

## So, You Call Yourself a Cowboy

by Scott Sosebee

*The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.*

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(June 23, 2022) Ask anyone in the world to “think of a Texan,” and they will almost all think of the same thing. In their mind’s eye they will envision a “cowboy,” a distinct character who wears western-style boots, a broad brimmed Stetson-styled hat, and probably jeans. He may also talk a “certain way”—a “drawl” most likely—and carries himself (and a “real” cowboy is almost always “him”) with a certain air that does not invite trouble, but certainly won’t avoid it if it comes his way. If you go out to many local watering holes—what my late grandmother often called “beer joints,” as in “the only people you will find in those beer joints are those who don’t love the Lord”—you will find many folks who fit that description, doing the two-step in fancily embroidered shirts with boots on their feet that cost more than the cow punchers of old would have made in a lifetime. I suppose a few of these splendidly sartorial wonders could have been on the back of a horse, but I would be willing to bet that hardly any of them have mended fences in a snowstorm, or searched for a lost calf in a torrential rainstorm, but then that is probably not what they think when they call themselves “cowboys.”

Perhaps that is because our modern image was never a reality. Instead it was one created first by “pulp novels,” and later—more successfully—by Hollywood productions. Our modern perception would be assaulted if it knew that the 19th century “hands,” as those who worked on open-range ranches were often termed, exchanged their boots for “dancing shoes” when they went to town for a dance, and because men outnumbered women often two-to-one on western ranges, some of the men tied a bandana around their arms, which let everyone know that they were dancing the female part of the dance. These men also removed their hats when they entered a room and every time they sat at a dining room table. They also never wore their hats while dancing. Very few of them carried guns, and when they did they only did so while working, never after hours. And those clothes? Most of those who worked with livestock during the late nineteenth

century wore ill-fitting trousers, and belts were as often as not ropes, not leather straps. Their hats were anything that could keep the sun and heat away from their heads. They were dirty, overworked, underpaid laborers, who as William Forbis wrote, “fried their brains under a hot prairie sun.” Their life was uneventful, even mundane, not a romantic adventure worthy of a Hollywood script.

And what about that term, “cowboy?” A writer of the period who lived among range workers wrote that the term “cowboy” meant a man who “roistered, gambled, and was brazen. He was generally immoral and someone to be avoided.” J. Frank Dobie noted that the term usually referred to someone who was a “cattle thief,” and in the mid-1880s it was slang for “drunkard,” “outlaw,” or something similar. Among those who worked cattle in the West in the 1870s and 1880s, the only ones ever referred to as “cowboys” were those who trailed herds to market, which in those days was an entry-level, almost unskilled job. The valuable employees, the ones who could not be spared to take off on a three-to-four month cattle drive, were usually referred to as “hands,” or “waddies,” and very often, especially those most skilled on horseback, as “buckaroos,” which was a strange Anglo-Texas pronunciation of the Spanish word “vaquero.”

So, like so many of our ideas about the past we have created a mythic figure, this modern cowboy. He is an image of misconception, even falsehood. Hollywood invented him to sell films; Madison Avenue used him to sell products, and to many Americans he is the quintessential symbol of freedom and independence. That is a lot of weight to put on the shoulders of a poorly paid agricultural worker who “fried his brains under a prairie sun.”

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