community of memory that cherishes the evaporated rural life. Therefore, although it provides a genuine worship experience that members receive great benefit from, the cowboy church movement promotes an idealized and mythic way of life.

⁷⁶ Impact Cowboy Church, worship service, November 28, 2012; Impact Cowboy Church, worship service, May 29, 2013; Ellis County Cowboy Church, worship service, Waxahachie, TX, July 8, 2013; Stan King, interviewed by McAdams; Sublett, interviewed by McAdams; Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; and Weaver, interviewed by McAdams.

including details of my accomplishments and failures. This final section provides readers a taste of the pleasures and frustrations experienced while working with this unique and seemingly welcoming community.

CHAPTER 3—CAMOUFLAGED ACADEMIC: REMINISCENCES OF PRACTICING PUBLIC HISTORY WITH COWBOY CHURCHES

Explaining The Disciplines

Disguised as a Cowboy Christian and bona fide hick, I attended church services, logged hours of conversations, and created genuine friendships with church members. I partially immersed myself into the cowboy church “world” and lived a complex life, balancing private questions and values while attempting to remain objective and scholastically critical. This proved a complex task—but such is public history. The “Can I Get a Yee-haw and Amen” public history project also proved highly rewarding, as hearing interviewees’ recount tales quickly became exciting and gathering Cowboy Christians’ memories helped, in a way, to liberate them.

This chapter recounts the journey of structuring, executing, and completing the oral history project component of the “Can I Get a Yee-haw and an Amen” public history project. I explain what public history is and provide a brief history of oral history practice. I then review relevant oral history literature to discuss the field’s developments and contextualize my work with other oral history projects. I conclude the chapter by detailing my methodology and practice as the lone staff member throughout “Can I Get a Yee-haw and an Amen,”

¹ Robert Kelley, “Public History: Its Origins, Nature, and Prospects,” *The Public Historian* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1978): 16.

including details of my accomplishments and failures. This final section provides readers a taste of the pleasures and frustrations experienced while working with this unique and seemingly welcoming community.

Explaining The Disciplines

In his foundational article "Public History: It's Origins, Nature, and Prospects," public historian Robert Kelley defines public history "in its simplest meaning" as "the employment of historians and the historical method outside academia: in government, private corporations, the media, historical societies and museums, even in private practice."¹ In this 1979 explanation and defense of the "newly created" professional subfield, Kelley continues to explain that while academic historians occasionally moonlight as corporate or political consultants, public history is what happens away from academia. Since Kelley wrote his defense, public history has developed into an ever-growing profession and academic discipline throughout the world as both academic and nonacademic scholars identify as "Public Historians." Despite its growing acceptance, public historians must continually explain their relevance and professional legitimacy to the public and academic colleagues as the former often relegates them as unnecessary or unwanted, and the latter frequently criticize them as uncritical or deficient in their objective to reach a public audience. Even though public

¹ Robert Kelley, "Public History: Its Origins, Nature, and Prospect" *The Public Historian* 1, no. 1 (Autumn 1978):16.

historians have gained a professional consciousness, complete with a national professional organization (National Council on Public History) and academic journal (*The Public Historian*), and academic historians are increasingly accepting of public historians, the motley community of practitioners, which includes “blue-hair” docents, tenured academics, corporate records keepers, and recreational historians, seems to some as lacking a directed focus.²

Public history entails historians using historical methodology to evaluate questions commonly provided by others and create products specifically intended to reach and educate larger public audiences. Simply put, the primary difference between academic historians and public historians is the final output and intended audience. While academic historians typically write monographs, journal articles, and university lectures, public historians often educate publics through museum exhibits, documentaries, finding guides, and preservation of the built and cultural environments. This discipline covers a vast range of positions and often requires skill sets that fall largely outside academic historians’ scholastic trainings. This does not inherently elevate the public historian over the academic historian or designate academics’ work as “more historical” than that of public historians. In fact, many prominent early historians, including Hubert H. Bancroft,

Carlos E. Castañeda, Charles Beard, and Allan Nevins, recognized it as their

² Kelley, “Public History,” 18; and Anthony T. Grafton and James Grossman, “Plan C,” *Perspectives on History* (November 2011), <http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/november-2011/plan-c>.

professional and civic obligations to function as both public and academic historians. A goal of public history, then, is that all historians acknowledge a responsibility to interact with the public through their research and products, thus drawing more individuals into the practice of history making and providing groups a usable past in the process.³

This goal explains my work as a public historian. While trained to research and produce academic histories, I have also been trained to do so as a public historian. This training prepares me to collect, interpret, and preserve "historical traces" for current and future generations of interested public individuals and scholars alike. The same historian seldom collects and critically examines primary sources in scholarly histories. Rather, it is professionally understood that archivists collect and preserve resources and historians (and genealogists) use them; there is rarely a confusion of these roles. While historians studying the recent past are unique, they most often compete with "popular historians" (untrained in academic and critical historical methodology) or, worse yet, journalists, and are sometimes even stripped of their title "historian" by other academics and scorned as a sociologists, ethnographers, or otherwise not about

³ Patricia Mooney-Melvin, "Professional Historians and the Challenge of Redefinition," in *Public History: Essays From the Field*, ed. James B. Gardner and Peter S. LaPaglia (Malabar: Krieger Publishing Company 2006), 8-9; Rebecca Sharpless, "The History of Oral History," in *Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Myers, and Rebecca Sharpless (New York: AltaMira Press, 2008), 20-21; and Félix D. Almarás, "Carlos E. Castañeda," in *Writing the Story of Texas*, ed. Patrick L. Cox and Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Jr. (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 2013), 156-157. See also Ian R. Tyrrell, *Historians in Public: The Practice of American History, 1890-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

Clio's business. This common mentality largely ignores other non-archival historical traces and academic institutions such as museums with their educational objects, designated parks that often utilize living history, and cultural landscape preservation, which encompasses the natural and built environments. My effort with "Can I Get a Yee-haw and an Amen," and my entire educational career, complicates this commonly understood role of the historian—one that pours through archival records examining a history that occurred at least one generation ago.⁴

"Can I Get a Yee-haw and an Amen" presents several challenges as a historical work, namely the near-complete lack of primary sources. Since the cowboy church movement is a phenomenon of the recent past, plenty of resources existed, they just walked around and attended services and were not collecting dust in archival boxes. Conducting the oral history project to collect Cowboy Christians' memories necessarily comprised a large part of my study. This involved extensive research, training, and hours of dedicated transcribing. Completing this oral history component is the second, and arguably more important, section of my public history project because it created primary sources for later researchers to understand better the cowboy church movement.

⁴ Roy Tryon, "Archivists and Records Managers," in *Public History*, 73; and Ronald J. Grele, "Movement Without Aim: Methodological and Theoretical Problems in Oral History," in *The Oral History Reader*, 39.

Oral history is one of the older fields affiliated with public history. At its simplest, oral history is the practice of collecting an individual's thoughts and remembrances about a person, event, or era. Oral history practice has a long history, especially considering that "all history was at first oral," as eighteenth century English writer Samuel Johnson said.⁵ Ancient historians such as Herodotus and Thucydides gained whatever semblance of primary sources they used by interviewing local residents during their wanderings. In the United States, oral tradition helped groups chronicle genealogies, express worldviews, and perpetuate their cultural heritages to younger generations. One of the most popular examples of this process is Alex Haley's 1976 *Roots* in which Haley, taking great imaginative pleasures, traces his genealogy from Africa to the United States' slave South and then to his own lifetime. While his book and subsequent television miniseries are largely fictional, he based it upon his research with African griots who recited the tribe's history from memory. Haley's experience illustrates that oral history is an emotional experience and liberating tool that can, as a tool, help people (re)shape their identities and make meaningful connections with their place in society.⁶

⁵ Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 20.

⁶ Sharpless, "The History of Oral History," 19; Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 155-156; and Alex Haley, "Black History, Oral History, and Genealogy," in *The Oral History Reader*, 18-20.

While Haley's *Roots* issued a nonacademic craze to record forebears' memories and trace genealogies, professional historians had recognized oral history as a valuable research tool for decades. As noted oral historian Rebecca Sharpless explains, oral sources largely lost favor during the "professionalization of history" in the nineteenth century when German historian Leopold von Ranke favored written documents over oral as they proved easier to check, and others indubitably followed. Nonetheless, some American historians, such as Hubert H. Bancroft, gathered and used oral sources when others did not. The Works Progress Administration's (WPA) Slave Narrative collection (1936-1938) proved another early professional oral history project. Commissioned as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, this project collected oral histories from over 2,300 former slaves mainly living in Southern states and challenged commonly believed interpretations of slave society provided by Southern apologists such as historian Ulrich B. Phillips. While never fully realized due to persisting racist attitudes and policies in the United States, the WPA slave narratives hint that one of the most promising possibilities of oral history is to incorporate disenfranchised groups into the greater society and processes of history making by providing them a "voice."⁷

⁷ Sharpless, "The History of Oral History," 20; and Norman R. Yetmen, "An Introduction to the WPA Slave Narratives," Library of Congress, accessed October 25, 2013, <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snintro00.html>.

Although these early attempts existed, oral history remained largely unappreciated as a historical resource until eminent historian Allan Nevins began the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University in New York City in 1948. As a political historian, Nevins guided the Columbia Oral History office to collect histories of renowned political leaders. Despite this more elitist focus, Nevins established United States oral history practice as to “capture the untold stories and recover information missing in the conventional record.”⁸ While oral history remains a popular technique to gather officials’ memories, oral history greatly grew alongside both the new social history and new cultural history in the 1960s and 1970s as the best way to collect primary sources for social and cultural histories. Along with other public history related -disciplines, oral history has become more widely practiced and professionalized since the 1970s as contemporary scholars appreciate it as a way to collect histories of disenfranchised groups, encounter and discuss traumatic events, and draw support for future history works by democratizing the process of history making.⁹

Literature Review

Necessarily accompanying this growth of oral history practice is an ever-growing historiography with topics ranging from the meanings of recorded

⁸ Rose T. Diaz and Andrew B. Russell, “Oral Historians: Community Oral History and the Cooperative Ideal,” in *Public History*, 203.

⁹ Sharpless, “The History of Oral History,” 32, 38.

memories to selecting appropriate recording devices. Since oral history is a collection method not monopolized by just one scholarly discipline, oral history literature is expansive and multidisciplinary. As eminent oral historian Donald Ritchie notes, to gain a comprehensive understanding of oral history practice, interpretation, and preservation one must verse themselves in history, archival theory, library science, folklore, anthropology, education, journalism, linguistics, and gerontology; and that does not include the breadth of literature outside those areas that incorporate oral histories into their narratives and findings. Because it does cut across disciplines on such a large scale, oral history literature, like other public history literature, has become a special academic subfield. While some might question the importance of reviewing such an extensive list of literature for a practice that seems predominately hands-on and commonsensical, oral historians note projects that are not well grounded in the field's literature and approved best practices routinely fail. It is important to explain the literature that both defines the field of oral history and reflects what I consulted during the project so others can, first, examine my projects' findings more accurately and, second, to use "Can I Get a Yee-haw and an Amen" public history project as a template for future projects. Of particular importance here, again, is this literature anchored my project and, following a brief literature review, helps explain the

decisions and actions I made in conducting the project itself as described in the next section.¹⁰

Oral history literature loosely falls into three categories: interpretation; theory; and practice. The interpretation literature includes works from autobiographies and memoirs to scholarly monographs. Writers have relied upon oral history for decades to create biographies and autobiographies as famous individuals sit for numerous sessions with interviewer-writers to record life remembrances. While some works, such as Texas folklorist J. Frank Dobie's *Some Part of Myself* and author Robert Leckie's *Helmet For My Pillow*, are true autobiographies and memoirs written solely by the subjects, most rely on oral histories and subsequent writing sessions by "co-authors." (Examples of this are *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* co-authored by Alex Haley, Roland Reagan's *Where's the Rest of Me?* with Richard Hubler, Colin Powell's *My American Journey* with Joseph Persico, and Merle Miller's *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman*.) While these books are largely entertaining, they offer little historiographical value to the practice of oral history, beyond the information transmitted, of course.¹¹

¹⁰ Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 15; and David E. Kyvig and Myron A. Marty, *Nearby History: Exploring the Past Around You* (New York: AltaMira Press, 2010) 115.

¹¹ Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2011) raises numerous historiographical challenges, but it presents a unique use and analysis of oral history as it relates to memory, inter-generational contact, and traumatic events. Despite its scholarly merit, *Maus* remains a grotesquely entertaining cultural novelty and contributes relatively little to oral history theory or practice.

Numerous scholarly monographs also rely on oral histories. Many of these works discuss trauma associated with World War II and Soviet-controlled countries. Frequently, these studies, such as historians Jan Gross's *Neighbors*, James Wertsch's *Voices of Collective Remembering*, and Luisa Passerini's *Fascism in Popular Memory*, use oral histories to discuss tales of Gramscian hegemonic strength and power. These scholars indicate that locales' official histories often contradict citizens' remembered histories and, conversely, citizens' remembered histories can forget or alter past events and historical facts.¹²

Because oral history is often utilized to collect individuals' memories that belong to innumerable subaltern groups, oral history is used extensively in social and cultural histories. Works such as Joseph Cash and Herbert T. Hoover's *To Be An Indian*, Marilyn Davis's *Mexican Voices/American Dreams*, and Joann Faung Jean Lee's *Asian Americans* each collect and use oral histories to narrate the stories of ethnic groups overlooked by national and regional metanarratives. Women and gender studies, such as historian Rebecca Sharpless's *Fertile Ground, Narrow Choices*, as well as labor studies, including labor historian Peter Friedlander's *The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936-1939*, have benefitted from oral histories. Some scholars use oral histories to examine violent social

¹² Hegemony refers to a process of moral and intellectual leadership through which dominated or subaltern groups consent to their own domination by ruling classes, as opposed to being forced or coerced into accepting inferior positions. See also gender discussion in chapter one and footnote 13 in chapter two.

movements that the public rightfully fears, such as the Ku Klux Klan in Dianne Dentice and James Williams's anthology *Social Movements*. While these works provide great academic merit without the oral history component, most works relying upon oral histories also provide oral history theory and methodology sections, thus contributing to oral history theory and practice literature as well.

Like *The Voice of the Past*, Three themes persist throughout oral history theory books: social relations, namely between interviewer and interviewee; the role of memory; and the usefulness of oral histories. These three themes are in no way completely separate from each other, but they do define unique qualities of oral history practice. British oral historian Paul Thompson's *The Voice of the Past* is foundational to oral history theory. As a labor historian, Thompson discusses using oral histories to provide lower classes a "voice" in society and encourages scholars to embrace oral sources as a means to shift scholarly focus and open new areas of inquiries, especially with concerns about labor, ethnic, urban, and family relations. Most importantly, Thompson explains oral history opens beneficial avenues between academia and the community and that "the relationship between history and the community should not be one-sided in either direction: but rather a series of exchanges, a dialectic, between information and interpretation, between educationists and their localities, between classes and

¹⁷ Paul Thompson, *Voice of the Past: Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 20.

¹⁸ Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, 54.

¹⁹ Michael French, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1993), 121.

generations."¹³ Thompson's 1978 work heralded the new age of oral history as a bottom-up approach that influenced many, notably Michael Frisch's *A Shared Authority*.¹⁴

Although there are numerous published oral history scholars, American Michael Frisch, and Italians Luisa Passerini and Alessandro Portelli stand out. Like Thompson, Frisch rose to prominence as a social and labor historian and heavily depended upon oral histories. In 1990, Frisch collected many of his previously published articles and case studies and published them as *A Shared Authority*, which remains a seminal work in oral history. Frisch discusses his earlier oral history projects and argues that oral history is a product of shared authority and narration between interviewee and interviewer. He explains that the interaction between interview participants affects the quality and content of oral history interviews and that oral history successfully allows more people to participate in the process of history making through public history.¹⁵

While Frisch's concept of shared authority helps oral historians better undertake and create oral histories, Passerini's work discusses its meaning. Infected by a postmodern pathology, Passerini encourages scholars in her well-known article "Work Ideology and Consensus Under Italian Fascism" to use oral

¹³ Paul Thompson, *Voice of the Past: Oral History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 20.

¹⁴ Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, 6-9.

¹⁵ Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: The State University of New York Press, 1990), xxii.

histories to discover how hegemonies assert control and how non-hegemonic groups live within structurally violent hegemonies. Passerini's most noteworthy contribution is her description of oral histories as "subjective," which she defines as residing in the "area of symbolic activity which includes cognitive, cultural and psychological aspects."¹⁶ While subjectivity sets many historians and scholars on edge, Passerini appropriately explains that oral histories are ever-changing combinations of historical facts, cultural influences, expressions of self, and social relationships that have material and economic effects, which theorist Bruno Latour more recently called "reassembling the social."¹⁷

Portelli represents somewhat of a bridge between Frisch and Passerini. Portelli's *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* is a valuable assemblage of interpretation, theory, and practice as he presents cases of working and lower class oral histories and a valuable methodology for collecting and interpreting memories. Accepting Passerini's assertions of oral history as subjective, Portelli explains that oral history still has "'objective' laws, structures, and maps" and interweaves an explanation of those structures throughout his book.¹⁸ Portelli reiterates notions of subjectivity and shared authority, arguing that scholars should use oral histories to interact with and chronicle non-hegemonic groups.

¹⁶ Luisa Passerini, "Work Ideology and Consensus Under Italian Fascism," *History Workshop* 3, no. 8 (1979), reprinted in *The Oral History Reader*, 54.

¹⁷ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 12.

¹⁸ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral Histories* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), ix.

He also provides ways to analyze speech patterns, word selections, interviewer responsibilities, and publications. Additionally, Portelli explains that people's memories manipulate factual details and chronological sequences of historical events in symbolic (creating symbolic meanings from events), psychological (to heal a feelings of humiliation or harmonize official statements and personal remembrances), or formal (shifting events chronologies) ways; or, again, reassembling or reconstituting meaning.¹⁹

In his later article, "Oral History as Genre" published in Mary Chamberlain and Paul Richard Thompson's *Narrative and Genre*, Portelli discusses oral history sources as "thick dialogue." He explains that because of the changing nature of personal memory, which interacts with personal, cultural, and political factors, interviewers actively reassemble the oral history narrative during every recounting. Continuing, he notes that oral history is inherently subjective but has great potentiality as a form of "thick dialogue," which refers to the way interviewees and interviewers interact within an oral history interview to produce both narrative and interpretive histories. Portelli indicates that if interviewers disclose more about themselves, interviewees are more likely to move beyond a superficial discussion of facts and provide more nuanced narratives. The thick dialogue of oral history, then, presents multiple layers of information including historical facts, how interviewees creatively fit their lives into metanarratives, and

¹⁹ Ibid., 26.

how social differences (such as political affiliation, socio-economic level, and perceived degree of intellect) are managed and appropriated by interviewees.²⁰

This literature indicates the close relationship between oral history and memory study. One reason for this is the simple fact that many oral history projects involve older individuals, and thus bring to question oral history's reliability of accurate recall. Studies such as John Neuenschwander's "Oral Historians and Long-Term Memory" and Robert Kastenbaum's *New Thoughts on Old Age* explain that long-term memory remains largely intact even when short-term memory decreases and that the elderly greatly desire to discuss their remembrances. More importantly for historical analysis, however, is the concept of memory as an active, social process affecting and affected by political and cultural forces. Most oral history studies deal with the notion of memory in some fashion – what it is, how to sight it, how to interpret it, how is it alterable, et cetera. While oral and public history projects, especially "Can I Get a Yee-haw and an Amen," are not necessarily memory studies, understanding academics' conceptions of memory helps explain why certain events, at least how interviewees remember them, are important to interviewees and which more-current events might alter interviewees remembrances of the past, thus skewing historical facts. Put differently, memory scholars powerfully remind oral historians

²⁰ Alessandro Portelli, "Oral History as Genre," in *Narrative and Genre*, ed. Mary Chamberlain and Paul Richard Thompson (London: Routledge, 1998), 23-24, 30-31.

to chase down the actors themselves to see how historical understanding and self or group meaning making forms in interviewee's own minds.

Memory historiography traces back to nineteenth and early-twentieth century scholars such as Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Antonio Gramsci. While not necessarily memory scholars themselves, these scholars established theoretical frameworks that permeate later memory studies, namely that of mechanical solidarity and understanding hegemonic practice. Nonetheless, Maurice Halbwachs, himself a student of Durkheim, is largely credited as the "father of memory," and he defines memory in *On Collective Memory* as an inherently social construction connected with forces inside and outside of one's self. Writing in 2002, cultural anthropologist James V. Wertsch illustrates how much the field has changed, and remained the same, since Halbwachs as he defines remembering as "a form of mediated action, which entails the involvement of active agents [people] and cultural tools [usable products or instruments such as books, film, and the built landscape]. . . . [R]emembering is also inherently situated in a sociocultural context."²¹ As Wertsch indicates, memory is a continually malleable social function. Memory scholars, such as David Glassberg, Dolores Hayden, and Martha Norkunas, additionally discuss that one's personal memory is inherently tied to cultural landscapes and, as John

²¹ James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 13.

Bodnar forcefully adds, is managed and manipulated by and in view of hegemonies.²²

Oral historians accept that remembering is the active process of recalling malleable and socially constructed memories and they examine how to detect and interpret such. While not specifically concerned with the role of memory in oral history practice, British oral historians Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson's *The Oral History Reader* anthology provides an international context to oral history theory and practice. While few of the articles include the word "memory" within their titles, almost every scholar discusses some aspect of memory, be it the creation, collection, detection, or interpretation thereof. For example, in his article for the anthology, scholar Ronald Grele identifies three relationships involved in oral histories that influence recorded remembrances: the linguistic; interpersonal between interviewer and interviewee; and the interviewee's own self-reflection. Other scholars, such as Naomi Rosh White, discuss that memory repression (purposefully forgetting historical facts) is a powerful tool used to heal from trauma. This type of self-repression also illustrates the presence of the past in people's lives, as they struggle to overcome past traumas. As oral historian Dana Jack points out, this necessitates "listening for meaning" in interviewees' silences and word choices, yet carefully not appropriating personal biases onto

²² Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 23; Glassberg, *Sense of History*, 9-10; Hayden, *The Power of Place*, 15; Martha K. Norkunas, *The Politics of Public Memory: Tourism, History and Ethnicity in Monterey, California* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 2; and Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 245-247.

others' remembrances. Folklorist Katherine Borland cautions scholars about interpreting the past differently than the way their interviewees remember it, which often occurs because interviewees attach emotional and cultural meanings to events that scholars later disassociate or simply dismiss. Additionally, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy presents a slightly different analysis of memory than Portelli, noting that interviewees, especially culturally prominent ones, provide rehearsed and perfected tales to oral historians that are personally flattering. Kennedy further notes that socially ostracized and persecuted groups, such as minorities and homosexuals, provide a metaphorical playground for scholars to explore the connections between oppressed groups and factually incorrect memories (especially the degree of any suffusion or appropriation of hegemonic narratives, e.g., female Cowboy Christians' acceptance of subjected gender roles and power). As indicated, Perks and Thomson's anthology is a valuable resource in understanding the theoretical outlines of oral history, including the memory component.²³

Linda Shopes also discusses oral history and memory in "Oral History and the Study of Communities." In this article, Shopes presents an overview of oral history of historically disadvantaged and oppressed groups.

²³ Grele, "Movement Without Aim," 44-45; Naomi Rosh White, "Marking Absences: Holocaust Testimony and History," in *The Oral History Reader*, 176, 180; Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses," in *The Oral History Reader*, 164-5; Katherine Borland, "'That's Not What I Said': Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research," in *The Oral History Reader*, 329; and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, "Telling Tales: Oral History and the Construction of Pre-Stonewall Lesbian History," in *The Oral History Reader*, 345.

history theory and practice, especially related to community oral histories. Within her discussion, she notes that oral histories indicate that memories, and thus identities, are “rooted in places” and that oftentimes “local history [is] defined almost entirely by specific places.”²⁴ This connection ties oral history studies to the larger body of literature concerned with memory and place studies. As Shopes points out, it is important that oral historians recognize the importance of place to memory constructions and interpret interviewees’ memories through social, cultural, and geographic contexts and currents.

Methodological guides including association bulletins, scholarly articles, and how-to books comprise the third important group of oral history literature. Perks and Alistair’s *The Oral History Reader* also contributes to this scholarship as Part II specifically deals with oral history interviewing methodology. During this section, prominent oral historians, such as Kathryn Anderson, Charles Morrissey, Paul Thompson, and Naomi Rosh White, discuss various interviewing tactics and listening strategies. These scholars advocate extensive pre-interview research, using broad, open-ended questions with follow-up questions, creating good rapport with interviewees and research communities, and remaining conscious of historically disenfranchised and oppressed groups.

Another comprehensive methodology book is oral historian Donald Ritchie’s *Doing Oral History*. Drawing on decades of oral history experience,

²⁴ Linda Shopes, “Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities,” *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (September 2002): 593.

Ritchie emphasizes the *doing* part of oral history, as his title alludes to, and admits that “most oral historians learn by doing, and our understanding of the theories of interviewing and our interpretation have more often followed than preceded our interviewing.”²⁵ Despite this recognition, Ritchie presents a short professional history and some disciplinary theory, including the temporal nature of memory and its role in oral history. Ritchie further details how to conduct an oral history project from beginning to end and encourages the use of oral histories in archives, classrooms, and on the internet. While he explains varying types of questions oral historians should ask and interviewing strategies, Ritchie correctly notes that oral history is mostly what happens before and after the actual interview. Ritchie’s *Doing Oral History* is a necessary resource for all oral historians.

Public historians David Kyvig and Myron Marty’s *Nearby History* is also very useful and has become a standard text for academic and lay public historians as it covers a wide range of public history concerns. Kyvig and Marty’s “Oral Documents” chapter discusses the benefits of doing community oral history projects and outlines how to conduct and use oral histories. They explain the importance of pre-interview research, crafting interview-specific, but broad, questions, and, most helpful for novice oral historians, provide a check list of requirements to successfully complete interviews, such as asking brief questions,

²⁵ Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 16.

using active listening skills, prompting interviewees with photographs, and obtaining legal releases. While Kyvig and Marty's primary focus on the interview process seems simplistic and possibly trivializes more nuanced and, arguably, more important aspects of oral history, it is ideal for their target audience—largely untrained volunteers who value others' memories and seek to preserve them for future researchers. Because of its straightforwardness, *Nearby History* is a quick and worthwhile reference.

Oral historian Willa Baum's *Transcribing and Editing Oral History*, Baylor University Institute of Oral History's *Style Guide*, and oral historian John Neuenschwander's *A Guide to Oral History and the Law* are also beneficial in oral history practice. In her book, Baum presents a very technical guide to completing oral history transcriptions. Her work explains and provides examples of transcripts, proper and improper editing styles, legal agreements, and donating interviews to an appropriate depository. Baum writes primarily for professionals and asks oral historians to consider difficult questions, such as to what degree edited transcripts will replicate the recorded interview. Baum notes, unlike others, that allowing interviewees to review and approve the transcript before final submission is ethical oral history practice and helps maintain good relations within researched communities. Baylor University's *Style Guide* largely supplements Baum's work, but provides more recent grammatical and style guidance for transcriptions, specifically with "filler words" and numbers.

Neuenschwander's small work is completely devoted to the relationship between oral history and United States law. Neuenschwander discusses creating release forms for oral histories, explains how American copyright law affects oral history, and presents historical and hypothetical examples of oral historians unknowingly breaking the law. Neuenschwander's discussion of oral history release and deed of gift forms is especially helpful for any oral history project.²⁶

Professional briefs also provide valuable guidance. While individuals have founded numerous oral history groups since the mid-twentieth century, the Oral History Association remains preeminent in the United States. This multidisciplinary professional organization maintains the fields *General Principles for Oral History*, which articulate interviewees' rights and encourages ethical practices and contextual interpretations of recorded memories. The Association's *Best Practices* further clarify oral historians' professional responsibilities before, during, and after oral history interviews, including: using the best digital recording equipment possible; creating good rapports with interviewees; providing a sufficient introducing "lead" at the beginning of interviews that records the names of people present, the date of recording, and the proposed topic of discussion;

²⁶ Borland, "That's Not What I Said," 327-329; and Will K. Baum, *Transcribing and Editing Oral History* (New York: AltaMira Press, 1991), 72. While there are numerous other transcription style guidelines, such as Minnesota's Historical Society's and the Miller Center's at the University of Virginia, I most closely followed Baylor University's because I am a member of the Texas Oral History Association, which is headquartered at Baylor, and Baylor University's *Style Guide* follows the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

respecting interviewees' rights; obtaining a signed release form; and making the oral histories publicly accessible.²⁷

Sociologist Earl Babbie's *The Practice of Social Research* is a final methodological work considered for "Can I Get a Yee-haw and an Amen." Although a history project, I asked some questions and performed some research similar to sociologists, namely researching religious groups as a participant observer. While an extensive ethnographic methods literature exists, and that is to its credit, Babbie's book provides sufficient guidance nonetheless. Although primarily concerned with quantitative research, Babbie's encouragement to maintain a "value-free" mentality is helpful to oral historians, especially dealing with religious groups and topics, not to mention politically and culturally charged issues. Since Babbie largely reiterates methodology advice provided by oral historians (such as creating good rapport), and I did not undertake an extensive statistical analysis, I did not need much sociological research methodology in the broad sense, but still found Babbie's guidance helpful.²⁸

²⁷ Oral History Association, "Principles and Best Practices," last modified October 2009, <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/>.

²⁸ Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research* (Belmont: Wadsworth/Thompson Learning, Inc., 2004), 76.

Methodology

I performed many roles as the sole staff member of the “Can I Get a Yee-haw and an Amen” oral history project, including director, interviewer, administrative assistant, and transcript editor; I did it all. This proved a daunting and rewarding responsibility that required extensive preparation and perseverance. The understood first step of any oral history project is deciding upon a community to work with and purpose for which to work. As discussed, the cowboy church movement is a rapidly growing movement that holds great social, cultural, and political significance and immediately affects the lives of thousands of people around the world. Nonetheless, few resources, especially archival, are available to understand the movement or even chronicle its history and rapid expansion since the 1970s. Because of the lack of resources, the movement’s seemingly non-typical religious experience, and its new-kid-on-the-block status, so to speak, there are far reaching misconceptions about the cowboy church movement. These fallacies range from misjudging the movement as the “Beer and Barbeque church” to having people physically petition in front of cowboy churches. The cowboy church movement and Cowboy Christians are, in a way, a marginalized group.²⁹

²⁹ Morgan, interviewed by McAdams; and Anonymous to Stan King, 14 June 2013, unpublished letter.

As a trained historian, I explain these misconceptions by the lack readily available and quality sources to understand the movement. As a public historian, I recognized this as an opportunity to practice my profession, contribute to the public's knowledge of history and the world around them, and, ultimately, work towards fostering a more inclusive society by providing a marginalized group a "voice." With this overarching and rather idealized purpose, I started establishing goals and objectives for my project as Donald Ritchie instructs. Originally, I hoped to create a history of the cowboy church movement in Oklahoma and Texas (the two states with the highest concentration of cowboy churches), doing participant observations with at least five cowboy churches in the two states, interviewing at least fifty Cowboy Christians, and collecting hundreds of surveys. Quickly realizing the impossibility of such an extensive study because of real-life deadlines and responsibilities, I created time-determined goals, which narrowed my focus specifically to the cowboy church movement in Texas, and further, to working primarily with two churches. I sought two willing churches that demonstrated the movement's diversity and were easily accessible.³⁰

I found two superlative churches: the nondenominational Impact Cowboy Church in Nacogdoches; and the Baptist megachurch Cowboy Church of Ellis County in Waxahachie. After attending services at both churches, I explained to

³⁰ Donald Ritchie discusses that most goals are time-determined and oral history projects rarely maintain the exact same goals throughout an entire oral history project. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 47-48.

cowboy pastors Stan King and Gary Morgan my desire to create scholarly resources for the cowboy church movement that could correct misconceptions and open scholarly study. As Babbie notes, it is necessary all participants are volunteers to maintain ethical standards and collect the most accurate and useful information. This first meeting also allowed me to establish good rapports with leaders in the cowboy church community, which, as Belinda Bozzoli explains, greatly helps the future success of oral history projects.³¹

After obtaining these leaders' consents, I decided upon pertinent information to gather during the oral history interviews and church service attendances. Ritchie, among others, reminds interviewers that oral histories are intended as resources for current and future scholars. Because of this, interviewers should ask interviewees questions that answer personal concerns and, as best as possible without consulting the Oracle at Delphi, foresee questions that future researchers might be interested in.³² Additionally, acknowledging oral history as the process of recording interviewees' "rememberings," as scholar Kathleen Ryan notes, obtaining interviewees' demographic and biographical information is imperative to contextualize interviewees memories.³³ To collect this, I used Ritchie's and Babbie's criterions to create a participant biographical survey that included general demographic

³¹ Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, 65; and Belinda Bozzoli, "Interviewing the Women of Phokeng," in *The Oral History Reader*, 149.

³² Ritchie, 45.

³³ Ryan, 30

information such as age, sex, race, occupation, political affiliation, education level, and marital status. Following Kyvig and Marty's advice, I also included biographical questions specifically pertinent to my study, including area of residence and religious backgrounds. (A copy of the "Biographical Sketch" is provided in the appendix.)³⁴

I also created a generic list of interview questions. Following oral historian Charles Morrissey's advice, I created open-ended questions that generally required a more in-depth answer than "yes" or "no." I posed broad questions to interviewees that enabled them to tell stories instead of answering a checklist of questions. Also important, I put harder questions later in the interview and created a list of probes and alternative phrasings if interviewees did not understand or refused to answer questions. Morrissey explains these strategies enable interviewers to ask difficult questions interviewees might otherwise refuse to answer. The questions included information about Cowboy Christians' political affiliations, different occupations and residences, and definitions of residential area types. The few other cowboy church scholars have rarely, if ever, asked these questions and certainly not to the degree that I did. I also tried to create questions of general interest to all researchers, including "What is the cowboy church movement?"; "What do you like best about attending cowboy churches?";

³⁴ Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 45, 102-103; Kathleen Ryan, "'I Didn't Do Anything Important': A Pragmatist Analysis of the Oral History Interview," *Oral History Review* 36, no. 1 (2009): 30; Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, 254-256; and Kyvig and Marty, *Nearby History*, 117.

"What is a cowboy?"; and the purpose and significances of the Cowboy and the Cross icon and church rodeo arenas. These sets of questions do not ask every question about the cowboy church movement or every individual Cowboy and Christian, of course, but they provide a broad overview of the movement nonetheless and can benefit future researchers. (A copy of the "Interview Questions" is in the appendix.)³⁵

I also created release forms before conducting the oral history interviews. Having read Kyvig and Marty's emphatic assertions of the importance of release forms, I knew that inappropriate release forms could cause the entire project to fail. As Neuenschwander further notes, oral histories are legally inaccessible to researchers without proper release forms. While a seemingly simple part of oral history practice, crudely organized and conducted oral history projects repeatedly fail to complete this process. Even Stephen F. Austin State University has experience with improperly managed oral history projects as most of historian Bobby Johnson's collection of more than 300 oral histories has no paperwork, not even interviewee releases. As Neuenschwander explains, interviewees maintain all legal rights to oral histories without a signed release form and can even sue scholars that use their interviews without permission for copyright infringement.³⁶

³⁵ Charles Morrissey, "On Oral History Interviewing," in *The Oral History Reader*, 108-11.

³⁶ Kyvig and Marty, *Nearby History*, 128; and John Neuenschwander, *A Guide to Oral History and the Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xvi, 9.

Creating a legally useful release form proved imperative to successfully completing my oral history project. While Stephen F. Austin State University has release forms on file because of its African American Oral History Project and Assistant Professor Paul J. P. Sandul's oral history courses, these release forms proved insufficient for my study because they require two different signature pages and do not allow for interviewing minors. Seeking to streamline and minimize the project's documentation, I created a release form modeled from Ohio University Press' "Catching Stories" Oral History Project. The resulting one-page, legally binding form requires the interviewer's and interviewee's releases and permits minors to participate if desired. As the sole staff member of my oral history project, the less paperwork involved made it easier to maintain organization throughout the project. My release form meets all the necessary legal requirements to protect from copyright infringement and makes the collected histories accessible to future researchers. (A copy of the "Release Form" is included in the appendix.)³⁷

Conducting the research proved the next step in the process. For the participant observation research, I followed Babbie's guidelines to inconspicuously blend into the cowboy church community. Although scribbling

³⁷ Paul Sandul, "Example Packet of What to Turn in for the Final Product," DocSandul, accessed April 15, 2013, <http://docsandul.wordpress.com/courses/history-536-oral-history/syllabus-other-materials/>; and "Catching Stories: Sample Release Form," Ohio University Press, accessed April 16, 2013, http://www.ohioswallow.com/extras/9780804011167_sample_release_form.pdf.

notes during services raised some eyebrows, I unobtrusively dressed in blue jeans, boots, and western style shirt; shook hands with the greeters; got my cup of complimentary coffee; and joined the congregation in singing songs. I attended a total of three Sunday morning worship services and one mid-week service at each church. These experiences enabled me to understand better cowboy churches' "come-as-you-are" and masculine atmospheres, and Cowboy Christians' religious sincerities. It also provided the best means to discover the dynamics and order of cowboy church worship services and the messages presented. Additionally, participating in their worship helped establish a good rapport and common ground between interviewees and myself. Certainly, participant observation helped minimize the concept of the "community outsider," or nonmember, and benefitted my research (outsider-insider paradigm discussed below).³⁸

While participant observation helped, the oral history interviews comprised the majority of my research and public history practice. As Linda Shopes notes, finding valuable oral history interviewees is the most difficult and crucial part of any oral history project. While release forms are essential, interviewees would have nothing to release without the actual interview. Because of this, a large part of oral history literature is devoted to the interview selection process. As noted oral historian Peter Friedlander discusses, oral history rarely provides a true

³⁸ Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, 70.

statistical cross section of people over any given topic. While there is a place for statistics, collecting such a sample is not the true purpose of oral history projects nor do statistics sufficiently consider individuality and individual beliefs per se—though, admittedly, social historians have shown that such data provides fodder for determining relevance, such as the relevance of Cowboy Christianity to suburbanites as evidenced by their large statistical attendance. With that said, Nigel Cross and Rhiannon Barker note oral historians should, nonetheless, seek to provide as representative of a demographic sample as possible.³⁹

Mindful of this, I worked with pastors King and Morgan to select at least six willing interviewees from each church, thus providing a sufficiently representative sample of the cowboy church movement, which included leaders, lay members, males, females, varying ages, and different races. Both pastors also served as “gatekeepers” to the larger Cowboy Church community. Indeed, Ritchie identifies “gatekeepers” as people who hold prominent positions or have been active in communities for a long time. Gatekeepers “help identify and locate other potential interviewees and help persuade them to be interviewed.”⁴⁰ King and Morgan both identified and put me in contact with other cowboy church leaders, namely Russ Weaver and Larry Miller, which I might not have interviewed otherwise. Working with King and Morgan early in the interviewing

³⁹ Shopes, “Oral History and the Study of Communities,” 596; Peter Friedlander, “Theory, Method, and Oral History,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 316; and Nigel Cross and Rhiannon Barker, “The Sahel Oral History Project,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 250.

⁴⁰ Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 88.

process largely enabled the success of the project overall. Additionally, by showing these gatekeepers my more-than-superficial interest in the cowboy church movement, they endorsed me to other Cowboy Christian interviewees.

After working with King and Morgan to find interviewees, I initiated the first contacts with potential interviewees. As Ritchie discusses, an interviewer's first contact with an interviewee is crucial in establishing a good working relationship. Following Ritchie's recommendations, I called each of the potential interviewees or met them in person at church services. I introduced myself and explained my goal to collect oral histories to add to the public and scholarly knowledge about the movement. Somewhat surprising, all of my interviewees readily agreed to participate in my study, eager to share their memories and experiences of the cowboy church movement. Working around interviewee's schedules, we established meeting times, I explained in more detail the types of questions I planned to ask during the interview, and, when possible, asked interviewees to complete the "Biographical Sketch" before the scheduled interview.⁴¹

While unnecessary, I provided interviewees as much preliminary information as possible to establish a positive rapport. Oral historians discuss that the "outsider versus insider" debate is important in conducting and interpreting oral histories. Shopes explains "insider" interviewers are community members who have some sort of previous contact with interviewees before the

⁴¹ Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 89.

oral history project begins and “outsider” interviewers are community nonmembers, most often scholars. With this in mind, scholars debate if it is better to use insider or outsider interviewers and Akemi Kikumura explains the professional debate as such:

On the one hand, advocates for the outsider perspective generally argue that access to authentic knowledge is more obtainable because of the objectivity and scientific detachment with which one can approach one’s investigation as a nonmember of the group. On the other hand, proponents of the insider perspective claim that group membership provides special insight into matters (otherwise obscure to others) based on one’s knowledge of the language and one’s intuitive sensitivity and empathy and understanding of the culture and its people.⁴²

Evidenced here, both perspectives have benefits, but the outsider becomes especially troubling when factors of gender and race are introduced as Belinda Bozzoli explains.⁴³

As the sole staff member, I had little choice but to conduct interviews as a relative outsider. The ability to reach Cowboy Christians as an outsider and talk meaningfully about such a personal topic as religion and individual spirituality proved a primary concern. Attempting to overcome these potential barriers, I

⁴² Akemi Kikumura, “Family Life Histories: A Collaborative Venture,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 140.

⁴³ Shopes, “Oral History and the Study of Communities,” 591; and Bozzoli, “Interviewing the Women of Phokeng, 145-146.

became completely forthcoming with my research and presented myself as close to an insider as possible. Additionally, my personal background (a white male raised in a seemingly rural location, having an evangelical background, and naturally boasting an “East Texas accent” similar to that of Cowboy Christians) helped in this regard as I largely resembled the “good ole country boy” type of person the cowboy church movement seeks to attract. Being upfront with my purpose and appearing to socially and culturally relate to Cowboy Christians greatly helped me gain members’ trusts and seemingly overcome the outsider–insider paradigm to a large degree.

Aiming to make Cowboy Christians as comfortable as possible during the interview process, I conducted the interviews at a neutral location—mainly interviewees’ churches. (All but three interviews occurred at a cowboy church meetinghouse. The Kenneth and Cynthia Denny interview occurred at their residence, Janice Burton’s interview occurred at her office, and I interviewed Larry Miller over the phone.) As Ritchie recommends, I called to remind interviewees a few hours before our scheduled interview and arrived at the interview on time. At the start of the interview, I gave another introduction in which I told interviewees more about my personal background and briefly talked about their lives and interests. Since the interview proved the first time I had one-on-one contact with most interviewees, this time became essential to lower any barriers interviewees had about discussing their personal lives with a stranger, let

alone an academic outsider. I also used this time to collect and scan over interviewees' biographical sketches to understand better their perspectives and what biographic "blanks" needed filling during the interview. Additionally, I provided a final explanation of the types of questions discussed in the interview and asked interviewees if they had any further questions about the research or me. While most interviewees did not have any questions, Morgan and Russ Weaver asked about my interest in the movement and some questions about my religious background. While several reasons likely motivated these questions, such as judging the extent of my theological knowledge, a probable explanation derives from being studied by an academic and wanting to ensure their fair treatment.⁴⁴

I conducted the interviews following professional best practices. Adhering to the Oral History Association's *General Principles*, I used a mid-level Olympus digital recorder able to record, save, and play in different digital formats and located it where it could pick up audio but remain visually unobtrusive. I chose to use audio only for this project because of the oral histories' intended uses and storage, as well as equipment cost. Ritchie explains that although videotaping oral histories records interviewees' gestures, it is most beneficial for use in museum exhibits and documentaries. Archiving video records also complicates the archival process and compounds archivists' responsibilities. Since I did not

⁴⁴ Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 61, 90; and Bozzoli, "Women of Phokeng," 149.

intend to create a video record and quality video recorders cost approximately double that of audio recorders, I opted to just use audio. At the beginning of each interview, I also provided a sufficient "lead" that recorded persons present, the date and place of the interview, and interview topic. This lead provides future researchers a valuable context and quick reference for each recorded interview and meets the Oral History Association's recommendations.⁴⁵

Active listening tactics such as looking at interviewees, having raised eyebrows, and indicating you understand what interviewees are saying also proved detrimental during the interviews. Charles Morrissey explains oral history is intended to record the interviewees' memories, not the interviewer's. Additionally, interrupting interviewees disrupts their remembering processes and disturbs their stories. Furthermore, after personally transcribing oral histories in which interviewers talk and interrupt extensively, I recognized the interviewing and transcribing processes are more successful if the interviewer limits speaking and verbal affirmations. During interviews, I asked succinct, open-ended questions and allowed interviewees to respond freely. As Kyvig and Marty encourage, I also asked follow up and clarification questions for any points misunderstood and remained willing to deviate from the prepared questions to explore interesting topics interviewees brought up. Additionally, I arranged my

⁴⁵ Oral History Association, "Principles and Best Practices," last modified October 2009, <http://www.oralhistory.org/about/principles-and-practices/>; and Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 90, 134.

questions in a loosely defined order of easy to difficult that followed a natural line of thought. Overall, my interviewing technique largely aligned with approved best practices of oral history.⁴⁶

I occasionally did diverge from approved best practices, specifically in framing questions. Ritchie explains that the way a question is framed, such as prefacing it with, "Wouldn't you say . . .," can distort interviewees' responses. This forces interviewees to agree with the interviewer's prescribed response or experience alienation from the interviewer or, worst case, suffer feelings of failure. While this is not universal, it does happen. Occasionally during interviews I prefaced questions with the "Wouldn't you say" phrase, especially in respect to the church as a family or the personal relevance of church missions. While this led interviewees to agree with me, those prompts derived from previous interviews with Cowboy Christians. I also occasionally fell into what Ritchie describes as the "curse of oral history" of not pursuing details.⁴⁷ While I explored the movement's history in detail, I should have delved deeper into the issues of race and feminity in the cowboy church movement during interviews. This failure primarily occurred because interviewees largely dismissed each as a nonissue, exclaimed they accepted all races or respected women, and did not want to

⁴⁶ Morrissey, "On Oral History Interviewing," 108-110; and Kyvig and Marty, *Nearby History*, 119-122.

⁴⁷ Ritchie, *Doing Oral History*, 115.

discuss it further. While I could have prodded, I ran the risk of angering interviewees and hurting the rest of the interview.⁴⁸

I also conducted group interviews, which challenges some professional norms. Ritchie states, "The best oral history interview is generally done one-on-one. That way, the interviewer can focus exclusively on one person, whose stories will not be interrupted."⁴⁹ Even he, however, admits this is not always possible or even ideal. Although I originally intended to only conduct individual interviews, I completed four group interviews with spouses. Having a third person in the interview altered the interview dynamics, especially since they were husband and wife in a relationship in which wives are instructed to remain in passive "submission." Although originally undesired, I agreed to the interviews so as not to upset the voluntary interviewers. As social worker and scholar Jan Walmsley explains, interviewing spouses has benefits as it can, in some instances at least, relax interviewees intimidated by a one-on-one interview. Additionally, interviewing spouses provided a unique experience to examine Cowboy Christians' family dynamics and evaluate spouses' roles away from church services. Finally, while group interviews can work to constrict the free sharing of information (i.e., the speaker is also speaking to satisfy, potentially, another group member present) they can also work to cause synergy or spark fuzzy or forgotten memories. Despite my initial hesitancy, I quickly preferred

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 93, 95-97.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 62.

holding spousal interviews over individual interviews because they gathered information more efficiently, which became imperative due to budgetary and time restrictions.⁵⁰

The most startling aspect about the interview process proved the openness in which Cowboy Christians responded. Although consciously trying to overcome the outsider–insider paradigm, interviewees overwhelmed me with their openness. As discussed in chapter one, many Cowboy Christians have unchurched backgrounds and lived lives for which they are not proud. Most interviewees had at least one previous marriage, admitted previous addictions to alcohol or drugs, grew up connected to violence, and at least one interviewee served a prison sentence. Nonetheless, every interviewed Cowboy Christian eagerly answered questions about the cowboy church movement and its influence in their lives. While I would like to explain interviewees' openness on my well-crafted questions and winning personality, other, more probable explanations arise. Certainly, the missionary mindset of Cowboy Christians to spread the Gospel helps them to more openly and eagerly discuss and share their religion with outsiders. Additionally, their espoused notions of lacking pretenses and helping strangers appear, in retrospect, genuine—at least with someone who seemingly fits into the Western Heritage Culture. Ultimately, their

⁵⁰ Jan Walmsley, "Life History Interviews with People with Learning Disabilities," in *The Oral History Reader*, 132; and Hugo Slim, Paul Thomson, Olivia Bennett, and Nigel Cross, "Ways of Listening," in *The Oral History Reader*, 118-119.

genuine respect and thankfulness for the cowboy church movement enabled Cowboy Christians to discuss openly the thing that they perceive improved their lives.

After the interviews concluded and I collected signed release forms, I set about the tedious process of transcribing. I arranged to deposit the oral histories at the East Texas Research Center at Stephen F. Austin State University. This facility meets Willa Baum's recommendations for an oral history depository as it is located geographically close to the participating communities, it has trained archivists to manage the resources, and it has the added bonus of a web-based archive so more people can access selected material. Working with the archivists, I derived a transcription format influenced by the African American Heritage Project and the Bobby H. Johnson Oral History Collection, both of which the archive manages. The resulting transcript template has a title page; a copy of the signed interviewer/interviewee release form; an interviewee biography; an editorial notice, restriction, and interview context page; interview index; and the interview transcript. This transcript form also follows the Baylor University's *Style Guide* (Russ Weaver's transcript is provided in the appendix). As Baum explains, "There are no cut and dried rules for how to do oral history at any step. Oral history is an art, not an exact science."⁵¹ Because of this, oral historians have the liberty to create project-specific interviews and transcripts that conform to

⁵¹ Baum, *Transcribing and Editing Oral History*, 6.

overarching approved best practices. This hybrid transcript template is best suited for the "Can I Get a Yee-haw and an Amen" oral history project and is familiar to depository archivists.⁵²

In compliance with the mandate of Paul J. P. Sandul, my public history project chair, I followed this template and transcribed six of the fourteen interviews: Russ Weaver; Gary Morgan; Kenneth and Cynthia Denny; Robert Wilson; Stan King; and Rodney and Kristi Spencer. These specific interviews provide for a sufficient range of Cowboy Christians. Weaver's, Morgan's, and King's histories provide the most information about the movement's history and guiding principles. The Dennys and Spencers explicate the various occupations and residence locations of Cowboy Christians, present testimonies from previously unchurched, and include female perspectives on the masculine movement. Wilson's history illustrates the dynamic education levels of Cowboy Christians and provides the only recorded non-white perspective about the movement. After completing the transcripts, I sent them to the respective interviewees to approve, as Baum recommends, and completed content summaries for the additional interviews to allow researchers greater accessibility. These procedures fulfill my ethical obligations and help maintain a good rapport with interviewees, which will hopefully lead to future collaborations with other researchers. I also consulted the East Texas Research Center archivists and

⁵² Ibid., 119-120.

provided them copies of the interview audios and documents in a suitable format.

This final donation concluded my obligations as an oral historian, but not a public historian. As Kyvig and Marty note, "Oral history is only a means to an end, not an end in itself."⁵³ After having successfully collected and made publicly-available oral histories, I have the privilege as a public historian to use them in the above narrative and future projects to educate publics and work towards a more inclusive and knowledgeable society.⁵⁴

⁵³ Kyvig and Marty, *Nearby History*, 117. Rogers, "Roy Rogers Day," accessed October 27, 2015.
⁵⁴ Baum, *Transcribing and Editing Oral History*, 66, 119.

CONCLUSION—HAPPY TRAILS: REFLECTIONS, REMEMBRANCES, AND DIRECTIONS

As this study ends, cowboy icons Roy Rogers and Dale Evans' 1950s song, "Happy Trails" has great resonance. It speaks of happy trails and the "blue" trails that each encounters during life, but that one's companions, especially Jesus and Christian brethren alike, make it worth living and bring about the "sunny weather."¹ The community Cowboy Christians create through their religious performances and shared experiences within and away from the meetinghouse enables them to get through the difficult trials (especially those related to perceived national moral decline) and celebrate the good times (such as the birth of a new child or colt). Before wishing readers "happy trails," it is important to reflect briefly upon the cowboy church movement's characteristics to explain succinctly its meaning and significance within the contemporary United States. Additionally, it is scholastically intriguing and fundamentally necessary to discuss and analyze the importance of members' collected memory as recorded in oral histories. Finally, as one of the few cowboy church scholars, I am obligated to discuss in which directions future scholars should explore the

¹ "Lyrics to 'Happy Trails' by Dale Evans Rogers," RoyRogers.Com, accessed October 27, 2013, http://www.royrogers.com/happy_trails-index.html.

cowboy church movement. These final expatiations are intended to sum up, clarify, and spur on sorely needed research of the cowboy church movement.

The cowboy church movement is growing on an international scale and, as such, demands evermore consideration and explanation. Not even a dream fifty years ago, cowboy churches currently contend for space in the religious marketplace and sprawling suburbia. They evoke notions of rurality and portend to meet people on their levels, which attract many to a life of Christian service. Although Cowboy Christians construct their cultural appeals around national myths, they provide members a genuine religious and social experience that necessitates observers and other interested researchers to acknowledge. It is difficult not to give pause to such a unique religious movement. Its seeming deviation from religious norms dismays many nonmembers as they question if Cowboy Christians perform ritualized spiritual worship to the cowboy and horse, which is found nowhere in the Bible. Cowboy Christians' intentional sacralizations of the profane evokes snickers and jabs from the public, and occasionally petitions. Yet, this does not disturb members. They are comfortable in their "relationships with Jesus Christ" and encourage nonmembers to not "knock it until you've tried it. Come see what it's all about."²

The cowboy church movement is primarily a religious movement as it emphasizes, above all else, individuals to gain salvation in Jesus Christ through

² Spencer, interviewed by McAdams.

baptism and live a Christian life. As a seeker church movement, it provides a socio-culturally relevant liturgy and applicable theology that attracts the unchurched and those disenchanted with traditional churches. Cowboy Christians continually bemoan traditional churches' inability to provide substantial religious guidance and their disconnectedness from contemporary society. To correct this, cowboy churches practice the Low Barriers Model that removes perceived unnecessary barriers, such as professional dress codes and jargon-filled sermons, which deter people, particularly men, from attending and actively participating in organized Christianity. Certainly, many men who pride themselves on their supposed courageousness and ruggedness appreciate the movement's celebration of the masculine, and cowboy churches' cultivated family-type atmospheres appear a stark contrast to traditional churches' perceived sterilities.

While most Cowboy Christians do not blink an eye at their criticizing traditional churches, it is impossible for scholars to overlook. In fact, pointing out this blatant irony is a common thread among cowboy church scholarship.

Cowboy Christians proudly espouse traditional values and seemingly hold contradictions largely characteristic of the American middle class. They glory in individuality, yet long for a sense of community. They proclaim that the government should leave them alone, while, as members of the middle class, commonly obtain Federal Housing Authority loans to buy their homes and land.

They call for government intervention with certain social issues they interpret through religious goggles, and support government spending astronomical levels when it comes to the military. They seek “elbow room” in country residences, but bemoan the natural landscape devastation caused by development and the price of living away from town centers. For heaven's sake, they seek “anyone that enjoys the western culture and traditional values that made our country great.”³ Although scholar Eric Hobsbawm explains that “tradition” and notions of “traditional” are wholly invented, “tradition” holds a special meaning to Cowboy Christians as the way they identify themselves, if not their Christianity.⁴

Another seeming contradiction of the cowboy church movement previously unexplored is its placement as a suburban movement. Obvious signs of this reality are the proliferation of cowboy churches in suburban areas, specifically the Dallas-Fort Worth and Houston metroplexes, and Cowboy Christians living in suburbia. Again, this does not disregard the cowboy churches located in rural areas or the Cowboy Christians that live in rural areas and have agricultural jobs. It is impossible, however, to overlook that the movement began and its leadership largely remains within suburbia. From these suburban headquarters, Cowboy Christians assist established, and plant new, cowboy churches throughout the world and can influence anybody with internet access.

³ “About Us,” Circle C Cowboy Church, Kilgore/Henderson, TX, accessed October 11, 2013, <http://circleccowboychurch.org/home/>.

⁴ Hobsbawm, “Introduction,” 1.

Additionally, the very fact that the cowboy church movement is a seeker church movement directly ties them into national suburban cultural and religious trends. Furthermore, the glorification of the rural and accepting notions of rurality explicates cowboy churches seemingly as a last frontier where suburbanites can escape the sins of the city and retreat with God to the country. Put differently, even if not physically rooted in suburbia, the cowboy church movement, as members' claim it stands for, appropriates long-standing tropes and ideals at the heart of suburban rhetoric and growth in the United States since the nineteenth century.

This enlightening discussion does not mean to demean Cowboy Christians' religious convictions, the genuineness of their beliefs, or the cowboy church movement as a whole. As the growing field of contemporary American Christian scholarship indicates, seeker churches with a greater emphasis on community, relevant liturgies, and disdain of traditional American Christianity provides the "real" and "authentic" religion American Christians indeed seek. As the theological and secular literature indicates, traditional churches are already reckoning with seeker churches and are adapting and adopting seeker-sensitive aspects into their churches. Whether it is the cowboy church movement or others, the seeker church movement, understood in broad terms, is a powerful force in American society.

¹ David Gaillard, "Pious History and the Church's Ministry," *The Public Minister* 10, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 23.

While "Can I Get a Yee-haw and an Amen" is not a memory study, as stated, no oral history project can wholly escape a discussion of memory. Most oral historians discuss the role memory plays in oral history practice. Practitioners detail the connection between memory and oral history in numerous works, including oral historians Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson's *The Oral History Reader* and Donald Ritchie's *Doing Oral History*. Additionally, historian David Glassberg's much-discussed article "Public History and the Study of Memory" delineates the pervasiveness of memory construction in public history and challenges all public historians to be ever conscious of their personal influences in society and their roles in memory making. Understanding and incorporating memory, then, is considered an additional professional obligation all public historians should undertake. With this in mind, I will briefly address the influence and evidence of memory—a mediated action of social construction—in this public history project.⁵

Memory in its many forms—public and private, individual and collective—is always present in people's lives. Glassberg later discusses in *A Sense of History* its mediation through inherited narratives (such as reading history books or watching TV or films) and performances (such as attending religious services or participating in pageantry). Historian John Bodnar explains it as mediated

⁵ David Glassberg, "Public History and the Study of Memory," *The Public Historian* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 23.

through public education and cultural resource interpretation, especially at museums and historic sites. Scholars Dolores Hayden and Lydia Otero provide studies of its mediation through mundane spaces and places, thus the importance of historic preservation. Because of the nature of oral history, oral historians are in a prime location to study how individuals interact with those different memory mediums and integrate them into their lives and even challenge or transmit historical metanarratives.⁶

In a well-crafted essay “‘I Didn’t Do Anything Important’: A Pragmatist Analysis of the Oral History Interview,” Kathleen Ryan presents a valuable approach to understanding memory in oral history practice. Looking at females serving in the United States’ military during World War II, Ryan discusses that they assert the hegemonic notion that they did not contribute to the national war effort while simultaneously asserting their independence and self-worth. Within this essay, Ryan explains that oral history “offers a way for ordinary individuals to evaluate their lives in relation to the historical metanarrative.”⁷ Furthermore, through the active process of remembering, oral history provides “potentially transforming powers” as interviewees affirm and recover their own stories through the story telling process.⁸

⁶ See Glassberg, *Sense of History*; Bodnar, *Remaking America*; Hayden, *The Power of Place*; and Lydia R. Otero, *La Calle: Spatial Conflicts and Urban Renewal in a Southwest City* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2010).

⁷ Ryan, “‘I Didn’t Do Anything Important,’” 26.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28, 30.

This is pertinent to Cowboy Christians because it explains how they imaginatively transform themselves—unchurched, previously hard-living suburbanites—into the archetypal cowboy. Appropriating socially and politically constructed narratives about the cowboy, which has a long history, interviewed Cowboy Christians use the storytelling process to re-identify themselves as cowboys, thus, personally donning the archetype's characteristics of courageous, unpretentious, and masculine. Additionally, this re-identification enables individuals to live within constructed notions of rurality that value the middle class and whiteness. Furthermore, since contemporary political rhetoric values the "American middle class" and the heroic cowboy archetypes, the remembering process of oral history further concretizes in Cowboy Christians' minds their identities as "patriots" and defines their American citizenships. Most importantly to Cowboy Christians though, it reassures them of their identities as Christians living in God's favor.

"Can I Get a Yee-Haw and an Amen" is a multidisciplinary historiographical contribution. Primarily, it fulfills my professional obligation as a public historian. From its outset, this public history project mixed public history practice and academic scholarship. It provides later scholars an approved example of a public history project at Stephen F. Austin State University by demonstrating how to appropriately perform the field and archival work to

produce an academic-quality product. It also demonstrates to students and others one way public historians should function. As noted public historians such as James Oliver Horton and John Michael Vlach discuss, scholarship does not end at the doors of academia; for public historians, that is where it begins. My study demonstrates that public historians can and should seamlessly cross the lines between the public and academia and challenge the very notion of a division.⁹

This study also benefits contemporary American religious studies, urban studies, American political studies, religious ethnography, oral history, and memory studies. Three important contributions are of special note. First, this is the first lengthy history of the contemporary cowboy church movement. While others briefly discuss the movement's history, they do not trace it to the 1970s rodeo services and provide as complete of a history as presented here. Second, I question Cowboy Christians' assertions of "cowboy" and "rural" where other scholars do not. This provides a more nuanced and richer meaning of the cowboy church movement than previous studies. Third, this study complicates notions of "tradition" in Texas and examines how individuals appropriate that moniker to suburbia. While this is not a new concept, examining its manifestation in and narration through the cowboy church movement is. I hope this encourages

⁹ James Oliver Horton, "Slavery in American History: An Uncomfortable National Dialogue," in *Slavery and Public History*, 36; and John Michael Vlach, "The Last Great Taboo Subject: Exhibiting Slavery at the Library of Congress," in *Slavery and Public History*, 58-59.

other suburban scholars, especially those interested in Texas suburbs, to examine more closely the connections between religion and suburbanism.

Despite these contributions, cowboy church study remains wide open. Scholars will, I assume, critically evaluate my assertions of the cowboy church movement as suburban. I welcome this critique and am confident further study will only strengthen the argument if scholars understand suburbanism represents both a mindset and an apparatus for living and making lives, and not just a geographic location or land development model. The amount of primary sources about the cowboy church movement also needs great expansion. Oral historians, ethnographers, and scholars must continue recording and making publicly accessible Cowboy Christians' memories. Scholars should also work with different cowboy churches and fellowships to create corporate histories. Doing this will expand scholarly knowledge about the movement and provide Cowboy Christians themselves a better understanding of the movement they identify with.¹⁰ University of Oklahoma professor Marie Dallam's much anticipated history about the cowboy church movement, which she traces to the late-nineteenth century, will fill in many of the gaps in the movement's history.

¹⁰ Many interviewed Cowboy Christians admitted they could not sufficiently describe and explain the cowboy church movement (Robert Wilson's oral history provides a good example of this problem). In a private conversation, professor Marie Dallam from the University of Oklahoma noted she also experienced Cowboy Christians unable to describe what the movement is or what it represents. Dallam is hoping to complete her book-length manuscript of the cowboy church movement's history, which she traces to the late-nineteenth century, in late-2014.

Scholars should also explore the cowboy church movement outside Texas and Oklahoma. Of the five known cowboy church scholars, only John Williford studied churches outside these two states. CowboyCurch.Net, the online cowboy ministry directory, lists cowboy churches and ministries in most states and, Cowboy Christians discuss numerous cowboy churches exist throughout the world. Scholars should study these different groups to present a more holistic portrayal and analysis of the movement. A study of California cowboy churches would be especially interesting as the state has a strong *vaquero* history, is the historical birthplace of the seeker church and numerous charismatic Christian movements, was the home of Ronald Reagan, and is understood as the quintessential suburban state. The geographical proximity of these factors might cause California cowboy churches to be much more flamboyant in their ruralism or more accommodating of *vaquero* and Hispanic cultures. Scholars must further explore the issue of race and feminity in the cowboy church movement and better explain the presence of non-whites' and females' seeming acceptances of subjugation. A comparative study of race and gender would be particularly interesting between churches in southern and non-southern states. These suggestions, of course, are not exhaustive, but provide scholars sufficient room to expand and grow academic and popular knowledge about the contemporary cowboy church movement.

The cowboy church movement is truly fascinating. For people seeking a Christian worship experience in a “down to earth” environment, visit your local cowboy church. Those interested in studying cultural appropriations of the Texas mystique and hyper-masculinity, go check them out as well. If you just want to ride a horse or eat some “good home cooking,” look for the nearest Cowboy and the Cross on your next Sunday outing. Whatever your intentions, attending a cowboy church service is an experience worth having.

Before sending readers down the proverbial dusty trail, country music legend Tanya Tucker’s 1978 “Texas (When I Die)” comes to mind. Tucker brings together a surprising number of different factors at play within the cowboy church movement as she sings, “When I die I may not go to heaven / I don’t know if they let cowboys in / If they don’t, just let me go to Texas, boy! / Texas is as close as I’ve been.” This song reflects both the skepticism and idealization that characterize the American 1970s and remains alive within cowboy churches. Tucker indicates the struggle between the sins of the “cowboy life” and Christian salvation and ponders the exact question posed by many contemporary Cowboy Christians: “Will I, as a cowboy, go to heaven?” Finally, Tucker’s description of Texas as heaven on earth is startlingly similar to Cowboy Christians’ descriptions of heaven as full of pastures and God riding the range. Unlike Tucker though, Cowboy Christians have assurances in their “real” Christianity that God does let

cowboys in, and Peter will greet them at the pearly gates with a big “yee-haw” and an “amen.”

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APPENDIX



Figure 9—Front view of the Cowboy Church of Ellis County. (Photograph courtesy of Jake McAdams; on file in the Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.)



Figure 10—"Country Prayer Chapel" scene located on the rear of the Cowboy Church of Ellis County's meetinghouse. Many of the inlaid bricks are tributes to previous members, several of whom are deceased. Undetermined purpose. (Photograph courtesy of Jake McAdams; on file in the Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.)

Figure 13—Impact Cowboy Church classroom building located behind meetinghouse. (Photograph courtesy of Jake McAdams; on file in the Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.)

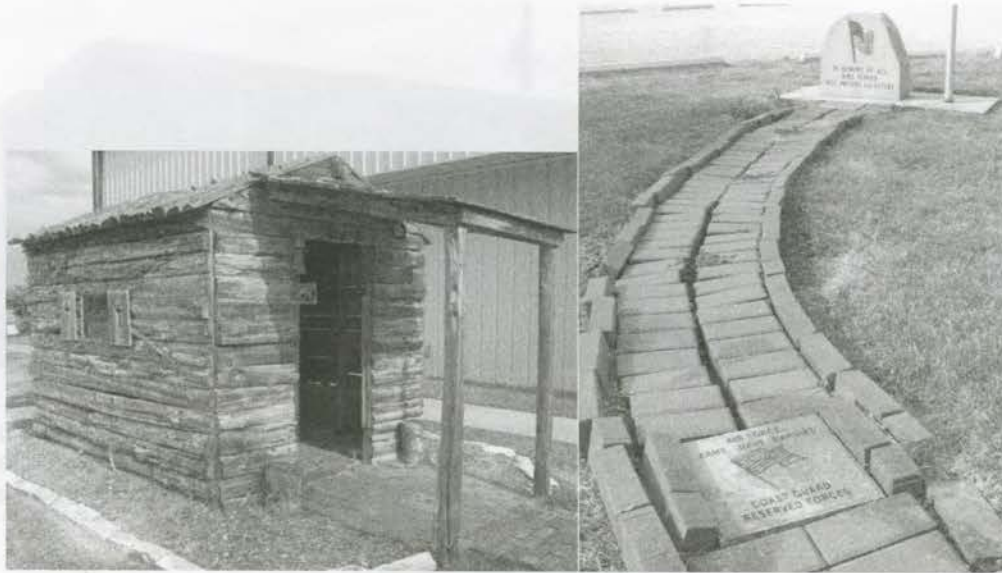


Figure 11—Close view of “County Prayer Chapel.” Chapel has a bench inside and the windows are stained glass scenes of the Cowboy and the Cross.

Figure 12—Memorial located close to “Country Prayer Chapel” Scene. Although this honors all veterans, it is specifically for Cowboy Church of Ellis county member. The church also flies all the U. S. Armed Forces flags in front of their building underneath the American flag—see Figure 1. (Photographs courtesy of Jake McAdams; on file in the Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.)



Figure 13—Impact Cowboy Church classroom building located behind meetinghouse. (Photograph courtesy of Jake McAdams; on file in the Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.)



Figure 14—Impact Cowboy Church youth classroom building. Located adjacent to meetinghouse. (Photograph courtesy of Jake McAdams; on file in the Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.)

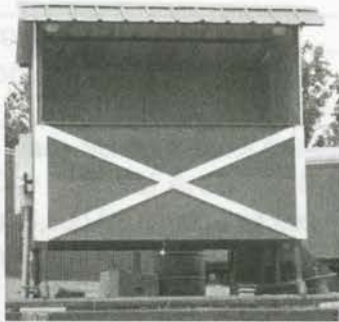


Figure 15—Announcers box at Impact Cowboy Church rodeo arena. Located behind meetinghouse. (Photograph courtesy of Jake McAdams; on file in the Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.)



Figure 16—Rodeo arena at Shepherd's Valley Cowboy Church. (Photograph courtesy of Jake McAdams; on file in the Texas Cowboy Church Oral Histories collection, ETRC.)

Prepared by & Date: _____

Biographical Sketch

Filling out this form before the interview may help the interviewer ask more appropriate and interesting questions. The interviewee should not feel compelled to complete the entire form, but only those parts that are applicable, relevant, or suitable. Again, interviewees should only fill out what they would like to.

Interviewee's full name: _____
Church interviewee attends: _____
Phone number: _____ E-mail: _____

Demographic Information

Birthday & Birth Place: _____
Race: _____ Political affiliation: _____
Occupation & Location of work: _____
Home address: _____
Education level: High School | Trade School | Some College | Bachelor's | Post-Graduate
You live in a: Suburb City Rural Area Other _____
Total family earnings: Under \$25,000 | \$25,000-\$34,999 | \$35,000-\$49,999
\$50,000-\$74,999 | \$75,000-\$100,000 | More than \$100,000
Marital Status: _____ Does your spouse attend church with you? Y N
Spouse's birthday & Birth place: _____
Date & Place of marriage: _____
Spouse's occupation & Location of work: _____
Number of previous marriages: _____ Number of children: _____
Do your children attend a Cowboy Church? Y N
How many family members attend a Cowboy Church? _____

Religious Information

How long have you attended a Cowboy Church? _____
Were you baptized in a Cowboy Church? _____
What church did you attend before the Cowboy Church? _____
Cowboy Church leadership positions held (currently or previously): _____
Do you display a Kneeling Cowboy symbol? Y N
What is your parents' religious background? _____
Any other information you would like the interviewer to know:

Prepared By & Date: _____ Interview Questions _____

_____ Interview (person's name)

Demographic Information

Birthday & Birth Place: _____ Race _____ Political affiliation: _____

* How long have you affiliated with this party?

Occupation & Location of work: _____

* How long have you worked at this location?

* Have you ever served in the military?

Home address: _____

Education level: _____

* What is the education level of most of the members at this church?

* What is the occupation of most of the members at this church?

You live in a _____

* How long have you lived in this type of area?

* What qualities separate the area you live in from City/Suburban/Rural?

* Do you know if most members live in a similar area as you?

Yearly family earnings: _____ Marital Status: _____

Does your spouse attend church with you?: Y N

* Why not?

Spouse's h-dayplace: _____ Date & Place of marriage: _____

Spouse's occupation & Location of work: _____

Number previous marriages: _____ # of children: _____ Do your kids attend? _____

* Why not?

How many family members attend a Cowboy Church? _____

Religious Information

* How long have you attended a Cowboy Church?

* What is the Cowboy Church movement?

* How often do you attend church services and participate in church activities?

* How far do you have to drive to attend church?

* How far do other members drive?

* Did you or another family member first want to visit and place membership?

* Why did you begin attending a CChC?

Interview Questions

- What do you like best about attending a Cowboy Church?
 - Where were you baptized in a Cowboy Church?
 - Had you ever been baptized before?
 - Why did you first get baptized?
- _____ Interview (person's name)

Demographic Information

Birthday & Birth Place: _____ Race _____ Political affiliation: _____

- How long have you affiliated with this party?

Occupation & Location of work: _____

- How long have you worked at this location?
- Have you ever served in the military?

Home address: _____

Education level _____

- What is the education level of most of the members at this church?
- What is the occupation of most of the members at this church?

You live in a _____

- How long have you lived in this type of area?
- What qualities separate the area you live in from City/Suburban/Rural?
- Do you know if most members live in a similar area as you?

Yearly family earnings: _____ Marital Status: _____

Does your spouse attend church with you?: Y N

- Why not?

Spouse's b-day/place: _____ Date & Place of marriage: _____

Spouse's occupation & Location of work: _____

Number previous marriages: _____ # of children: _____ Do your kids attend? _____

- Why not?

How many family members attend a Cowboy Church? _____

Religious Information

- How long have you attended a Cowboy Church?
- What is the Cowboy Church movement?
- How often do you attend church services and participate in church activities?
- How far do you have to drive to attend church?
- How far do other members drive?
- Did you or another family member first want to visit and place membership?
- Why did you begin attending a CBC?

- What do you like best about attending CBCs, specifically this one?
- Were you baptized in a Cowboy Church?
- Had you ever been baptized before?
- Why did you (not) get baptized again?
- What church did you attend before the Cowboy Church?
- What denomination is the CBC you attend?
- How are CBCs different from other churches you have attended?
- How is the message preached at this cowboy church relevant to you? (More so than traditional?)
- Does, and if so how, does the message of the Cowboy Church align with your political beliefs?
- Are you a Cowboy? Are other members cow-people? What is a Cowboy?
- Are the activities more relevant to your life and spirituality? How?
- What role to CBCs have in today's world?
- What is the most important message, value, or service the CBC instills?
- What spiritual significance, if any, does the cowboy and horse have for you?
- Do you think the CBC conducts better mission work than other churches?
- Do you think CBCs are misunderstood? Why?
- Cowboy Church leadership positions (currently or previously)
- How is serving in a leadership position in the CBC different than other churches you've attended?
- Do you display a Kneeling Cowboy symbol? Y N
- How do you display it?
- What does the Kneeling Cowboy mean?
- Does the meetinghouse's architecture have any significance? (sacred v. profane)
- What is the purpose of having an arena

Interviewer's name (please print clearly) _____ Interviewee's name (please print clearly) _____

Interviewer's address _____ Interviewee's address _____

Street _____ Street _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____ City _____ State _____ Zip _____

If interviewee is minor, signature of parent or guardian _____

Signature _____ Date _____

"Can I Get A Yee-Haw And An Amen"
Release Form

The "Can I Get a Yee-Haw and an Amen": Oral History Collection and Interpretation of Texas Cowboy Churches" is a program of Stephen F. Austin State University. Recordings and transcripts resulting from interviews conducted for the project will be deposited in the East Texas Research Center, where they will be made available for historical research and public dissemination. Participation in the project is entirely voluntary.

I, the undersigned, have read the above and voluntarily donate to the project full use of the information contained in the recordings made on _____, transcripts of the recordings, and other materials collected during the interview.

I hereby assign legal title and all literary property rights, including copyright, in these recordings and transcripts to the project, which may copyright and publish said materials. The information may be used for scholarly or educational purposes as determined by the project (except as noted below).

Restrictions on use:

Interviewee's signature	Date	Interviewer's signature	Date
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Interviewee's name (please print clearly)	Interviewer's name (please print clearly)
---	---

Interviewee's address:	Interviewer's address:
------------------------	------------------------

Street	Street
--------	--------

City	State	Zip	City	State	Zip
------	-------	-----	------	-------	-----

If interviewee is minor, signature of parent or guardian:

Signature	Date
-----------	------

VITA

Jake McAdams graduated with honors from Red Oak, Texas High School in 2008 and immediately entered Stephen F. Austin State University (SFA). As an undergraduate, McAdams published several articles in SFA's historical magazine, *Clio's Eye*, and presented papers at numerous professional conferences. He also remained active in SFA's School of Honors, was listed numerous times on SFA's Dean's and President's lists, and received numerous writing awards. McAdams graduated from SFA with a Bachelor of Arts in History and a minor in Forest Recreation Management in May 2012. As a Public History graduate student at SFA, McAdams collaborated on numerous museum exhibits and historic preservation projects, including a National Register of Historic Places nomination for Monte Verdi Plantation in Rusk County, Texas. He also co-authored "The Charlie Wilson Oral History Project" article to be published in the Winter 2013 issue of the *Sound Historian* journal.

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Chicago Manual of Style

This thesis was typed by Jake R. McAdams