

📖 Topic Page: [cowboy](#)

Definition: **cowboy** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

(cowhand) US ranch hand. Traditionally living and working in the West, cowboys increased after the Civil War. They have been romanticized in books and films as a symbol of the rugged independence, colour and vigour of the old 'Wild West'. See *also* gaucho



Image from:

[Longhorn cattle drive from Texas to Abilene, Kansas, c.1870s \(colour litho\) in Bridgeman Images: Peter Newark American Pictures](#)

Summary Article: **cowboy**

From *The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide*

US cattle herder working on horseback; one of the great figures of American history and part of the folklore of the rugged adventurous West portrayed in books, films, and plays. Thousands of cowboys worked across the Great Plains in the heyday of the early US cattle industry 1866–87, initially on the long cattle drives, herding cattle from the ranches to the cow towns, and later on the open range, the vast unfenced grazing grounds belonging to the cattle barons. They represented the spirit of adventure and independence that was seen to epitomize the American spirit during the USA's push to take over the West in the 19th century.

The number of cowboys was severely reduced when the open range system collapsed between 1886 and 1887. Falling prices, drought, and unusually harsh winter conditions combined to bankrupt the cattle barons and, although the cowboy lived on, demand for their work declined.

Origins of the cowboy The first cowboys in the American West were the Spanish or Mexican vaqueros operating in the first half of the 19th century. US cowboys came from a variety of backgrounds in the 1860s, reflecting the already complex ethnicity of the USA by the mid-19th century. They included young white Americans, who had left their family homes in the East to seek adventure in the West; ex-Confederate soldiers from the American Civil War, who wished to pursue the adventurous lifestyle of war and saw being a cowboy as the best option; Mexican Vaqueros who had worked as cattle herders in Texas for decades; and freed black slaves who were using their new found freedom to good effect.

Types of employment The work of the cowboy can be divided into two stages, according to the development of the cattle industry. Initially cowboys were employed on the long drives, trails that took the Texas Longhorns up to cow towns such as Abilene and Dodge City where they were shipped east by rail. A cowboy was employed by the trail boss who worked for the cattleman or ranch owner, and had the specific task of herding cattle from the ranch to the market. In the 1870s and 1880s, as homesteaders took up lands on the Great Plains, blocking the cattle trails, the long drives were gradually replaced by the open range system and the work of the cowboy came to be considered less exciting.

Life on the trail The job was a combination of boredom, tiredness, danger, and occasional excitement. Most drives were in the summer, and the days were consequently long – the cowboys rose before sunrise and worked until sunset. A cowboy could be trampled by stampeding cattle, drowned while

helping cattle cross a swollen river, or killed by snakes or other creatures on the Great Plains. The harsh weather conditions on the dry, dusty Plains caused constant problems. Water was always scarce and the animals risked dying of dehydration. Storms were commonplace and could scare the cattle into a stampede.

A cowboy's diet was simple, most meals consisting of biscuits, coffee, beans, and beef. Each drive employed an old cow hand as a cook, and food was prepared in his 'chuck wagon'.

At the end of the drive came the arrival at the cow town, where the cowboys could relax after working for weeks out on the Great Plains. After being paid for their efforts, they were let loose on the town. Enterprising business people soon built a wide range of bars, saloons, casinos, and brothels in the cow towns, and the cowboys made extensive use of these facilities. Not surprisingly relations between the cowboys and the citizens of the cow towns became strained. The cowboys were primarily young, single men, who were entering the town after weeks of non-stop work and no opportunities for recreation. They also had a supply of ready cash. As incidents of violence and trouble grew, they were reported by a press keen to sell newspapers by exaggerating the trouble. One by one the cow towns banned the cowboys from entering them. This reputation for trouble, which is partly deserved, became part of the enduring image of the cowboy that fed into Western books and films.

Life on the open range The work of the cowboy changed when the open range replaced the cattle drives in the 1870s and 1880s. Instead of being on the move, cowboys now spent most of the year looking after cattle on a single ranch, doing jobs such as branding and fence riding. Here they were employed to ensure that the cattle grew to a large enough size to be sold at market once a year. Cowboys had to ensure that other cattle were not using the waterholes on the ranch, and were responsible for erecting and maintaining the barbed wire fences that were increasingly used to keep the ranch's cattle in and other cattle out. The cowboys were in charge of the annual 'round-up' when all the cattle on the ranch were collected together for counting and branding. The cowboys then had to drive the ranch's herd to market, usually over a much shorter distance than they had on the cattle drives. The job was now less interesting, but also less dangerous.

Development of the myth of the cowboy Thousands of films, books, and plays have been produced about the cowboy, starting in the contemporary 19th century with the cheap dime novels produced for city dwellers in the eastern USA. In these the cowboy was eulogized, and their lives made to look as exciting as the myths suggest. From the earliest days of cinema Hollywood has made Westerns, with US actor John Wayne emerging as the most celebrated star of the genre. Once television became a mass media in the USA in the 1950s, Western series were produced such as *Rawhide*, in which a young Clint Eastwood starred as a member of a team of cowboys driving cattle from Texas to market. Although the popularity of Westerns waned in the 1980s, they made a comeback in the later 1990s, with films such as *Unforgiven* (1992), again starring Clint Eastwood. These new Westerns sought greater historical accuracy, particularly in their presentation of the ethnic mix of cowboys. In *Unforgiven* Morgan Freeman, a black American, plays Eastwood's partner, and in the film *Posse* (1993), the role of the black cowboy-outlaw is examined. The screen image of the cowboy forms part of American folk-culture, illustrating the beliefs held by Americans about the cowboy and the West – many of which have since proved to be myths – and showing how these perceptions have changed over time.

essays

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