



Thoughts on History

Summer 2019

The Cowboy Issue!

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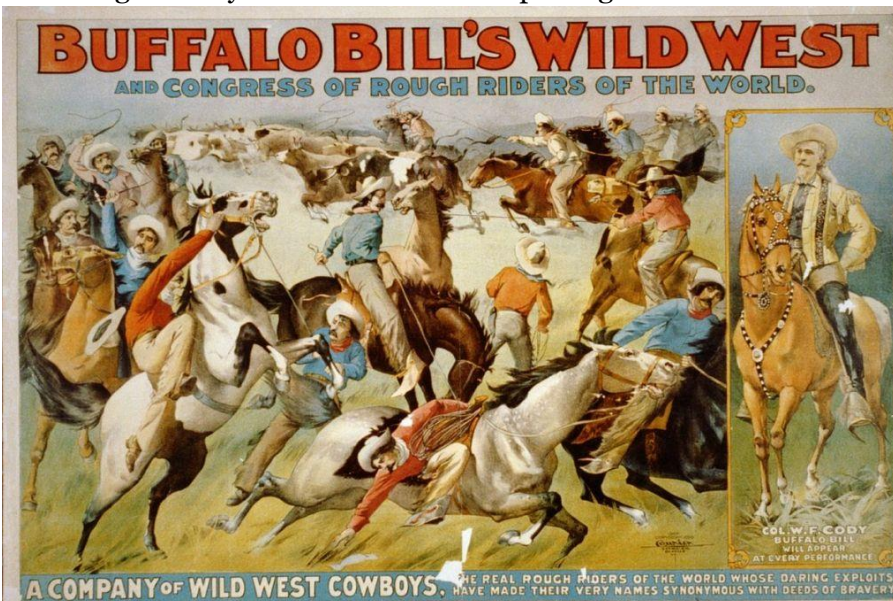
Cowboys!!!

When I was in my teens, I met an English family whose rosy-cheeked daughter was about four years old. She turned her round blue eyes up to me, dimpled sweetly and said, "Please, may I see your guns?" Surprised, I said I didn't own a gun. She looked confused.

Her mother told me that having seen many westerns on TV, her children thought all Americans were cowboys who carried guns.

I felt a bit bad to disappoint her—but just a bit. I knew why she and her brothers believed that.

America's had a long, passionate affair with the image of the "Wild West," starting in the late 1800s and extending to today. That's what we're exploring in this issue.



Frontierism (Vol III, issue 1) probably fueled the myth. By the 20th Century's start, we'd expanded the United States to the Pacific Ocean and established our borders. There no longer was a frontier. So with a strange sort of patriotism America romanticized the west, especially the "free and easy" life of the cowboy, with his special skills, lassoes and wonderful horses. TV and movies used this image almost to death and then promoted the anti-hero image—think "Spaghetti Westerns"—which kept the theme going. To a large degree, media created the old west as we think of it.

Scout, buffalo hunter and consummate showman William F. Cody (1846-1917) developed very popular "Wild West" shows which romanticized the west and spread that dramatic image throughout America and Europe. He wasn't the west's only publicist but was probably the most successful.

What TV and Movies Told Us

Cowboys were young, good - lookin', mostly white, and many of them just wandered around all the time getting into situations and living off their wits and fighting skills. Not OK.

Cowpunchers were hard working men and women of all ages and races. Some were hired by ranchers and railroads. Others worked 4-6 months of each year on cattle drives, then went home to their families and their own land.



Those Manly, Manly Men: Overall, there were well more than 30 successful western or frontier-themed TV shows in the 1950s. Here's a typically well-groomed lineup of the leads of five 1959 popular Warner Brothers westerns: from the left, Will Hutchins (*Sugarfoot*), Peter Brown (*Lawman*), Jack Kelly (*Maverick* – he was Bart), Ty Hardin (*Bronco*), James Garner (*Maverick* – he was Bret), Wayne Preston (*Colt .45*), and John Russell (*Lawman*). Other studios had similar teams of handsome good guys with great cheekbones starring in their westerns.



The Lone Ranger and Tonto
(Clayton Moore and Jay
Silverheels) with their horses
Silver and Scout.

See page 4 for more about Jay
Silverheels

1950'S TV COWBOY PRIORITIES

(In descending order of importance)
His **freedom**, or his badge, depending.
His **horse**, of course, of course.
His **sidekick**, if he had one.
His **guns & girlfriend** about equally.



TV Annie
Oakley's poor
horse had an
unfortunate
name: **Target**.

In one of the few westerns about a woman, Gail Davis played *Annie Oakley*. TV Annie was orphaned, wore cute cowgirl outfits and took care of her young brother. They lived with their uncle. She did ride fast and shoot well. (Curious about Annie Oakley? Turn the page)

"Where's tha Wimmen?"

In a few TV westerns, the leads had real relationships, but usually the women in repeating roles in the series were offside characters: little sisters, tomboys, schoolmarms, saloon denizens or starchy matriarchs. Our TV heroes usually romanced women who were "passing through" town. These were virtuous women with amazing makeup, rosy lips, big skirts, and had lots of elaborately styled hair. They apparently didn't perspire, ever, and portrayed people of any time with even less accuracy than the men did.

Who Was Annie Oakley? *The only resemblances between Annie Oakley of the TV show and the real Annie Oakley, Phoebe Ann Moses, were that they were female, attractive and could shoot well. The real Annie's story is much more dramatic.*



Phoebe Ann Moses was born into a poor Quaker family in rural Darke County, Ohio in 1860. When her father died, Phoebe Ann was sent to the county poor farm and when she was ten was sent to work for a family that abused her. She ran away and rejoined her mother, helping support her family by shooting game in the woods and selling it in town. Careful not to waste expensive ammunition, Phoebe quickly learned to make every shot count.

At fifteen, she was pretty, had a vivid personality, and had made a name for herself locally as a marksman. When exhibition shooter Frank Butler came to town on a publicity tour, it of course included a shooting contest. Phoebe out-shot Butler, who fell in love with her, and they married a year later. She traveled from town to town on Frank's tour.

When Frank's partner suddenly became ill, Phoebe went onstage in his place and the audience loved her. After that, she and Frank performed as a couple. As her appeal to audiences grew, Frank edged his way out of the limelight, focusing on managing Phoebe's career, although they still shot together on stage. While they were performing in Oakley Ohio, Phoebe adopted her stage name, Annie Oakley.

As stage personalities she and Frank developed a successful style. When they reached the vaudeville circuit, Annie made herself distinct from the other women on stage by designing and wearing modest costumes instead of the usual flamboyant, skimpy (for that time) clothing that was standard for female performers.

Annie and Frank's long stage careers included performing in Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West show, where the famous Lakota Sioux chief Sitting Bull became their friend. He adopted Annie as his daughter, naming her *Watanya Cicilla*, which means "Little Sure Shot." There's a lot to be said about Sitting Bull, who was a remarkable man, but that'll wait for another newsletter issue.

The couple toured Europe and were constantly on stage and on the move. Though they made good money, Annie never forgot the feel of poverty and was notoriously frugal.

Married for 50 years, Annie Oakley and Frank Butler died in 1926, within 18 days of each other.



Though Annie and Frank retired together in 1913, she stayed active, teaching marksmanship to women and girls and doing shows for charities.

When World War I broke out, Annie offered to raise a regiment of trained women sharpshooters but was ignored. Instead, she raised money for the Red Cross through shooting exhibitions at army camps.

“I’ll be the Cowboy: You be the Indian”

Many frontier stories are about the recurring conflict, or sometimes friendship, between settlers and Native Americans. Though TV westerns tended to focus more on bank robbers, cattle rustlers, unprincipled gunmen and such, there was usually a sprinkling of Native Americans among the characters and occasional shootouts with bands of shirtless warriors. Movies had more and better Native American roles, but almost always, Native American actors didn’t play them.

In the movie *Broken Arrow* (1950), the choice role of Chiricahua Apache chief Cochise was played by actor Jeff Chandler (Ira Gessler, born in Brooklyn) who received an Oscar nomination. In the subsequent (1956-59) TV show *Broken Arrow*, Cochise was played by Michael Ansara, a Lebanese immigrant. In the 1957 series *Hawkeye and the Last of the Mohicans*, the title character Chingachgook was played by Lon Chaney Jr., of Irish and French descent. He’s best remembered for leading roles in classic horror movies such as *The Wolfman*.

The first exception I could find to this was the work of Mohawk actor Jay Silverheels (1912-1980), who was born Harold Preston Smith of Six Nations of the Grand River in Ontario, Canada. As far as I can tell, he was the first Native actor to appear on TV in a Native American role. He played Tonto, sidekick of the *Lone Ranger* (1949-1957). A professional boxer and lacrosse player, Silverheels took up acting when comedian/actor Joe E. Lewis noticed him at a lacrosse exhibition. Smith kept his lacrosse nickname “Silverheels” for his stage name. Though he had a minimal speaking role on the show, Silverheels appeared in almost every episode and managed to portray Tonto as a skillful, perceptive, wise and dedicated friend.

Silverheels had a long and successful career in movies and TV shows. In retirement, he lived at his ranch near Los Angeles where he and his family raised prize winning standardbred horses.



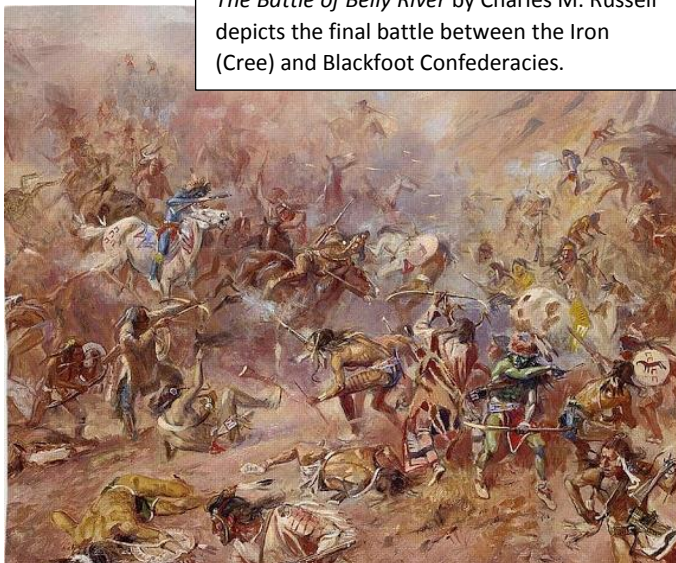
Jay Silverheels as Tonto.



Harold “Harry Silverheels” Smith (later, Jay Silverheels) playing lacrosse. *NY Times* photo

Cowboy Artist

Painter Charles M. Russell (1864-1926) was born and raised in Missouri but became fascinated with Wild West stories. He left school and home at 16 to go to Montana and lived the rest his life there, working at various sheep and cattle ranches, sketching constantly. For a few years he lived with the Blood tribe of the Blackfeet and learned their culture. At the age of 28 he settled near Great Falls, Montana and began his career as a full-time artist. Russell’s considered one of the most significant painters and effective portrayers of the American West.



The Battle of Belly River by Charles M. Russell depicts the final battle between the Iron (Cree) and Blackfoot Confederacies.

“Put on yer duds on ‘n let’s go” American cowpuncher “duds,” clothing, still influence fashion. Boots to bandanas to denim everything, we all wear the west to some degree.

Boots Cowboys originally wore farm or military boots but eventually their footwear changed, with higher tops to fend off snake or animal bites, scratches, and so forth. They had narrower soles and were longer in the toe with a very pronounced heel to help feet stay in the stirrups. Even ornamental stitching, though not common, helped keep the boot top rigid. Designed for stirrups, true cowboy boots weren’t very good to walk in and probably added to cowboys’ already rolling bow-legged gait.

Britches Cowboys originally wore Spanish style woolen or canvas pants that were tight at the waist (with suspenders if needed) and wide in the legs. Unfortunately, the seams split easily at the hips. Levi Strauss revolutionized cowboy pants by riveting their stress points such as pocket corners, adding belt loops to reinforce the waistband and eventually replacing canvas with denim. That style has held on since 1890 and we all know about jeans: a wardrobe staple for almost everyone.

The Hat Whether on cattle drives or monitoring a herd on the ranch, cowboys lived outdoors year round. A hat served many functions: a sunshade, rain repellant, head warmer, horse feeder, water bucket, and something to swing at the cows to get them moving. Hats varied a lot according to local climate: the wide brim which deflected bright plains sunlight would too easily catch the wind and blow away in the mountains. The hats all featured very deep crowns to make them more stable when the wearer was in motion. Felt Stetson hats, introduced in 1865, came to define western headgear.

The Vest If you’re straddling a horse all day, how do you get your snuff, harmonica, photo of the wife and kids, comb, whatever, out of your pants pockets? You probably can’t—you need a vest. The vest was critical to keep the cowboy’s chest protected and warm and his arms free. Jackets could easily get in the way and sleeves got caught, so normally vests were the clothing of choice.

The Blue Shirt Unlike the other clothing mentioned here, there was no functional reason why so many cowboys wore blue shirts, but an economic one. A large surplus of blue cotton fabric left over after the Civil War made blue shirts cheap, so cowboys wore them. By the way, these were plain shirts: not what we think of as “western style.” Those, with their shoulder points, snap closings and embroidery, came later and were dress shirts, too fancy and expensive for cattle punching.

The Venerable Bandana

Bandanas predate American cowboys by centuries. The name is thought to have derived from Sanskrit *badhnati*, to tie or bind. The word bandana came into use in Europe in the mid-1600s from a Portuguese adaptation, *bandannoe*.

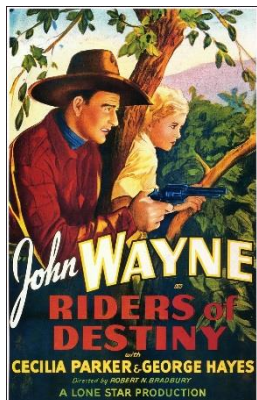
So-called “Turkey red” dye, which was colorfast—unique at the time—was first used for kerchiefs in Europe around 1785. That was the beginning of the classic red bandana.

Working horsemen like cowboys needed kerchiefs to shield their lower faces from dust (think of riding *behind* a herd of cattle across dry plains). The kerchief also absorbed perspiration, served as a towel and in an emergency as a short rope. They were folded diagonally and knotted behind the neck and could be turned around to shield the neck and upper back from the sun.

1800s bandanas were larger than today’s and weren’t necessarily printed, or red, but were indispensable to cowboys.



Printmaker John Hewson made this George Washington bandana for Martha Washington in 1780. Specially printed bandanas handed out in political campaigns continued for many elections well into the 20th Century.



The Creative Cowboy

Singers: Until the 20th Century, people generally weren't shy about their singing. Though professional standards applied on stage, singing was part of everyone's life in parlors and kitchens as well as in mines and on dusty trails. Singing was entertaining and helped pass the time. An added benefit for farmers and cowboys was that singing to livestock seemed to calm them. So, cowboys sang a lot. The wranglers sang to the horses, the cowboys sang to the cattle, and evenings often were spent sitting around singing together. Men learned new songs from each other on cattle drives and took those songs home to their families.

When interest in cowboy life took popular hold, the iconic Singing Cowboy was developed in movies, sitting (unmoving!) on his horse, playing his guitar and crooning a ballad.

There were some singing cowboys we still remember. John Wayne was Singin' Sandy Saunders in *Riders of Destiny* (1933), while Gene Autry sang in about every film or TV show he did. Supposedly, Autry got his first role because he was the only rodeo champion who could sing well while riding a moving horse. Other well-known singing cowboys included Roy Rogers, Tex Ritter (who later sang the *High Noon* movie theme) and Eddie Deane (who later recorded country hits "One has My Name – the Other Has My Heart" and "I Dreamed I Went to Hillbilly Heaven").

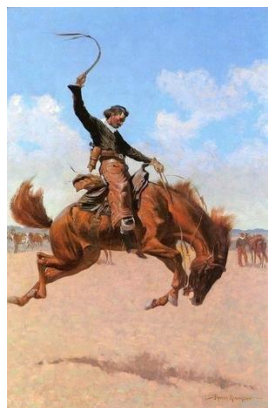
Overall, the singing cowboy didn't transfer very well to television except for Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, who sang on their own shows, and that Western icon faded slowly and tunelessly into the past.

Poets and Authors: Though most famous novels and poems of the west came from college-educated writers, some had lived the cowboy life, while a few had little or no education. Andy Adams (1859-1935) herded cattle for ten years and prospected in the West. He wrote a series of western stories, of which the most popular was *The Log of a Cowboy*, 1903. Louis L'Amour, college educated, worked on ranches for eight years, collecting impressions and

ideas for his western poetry, stories and novels.

Bruce Kiskaddon (1878-1950), uneducated, was one of the most admired and widely read classic cowboy poets.

Artists: Paintings and sculptures of western images such as the work of Frederic Remington are American favorites. Though Remington didn't do it, many artists spent years working in the west, deriving inspiration for their work. (see "Cowboy Artist, p. 4) *The Bronco Buster*, Painting ca 1890 by Frederic Remington (may have been a



sketch for his sculpture of the same name)

Cold Mornin's

I been out in the weather since I was a boy,
But cold mornin's is sumthin' a man cain't enjoy.
It makes me feel like I wanted to quit
When I ketch up my pony and thaw out my bit.
There ain't any cow puncher needs to be told
That my saddle is stiff and the leather is cold.
The blankets is froze and the hoss shakes like jelly
When you the pull the old frozen cinch up on his belly.
He snorts and he's got a mean look in the eye.
He is humped till the back of the saddle stands high.
He ain't in no humor to stand fer a joke,
But I belt on my chaps and I light me a smoke.
There may be some trouble between me and him.
It is like goin' into cold water to swim.
It gives me a sort of shivver and scare
But once I git started; well then I don't care.

Bruce Kiskaddon, 1937



A Legend of the West: The Red Ghost of Arizona

The Arizona highlands were haunted by a giant apparition during the 1880s, a devilish human-like creature riding a huge, fierce, red beast. It was said to have trampled a woman to death, to be thirty feet tall, to have eaten a grizzly bear. One time, when a brave cowboy came upon and attempted to

lasso the creature, it turned and raced toward him, nearly trampling his horse. Pursuers saw something fall from it and found it was a human skull. Stories grew and circulated, and people became increasingly puzzled or frightened.

Then one day at Eagle Creek, Arizona, a farmer looked out his window and saw a big red animal browsing among his tomato plants. He shot and killed it and then he went to look. It was an emaciated old camel, bound around with rawhide straps as if it had been carrying something or someone. After that day, there were no more sightings of the Red Ghost.

Got Camels?



Horses had a tough time working in the America's southwestern deserts because of heat, lack of water, little forage and relentless sunlight. The U.S. Army was constantly trying to alleviate this problem.

Based on recommendations from friends and officers, Jefferson Davis, who was the U. S. secretary of war in 1855, approved the purchase of camels and dromedaries to be tried out as desert substitutes for horses. Seventy-five camels were purchased overseas and sent "out West," to be army beasts of burden. They were based in Texas, and two dozen of them successfully caravanned the nearly impassable southern desert route to California. Camels were successful pack animals, and a few officers even envisioned camel-mounted cavalries.

Despite usually inexperienced handlers, the camels were excellent for some roles, so both the army and entrepreneurs imported more of them. But there was entrenched opposition from many officers who complained that the camels were bad-tempered, hard to manage and made the horses nervous. As work animals in the west, camels had too tentative a start and when the Civil War began, they lost out—replaced by less sturdy but more familiar and available mules.

Disposal of the army's no-longer-wanted camels was uneven: some went to private owners or zoos, some were slaughtered for meat, and some ended up loose in the deserts, where Arizona's poor Red Ghost wandered alone with a skeleton strapped to his back for twenty years.

Ahem...

"Americans will be able to manage camels not only as well, but better than Arabs, as they will do it with more humanity and with far greater intelligence."

Major Henry Wayne, overseer of the camel project for Jefferson Davis
Uncomfortable pause...

Some Views of the “Wild West” from the Digital Age



Video Games

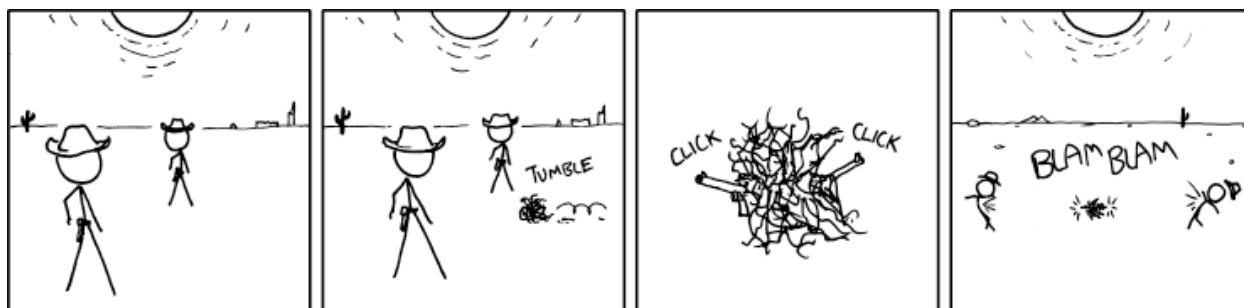
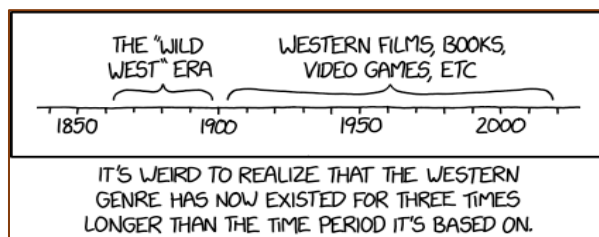
The western is still going strong in the wide genre of video games. From the poky little Conestoga wagon of *Oregon Trail* in the 1980s to the life-like characters and fast animation of today's



popular *Red Dead Redemption* and *Call of Juarez*, countless video games have played out imaginary and historical western battles and hardships. Games have included vampires (*Darkwatch*, *Curse of the West*), Japanese Role Play (*Wild Arms*), extraterrestrial creatures and settings (*Oddworld*, *Stranger's Wrath*) and many just plain shoot 'em ups. And the stories continue.

Webcomic XKCD

Some thoughts on the Wild West are expressed by award winning author, artist and thinker Randall Munroe in his XKCD webcomic



Graphic stories: Weird Westerns

Though they don't encompass all graphic westerns, weird westerns are a strong element in graphic novels and animations. An example is *Wynona Earp*, which began as a graphic novel series about 20 years ago and is now a series on the Syfy network. Wynona, a descendant of Wyatt Earp, is a hereditary sharpshooter who works for the U. S. Marshals on their Monster Squad fighting all sorts of strange baddies.

Real Cowboys

A member of my family who lived well into his 90s had been born and raised in Texas, the youngest of 14 children. Remarkably, his father had joined the Confederate Army in Texas at 13, but barely served before the war ended. His family had a small ranch above Austin where my relative's parents and all their children worked to make the place provide for them. They relied on wages the father earned on cattle drives. He was gone from the ranch for up to six months each year. He'd come back tired and sort of ragged, but with a good cash boost to the ranch's funds and could resume mending fence, tending his livestock and digging his garden. My relative told me that was how most cowboys lived. It's not romantic, but it makes very good sense.

Between 1860 and the 1880s, about 25% of cowboys were black. Many southerners, including former slaves and their families, left the war-ruined south and went west after the Civil War ended.

Why We Say... *Hands, Cowboys, Cowpokes, Wranglers, Cowpunchers:*

These days, for most of us, anyone in these occupations would be a *cowboy*, but in the 1800's west, the roles were pretty distinct. A *hand* was, generically, an employee. On a ranch, working with cattle would be part of his job. *Cowboys* (also called *riders* or *ropers*) herded cattle and managed them from horseback, usually on the range. *Cowpokes* originally prodded lagging cattle with sticks to keep them moving with their herd, especially to get them onto cattle cars. Cowboy writer Eugene M. Rhodes describes cowpokes perched on rails near the ceilings of loaded cattle cars poking down among the cattle with long poles to keep them from lying down and suffocating. Though it could be dangerous, cow poking was a low-skill job and it was rude to call a *cowboy*, who had a much more complex job, a *cowpoke*.

A fourth word, *cowpuncher*, was the preferred name covering all occupations related to cattle. I always thought that word was a silly Hollywood creation, but, nope: it was widely used and preferred.

A *wrangler* usually meant someone who managed horses. On cattle drives, wranglers handled the *remuda*, the herd of horses the cowboys rode.

The first American cowboys were *vaqueros* who worked for Spanish, later Mexican, ranchers. Many of them were Native American. Much cowboy culture and gear developed from *vaquero* experience, and "buckaroo" is thought to be a corruption of *vaquero*.

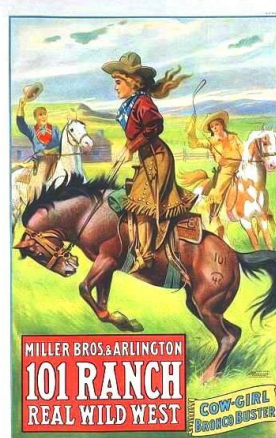
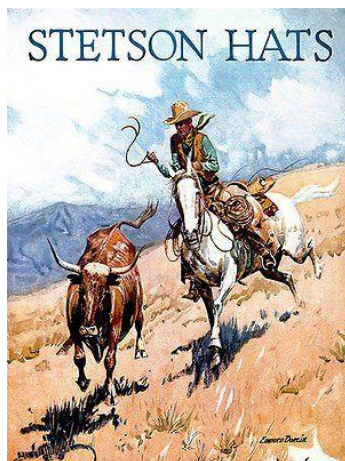
When Cowboys Get in Trouble

Cattle herding was usually pretty dull, but had its lively moments, which often involved cows with calves. This 1899 painting, "When Cowboys Get in Trouble (The Mad Cow)" by Charles Marion Russell depicts such a dramatic moment when a cow panics, turns on the herders and ropes and horses become entangled.





An irresistible photo of a performing cowboy. On the typed sticker: "Gene Holter's Racing Camels, Devonshire Downs, CA, Montie Montana Jr., 1959."



Resources

Page 1: image - Albert Bierstadt, *Emigrants Crossing the Plains*, 1867, Public Domain, <https://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/detail.php?ID=170994>

Page 2: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Warner_Brothers_television_westerns_stars_1959.JPG

Uncredited Wikimedia images: Lone Ranger and Tonto, Gail Davis as TV's Annie Oakley (1957)

Page 3: <https://www.baltimoresun.com/news/maryland/bs-md-backstory-annie-oakley-20121123-story.html>

Page 4: Uncredited Wikimedia images "Battle of Belly River" by Charles M. Russell <https://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/full.php?ID=45188>

Page 5: <https://centerofthewest.org/2014/06/18/i-can-see-by-your-outfit-that-you-are-a-cowboy/>
<https://www.heddels.com/2017/05/the-history-of-the-bandana/>

Page 6: "Cold Mornin's" Bruce Kiskaddon, 1937.

<http://www.cowboy-poetry.com/kisk.htm#Poem>

The Bronco Buster, Frederick Remington Wikimedia

Page 7: "The Red Ghost"

<https://www.legendsofamerica.com/we-ghostcamels/Camels>

<https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/12/27/the-short-life-of-the-camel-corps/>

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/whatever-happened-wild-camels-american-west-180956176/>

Page 8: The Digital West

Video graphics: Uncredited Wikimedia images

XKCD comics courtesy of Randall Munroe

<https://xkcd.com/789/>

"Winona Earp" <https://www.syfy.com/syfywire/west-gone-wild-9-comics-weirdest-westerns>

Page 9: Real Cowboys & Why We Say...

Marshall Trimble, "How Did the Term 'Cowpoke' Come About?" *True West Magazine*, March 1, 2007

<https://truewestmagazine.com/how-did-the-term-cowpoke-come-about/>

Charles Marion Russell, *When Cowboys Get in Trouble (The Mad Cow)*, 1899, Public Domain, <https://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/detail.php?ID=45196>

Page 10: Photo from thecircusblog.com

Tintype (1895) from <https://truewestmagazine.com/the-100-best-historical-photos-of-the-american-cowboy/> via Pinterest

Vintage promotional posters: Uncredited Wikimedia images

A group photo of working frontier cowboys: employees and friends of Texas Ranger and cattle businessman, Texas John Slaughter, 1895, Douglas, Arizona. From the Robert G. McCubbin Collection. Image was cropped for newsletter use.

