

“IN ALL TRUTHFULNESS AS I REMEMBER IT”: DECIPHERING MYTH AND
MASCULINITY IN COWBOY MEMOIRS

By

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Abstract

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The American cowboy of the open-range era of cattle ranching played an indispensable role in extracting the resource-based wealth of the great western frontier, thus ensuring economic success for the country’s expansionist policies. His work as a wage laborer, however, is not the stuff of cowboy legend and mythic West lore. Cowboys became symbolic representations of the West and popular culture superstars because they supposedly embodied many of the values that the public associated with American exceptionalism: freedom, self-reliance, and independence. In the last decades of the nineteenth century, moreover, cowboys became the poster men for a new formulation of masculinity that emphasized ruggedness, aggressiveness, and physical fitness. In my thesis, I review the development and deployment of these stereotypes, which painted cowboys as one-dimensional characters obsessed with violent retributions of justice and who spent very little time actually tending to cattle. After reviewing the genesis of these myths, I then investigate the previously unexplored story of how actual working cowboys reflected and rejected those myths in their own life-narratives. Through a careful interrogation of cowboy memoirs, I am able to reveal how cowpunchers internalized, perpetuated, sometimes challenged, and other times integrated into their autobiographies the often times fantastic stories told about their community in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century popular culture outlets.

The American West of popular conception is comprised of a series of myths that endeavor to explain the country's origin and identify a sub-set of the population as special contributors to the nation's greatness. While historians have for many years now dismissed the "myth of the West" as a relic of nationalistic sentiments and nostalgic scholarship, it was a very real ideology that American culture eagerly endorsed throughout much of the twentieth century. Western mythology shaped attitudes and shaped lives, as my research illustrates. Through my investigation of cowboy life-narratives, I reveal how individuals utilized myths about themselves but not of their own making to rationalize their experiences and lend meaning to a lifestyle that had already become obsolete.

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Thesis Introduction

One of the two or three most famous and widely referenced cowboy memoirs comes from E.C. “Teddy Blue” Abbott, who, with help of an editor, published *We Pointed Them North: Recollections of a Cowpuncher* in 1939 at the age of 69. Abbott enjoyed a good deal of local popularity as a Montana “old-timer,” and his many years of service to the cattle business made him well-known throughout much of the old open range country. Yet Abbott’s memory has survived the passing decades of the twentieth century because of the rich personal narrative left behind. When considering his motivations for sitting down with Helena Huntington Smith to pen his autobiography, Abbott asserted that “for a long time I have wanted to write a history of the cattle range...I have read plenty of histories of the trail, written by other men who went over it, that are entirely accurate as to facts, but they are not told right.” Abbott went on to note that “they are like these cowboy songs I have seen in books and heard over the radio, that are all fixed up and not the way we used to sing them at all.”¹ The existing literature might provide readers with the facts, but the flavor of the cowboy’s experience was sorely missing. “Other old-timers have told all about stampedes and swimming rivers and what a terrible time we had, but they never put in any of the fun, and fun was at least half of it.”²

A concern for authenticity and accuracy emerges in many published memoirs of cowboys from the open-range era of the western cattle industry. Reminiscent cowpunchers reveal a keen awareness of their own public persona, and these men frequently reference the popular culture

¹ E. C. “Teddy Blue” Abbott, *We Pointed Them North: Recollections of a Cowpuncher*, ed. Helena Huntington Smith (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 3.

² Abbott, *We Pointed Them North*, 3-4.

cowboy of dime novels and Hollywood when recalling their own experiences. Cowboy iconography was, and continues to be, a significant component of America's mythic West.

Much of the mythic cowboy stereotype, of course, turns out to have been invented by individuals and parties outside of the cattle industry. Famous character's like Owen Wister's the Virginian fed popular imagination and established a caricature of the cowboy as stoic loner who was compelled to distribute justice and protect the innocent across the open range. Few cattle existed in this mythic cowboy world, but there were plenty of guns and a good bit of moral superiority. The adoption of cowboy imagery by Theodore Roosevelt, moreover, popularized an understanding of cowboys as forceful, hyper-masculine individuals who never shied away from violence or danger and were bound by honor and morality. As a result, the cowboy figure was idolized and mythologized by an American society that was wrestling with the fears associated with the closing of the frontier and the erosion of Victorian gender norms.

My research reveals that the life-narratives of Abbott and his peers, who actually made their livings as cowpunchers, challenge this myth on a number of fronts. Although cowboys lived on the sparsely populated frontier, they were not solitary beings; camaraderie was an important feature of the cowboy experience. Reminiscent cowboys were also quite proud of their work, and any "tenderfoot" who tried to enter the fraternal order of cowpunching had to pay his dues. There was little time or necessity for gunplay, and as a number of the men pointed out, there were hardly any damsels in need of rescuing. In short, real cowboys made a point of distinguishing themselves from their mythic counterparts.

And yet, the larger myths of western exceptionalism and rugged masculinity infiltrated cowboy communities and were difficult to dismiss. In this thesis, I will examine the intertextual relationships between the discourse of western mythology and cowboy life-narratives. I seek to

understand how cowboys rejected, adopted, and helped to perpetuate specific aspects of the mythic West. Furthermore, I hypothesize that because myths are essential tools with which one constructs a personal identity and an understanding of one's place in society, cowboys utilized the discourse of the mythic West to make sense of their experiences and establish a meaning for their lives. If cowboys bought into popular culture's representation then they could claim membership in the great cohort of men who "won the west."

This project focuses on cowboys who worked during the open range era of cattle ranching, which began in Texas following the Civil War and spread to the northern plains during the 1870s and 1880s. The end of large-scale open-range operations coincided with the purported and highly popularized closing of the frontier in the 1890s, both of which were precipitated by a marked increase in homesteading and farming in the region. While cowpunchers continued to perform the same sorts of tasks for their employers well into the twentieth century, the work environment had changed significantly. I have tried to restrict my study to men who rode during the open-range era, moreover, because it was that generation of cowboys who inspired the myth. These men came of age just as Theodore Roosevelt was heaping praise on the virtues of the cowboy lifestyle, and as a result their identities were in part shaped by popular culture's imagery.

Not all men who worked in the cattle industry were cowboys. First and foremost, the cowboy "was," according to William W. Savage, "a hired hand, employed to tend cattle, whether on range or trail."³ He did not own the cattle he worked and in some cases not even the horse he rode, his labor was generally considered unskilled by cattlemen, and he was frequently underemployed. Ranches might also employ cooks and other domestic laborers, but those men

³ William W. Savage, *Cowboy Life: Reconstructing an American Myth*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), 5.

and women worked at an operation's headquarters instead of on the range. Cowboys worked for ranchers and cattlemen, the owners of the capital that made their existence possible.

Some of the earliest histories to mention cowboys were written by men intimately involved in the cattle industry. Joseph G. McCoy's *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest*, first published in 1874, was the product of his years spent as a cattle supplier in Kansas City.⁴ Theodore Roosevelt praised the toughness and determination of cowboys in his varied turn-of-the-century accounts of ranching in North Dakota. Statistical figures and biographical information combine to provide a view of the Texas cattle industry in James Cox's *Historical and Biographical Record of the Cattle Industry and the Cattlemen of Texas and Adjacent Territory* (1895).⁵ While all of these works are invaluable to modern scholars for their use as primary sources, the authors tended to romanticize both the industry as a whole and the experiences of laborers.⁶ This proved to be a reoccurring problem throughout the 20th century, as historians of the mythic cowboy struggled to free themselves from cultural assumptions.

In the late 1920s and 1930s, a new wave of studies appeared, this time the product of serious academics interested in the economic history of cattle production. In comparison to their predecessors, these works were remarkably impersonal. The most influential works from this period include Ernest S. Osgood's *The Day of the Cattleman* and Edward Everett Dale's *The Range of Cattle Industry*. In their determination to adhere to new professional standards of objectivity, these authors turned away from the personal stories of cattlemen or cowboys that had

⁴ Joseph G. McCoy, *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest* (Kansas City, MO: Ramsey Millett & Hudson, 1874).

⁵ James Cox, *Historical and Biographical Record of the Cattle Industry and the Cattlemen of Texas and Adjacent Territory* (St. Louis, MO: Woodward & Tiernan Printing Co., 1895).

⁶ For further evidence of this trend, see Don D. Walker, *Clio's Cowboys: Studies in the Historiography of the Cattle Trade*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 1-45.

made Roosevelt's work so popular.⁷ They endeavored, however, to preserve statistical information that now supplements modern scholarship.

A recurrent theme in the historiography, appearing in both sentimental and scientific studies, was the strong sense of individualism that permeated the entire cattle industry. In significant ways, this was a product of Frederick Jackson Turner's assertion that the very nature of America's western frontier demanded individual courage and fortitude. Historians throughout much of the twentieth century prescribed any man who made his living on that frontier as admirably self-sufficient.⁸ The ideology of exceptional individualism was particularly attractive to historians writing during the Cold War era when personal independence was a fundamental characteristic of American democracy. Lewis Atherton's 1961 book *The Cattle Kings* praised cattleman and cowboys as true believers of individual freedom and responsibility.⁹

Another major work from this era is Clifford Westermeier's *Trailing the Cowboy*. This often-cited study returned attention to the experiences of men in the industry, and more specifically investigated the lives of men working range cattle. Of course the difficulty of social history has always been a fundamental lack of sources. For example, average laborers produced far fewer documents and left far fewer paper trails than individuals who controlled capital or knowledge. Westermeier successfully tackles this problem by using early journalists' accounts from newspapers to reveal the activities of cowboys as well as public reactions to those activities.¹⁰

⁷ For further evidence of this trend, see Walker, *Clio's Cowboys*, 61-75.

⁸ Walker, *Clio's Cowboys*, 78-79.

⁹ Lewis Eldon Atherton, *The Cattle Kings* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1961).

¹⁰ Clifford P. Westermeier, *Trailing the Cowboy: His Life and Lore as Told by Frontier Journalists* (Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1955).

Cowboy Life: Reconstructing an American Myth, published in 1975 under the editorial direction of William W. Savage, marked another important advance in the historical literature on this subject. In acknowledging the discrepancies between cowboys as historical actors and as fictitious characters, Savage attempted to illustrate where modern assumptions about cowboy culture originated by compiling nearly a dozen excerpts from turn-of-the-century sources, including McCoy's *Historical Sketches*.¹¹ Although Savage provided limited analysis of those writings, the work was seminal in establishing the myth of the cowboy and his place in American popular culture as a separate study from the actual historical experiences of cowboys. He followed up this anthology with a more serious study of cowboy representations in *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History and Culture* (1979).¹²

A number of works on the mythological cowboy have been produced in the last several decades. Some have focused on his rise to Hollywood stardom.¹³ Others have explored the popular appeal and adoption of cowboy folk culture.¹⁴ The most significant for this study, however, are those works that examine the evolution of the late-nineteenth century cowboy stereotype. In particular, Richard Slotkin's *Gunfighter Nation* has informed my discussion of the creation of the mythic West and its favorite son, the cowboy.¹⁵

¹¹ Savage, *Cowboy Life*.

¹² William W. Savage, *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History and Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1979).

¹³ See Paul Howard Carlson, *The Cowboy Way: An Exploration of History and Culture* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2000); Richard Aquila, *Wanted Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Robert Murray Davis, *Playing Cowboys: Low Culture and High Art in the Western* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992).

¹⁴ See David Stanley and Elaine Thatcher, *Cowboy Poets and Cowboy Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Michael Allen, *Rodeo Cowboys in the North American Imagination* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998).

¹⁵ Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992); see also David Hamilton Murdoch, *The American West: The Invention of a Myth* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2001).

Cowboy studies have diversified in recent decades, mirroring trends in the larger field of American history. Historians of the American West began to ask questions about racial diversity on cattle drives or ranches, if women were present and where, how cowboys constructed their own identity, and the role that class played in interactions on the range. As Peter Iverson, the author of *When Indians Became Cowboys*, rightfully noted, “cattle ranching is a story usually told and nearly always understood in one color, and that color is white.”¹⁶ In the last twenty years historians opened up the study of cowboys to include non-white men working the open range. Iverson’s book was the first to acknowledge the roles that Native Americans played in raising cattle on the frontier. Iverson focuses primarily on the ranching operations established by tribes on reservations, pointing out that those endeavors allowed for the preservation of some native culture. Douglas Flamming’s 2009 study of African Americans in the West and Sara Massey’s collection of short biographies on black cowhands further challenge the assumption that the cattle frontier was a racially homogenous affair.¹⁷ Historian Richard Slatta’s work fostered a clearer understanding of the origins of the US cattle industry by drawing connections to the vaquero cultures of various South American countries. *Cowboys of the Americas* (1990) is a book of encyclopedic proportions.¹⁸ In it, Slatta compares a number of aspects of the ranching culture, from saddles to gambling to appearance to language, across national boundaries to prove how similar cattle husbandry was from Chile to Canada. Finally, although men dominated the cattle frontier, scholars have begun to investigate the unique experiences of the women who did

¹⁶ Peter Iverson, *When Indians Became Cowboys: Native Peoples and Cattle Ranching in the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 25.

¹⁷ Douglas Flamming, *African Americans in the West* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2009); Sara R. Massey, *Black Cowboys of Texas* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000). Both Massey and Flamming are building on the work of Philip Durham and Everett Jones’s *The Negro Cowboys* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1965) which was the first scholastic acknowledgement of the large number of African Americans who worked a cowboys both before and after the Civil War.

¹⁸ Richard Slatta, *Cowboys of the Americas* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

come west. There is little evidence to suggest that women worked alongside men as cowpunchers, but their roles as wives, mothers, and prostitutes certainly had impacts on the lives of cowboys.¹⁹

The emerging field of masculinity studies has also influenced recent cowboy scholarship.²⁰ Blake Allmendinger investigated how cowboy conceptions of manliness, class, and religion were evident in the work culture they created. In particular, Allmendinger argued that cowboys fought psychological subjugation by their bosses through reinterpreting common ranch chores, like branding or castration, as acts of personal power that elevated them above cattlemen, even if only in terms of virility.²¹ The collection of essays in *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West* provide myriad examples of minority men -- and some women -- who challenged dominant definitions of masculinity which made whiteness a requirement of true manhood. Of particular interest is an essay on the process of engendering ranch work.²² Most recently, Jacqueline Moore's comprehensive study of ranch work in Texas focused on the power of masculinity to shape other social hierarchies, namely class and race. *Cow Boys and Cattle Men: Class and Masculinities on the Texas Frontier, 1865-1900* provides a sound framework for future scholars interested in the relationships of power and gender in

¹⁹ See Catherine Smith and Cynthia Greig, *Women in Pants: Manly Maidens, Cowgirls, and Other Renegades* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 2003); Teresa Jordan *Cowgirls: Women of the American West* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1982).

²⁰ Issues of race and masculinity were intimately related during this time period because dominant definitions of manliness during the late-nineteenth century made whiteness a prerequisite for true manhood. Susan Lee Johnson's work is among the finest on this topic. In a 1993 article she argued that despite earlier collaborations between different ethnicities and minorities, by the late-nineteenth century the American West had been transformed in the public psyche into a thoroughly white, definitely masculine space. "The discursive apparatus of white masculinity has not been dismantled," she continued, "and the 'American West' still exists as a sort of happy hunting ground for Anglo virility." "'A Memory Sweet to Soldiers': The Significance of Gender in the History of the West," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (Nov., 1993), 498.

²¹ Blake Allmendinger, *The Cowboy: Representations of Labor in an American Work Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

²² Dee Garceau, "Nomads, Bunkies, Cross-dressers, and Family Men: Cowboy Identity and the Gendering of Ranch Work" in *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West*, ed. Matthew Basso, Laura McCall, and Dee Garceau-Hagen (New York: Routledge, 2001), 149-168.

relation to cowboys.²³ These works are indebted to Westermeier's groundbreaking article "Cowboy Sexuality: A Historical No-No?" which was one of the first scholarly investigations of cowboys' sexual activities.²⁴ Before the article's publication in 1975, historians and popular writers alike had portrayed bachelor cowboys as chaste or even asexual. I draw heavily on the work of Allmendinger, Moore, and Westermeier in my second chapter as I explore the ways in which cowboys defined their manhood. My discussion of cowboy sexuality and the challenges presented to masculinity by a steep gender-imbalance on the frontier is influenced by of Susan Lee Johnson's work. It is imperative that the West be subjected to a study of gender because, as Johnson convincingly argues, "gender is a relation of difference and domination" that was constructed in relation to a region which was "historically a place of disrupted gender relations and stunning racial and ethnic diversity, a diversity structured by inequality and injustice."²⁵ In the West, where society's ridged hierarchies of race and class were frequently absent, masculinity was a tool with which white men could establish and maintain their power.

This brief historiographical review reveals that while cowboys have been the subjects of a good deal of scholarship, there are still gaps deserving of attention. My research specifically looks to supplement historians' understanding of cowboys as components of a greater western mythology. How cowboys became cultural icons is well established; how cowboys felt about that status, how they internalized the expectations of popular culture, and how challenged the myth of their own experiences is less clear. Through a careful reading of cowboy life-narratives I will answer those questions. This study will utilize cowboy memoirs either written or dictated

²³ Jacqueline Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men: Class and Masculinities on the Texas Frontier, 1865-1900* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

²⁴ Clifford P. Westermeier, "Cowboy Sexuality: A Historical No-No?" *Red River Valley Historical Review* 2 (Spring 1975), 101; reprinted in Charles W. Harris and Buck Rainey, eds., *The Cowboy: Six-Shooters, Songs, and Sex* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976).

²⁵ Johnson, "'A Memory Sweet to Soldiers,'" 499.

by men who spent a significant part of their adult lives working for cattle outfits on the open range. A handful of these memoirs have been very popular among scholars of cowboy history. In particular, the memoirs of Charles Siringo, E.C. “Teddy Blue” Abbott, and Edgar Beecher Bronson have been cited countless times.²⁶ A number of lesser-known accounts have also proven incredibly useful, however, and taken together this group of memoirs provides a window into the minds of aging cowboys. Without dismissing the inherent flaws of personal accounts written years after events occurred, I believe that these life-narratives are valuable because they reveal how identities are constructed in relation to popular culture as well as the far-reaching implications of western mythology. “The veracity of the stories the men told was often less important,” one scholar noted, “than the way in which they were told.”²⁷

It should be noted that while historical scholarship has definitively established the presence of a large number of black, Hispanic, and Native American men within the ranks of open-range era cowboys, this study will focus on white men in the cattle industry. In part, this is a result of available source material. Nat Love’s memoir is generally accepted to be the only personal account produced and published by a minority cowboy, and I do devote some attention to this truly unique document. White men seeking to emulate white cowboys, however, constructed the mythic persona. My investigation of how cowboys contributed to and resisted public representations, therefore, is best served by the life-narratives of white men. With that in mind, I acknowledge that any future expansion of this project would benefit from a more detailed exploration of minority cowboy experiences.

²⁶ Charles A. Siringo, *A Texas Cowboy, or, Fifteen Years on the Hurricane Deck of a Spanish Pony, Taken from Real Life* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1950). Abbott, *We Pointed them North*. Edgar Beecher Bronson, *Reminiscences of a Ranchman* (New York: The McClure Company, 1908).

²⁷ Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men*, 8.

Chapter one begins with an examination of the process through which cowboys became symbols of the American West. The generally known narrative of this phenomenon of course identifies the propaganda of Theodore Roosevelt and “Buffalo Bill” Cody as undeniably important, as were the writings of dime-novelists and full-length fiction writers. Americans came to idolize cowboys as relics of a quickly disappearing frontier, and the public’s fascination with the mysterious horseman lasted well into the twentieth century. The chapter then moves into an investigation of the ways in which the cowboys themselves accepted and rejected the mythic West for which they were primary representatives. Cowboy life-narratives reveal a complicated and intertextual relationship between myth and reality; on the one hand, cowboys felt compelled to correct inaccuracies because they believed that popular imagery actually devalued their hard work and skills. On the other hand, cowboys reflecting on their experiences found the discourse of the West could help them contextualize their lives and lend meaning to their work. While a good deal has been written about cowboys as cultural symbols, and historians have corrected much of the misinformation about their lived experiences, this study sheds light on the gray-zone that inevitably exists between fiction and fact. Real cowboys did not exist in isolation from popular culture’s sphere of influence, and through their own words a better understand of that interaction can be assessed.

In chapter two I look at this dialectic process in more detail through a specific example of cowboy mythology; namely the myth of the hyper-masculine cowboy. I begin the chapter with an overview of the various avenues available to real cowboys seeking to assert their manliness, which draws on the work of established gender scholars to create a framework of understanding. As working-class men with limited access to the opposite sex, cowboys invented novel ways of demonstrating their masculinity that went beyond traditional Victorian definitions of gender

roles. I then turn to how the cowboy's image became synonymous with rugged manliness in the twentieth century in incredibly popular and visible ways – think of John Wayne, Ronald Reagan, and the Marlboro Man. This association is significant because, as Peter Boag notes, “through these fictional and real-life characters and people, popular cultural outlets had long shaped the American imagination about the masculine, heterosexual West.”²⁸ This project began in the late-nineteenth century as middle-class men were experiencing a “crisis of masculinity.”²⁹ Proponents of a new brand of manliness, one that placed increased value on physical fitness, aggression, and the cultivation of one's primordial instincts, turned to cowboys for inspiration. Roosevelt encouraged young men to follow in his footsteps and emulate the cowboy way of life. Indeed, as my research shows, he published a number of works that heaped praise on the men of the open range. In some ways, Roosevelt's mythic cowboy was an invention designed around his ideas about America's future. The dynamics of an all-male cowboy community are not accurately accounted for in the myth, for example. Discussions of prostitution, egalitarianism, and opposition to violence come through in the memoirs of cowboys, challenging the veracity of popular culture's cowboy imagery. Yet in other ways, the myth was reflected in the life-narratives of cowpunchers. While the hyper-masculine myth is certainly based on some realities of the cowboy experience, I argue that aging cowpunchers utilized the rhetoric of western manliness in their memoirs, despite inaccuracies, because it was the most expeditious avenue by which these working-class, uneducated men could assert their superiority.

²⁸ Peter Boag, *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 2. This conception of the West, Boag goes on to argue, is so deeply engrained in the nation's identity that even today Americans push back against any challenges to the hyper-masculine myth, as the public reception of *Brokeback Mountain* exemplifies.

²⁹ As Johnson notes, “The construction of a masculine West was part and parcel of a larger late nineteenth-century ‘crisis of masculinity’ in the United States – a crisis in which older definitions of white, middle-class manhood that emphasized restraint and respectability (manly men) gave way to newer meanings that focused on vigor and raw virility (masculine men).” “‘A Memory Sweet to Soldiers,’” 497.

Chapter One: Cowboys Make and Unmake the Mythic West

Introduction

Aging Montana cowboy John R. Barrows published his coming-of-age memoir *Ubet* in 1934. In it he tells the story of his transformation from an eastern tenderfoot, raised in the security of a civilized farming town, into a tough-skinned cowboy roaming the last vestiges of the western frontier. Barrows was like many young boys born in the latter-half of the nineteenth century to parents settled in the Midwest or farther east, fascinated by wild stories of western adventure. He daydreamed about the excitement and riches that might await him if he journeyed into the uncharted territory of the frontier. Tall tales and colorful accounts of travelers published in popular magazines or by serial presses fed his imagination.

Like the majority of Americans, a population located primarily east of the Mississippi River and increasingly concentrated in urban centers, Barrows believed that the West was a space where hard-working men could escape the corruption of the city, derive wealth from an abundance of natural resources, and fortify their masculinity by battling the forces of nature and the last savages of a disappearing race. When his father traveled to Montana Territory in 1879 to stake out the site of a future sawmill, Barrows eagerly awaited word of when he might be able to escape the tidy forests of Wisconsin and join him in the Musselshell Valley. Though written nearly fifty years after the fact, *Ubet* succeeds in conveying the anticipation with which young Barrows regarded his impending move:

I determined that if I were allowed to go to Montana the next spring, I would travel from fort to fort and if the Gros Ventres and Mauvais Terres were hostile Indians, they should

grow familiar with the report of my rifle. If they were mere geographical areas, I would explore them thoroughly. Autumn spread her colors on sumach, oak, and maple...More fantastic and colorful than the efforts of the season, were my mental pictures of Montana and the frontier to which I was destined.³⁰

Barrows goes on to recount his internal debate over whether to become an Indian fighter or a scout upon arrival in Montana. No matter his choice, he felt assured that a future in Montana would provide him with adventures worthy of the dime novels that fed his imagination.

In fact, he became neither Indian fighter nor scout, but a cowboy. *Ubet*, then, is also the tale of a cowboy learning his craft, and in very subtle ways it also recounts the dialectic interactions between Barrows's conception of the West and the incongruous realities that he encountered, both as a recently arrived boy and then later as an actual *cowboy*. Indeed throughout his memoir, Barrows makes a concerted effort to acknowledge that the West of popular imagination, what historians today might call the "mythic West," bore only partial resemblance to its physical namesake.³¹ As Barrows recalled, "our mental pictures are painted with the pigments at hand. If my conception of the Montana frontier was extravagantly erroneous it was because I had gathered together a most remarkable lot of misinformation."³²

Barrows's challenge to western mythology takes the form of unmet expectations in the first chapters of his book, where, for example, he expresses disappointment with an uneventful passage up the Missouri River. He had anticipated bands of painted Indian warriors chasing great herds of buffalo but saw only a few hungry Native American mothers seeking food for their children. His father's letter assuring that soon the Judith Basin would be extensively settled left Barrows even more discouraged that his days as a scout would be numbered. Barrows's later

³⁰ John R. Barrows, *Ubet* (Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1934), 10.

³¹ On the "mythic West," see in particular Robert G. Athearn, *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986).

³² Barrows, *Ubet*, 7.

critiques of the mythic West come from his perspective as a participant rather than an observer. Several times throughout the latter chapters Barrows directly juxtaposes his life against the romanticized cowboy that had become familiar to the American public by the early twentieth century. As an “old timer” Barrows took issue with the cowboy caricature that dominated representations of the West, and his desire to correct those inaccuracies drove much of his memoir.

When Barrows sat down in the early 1930s to pen his recollections of a youth spent herding cattle in the great expanses of central and eastern Montana, the vast grasslands had been over-run by fences and farmers for nearly three decades. The open-range cattle business, with its long trail drives, lawless cow towns, and wandering cowboys, existed for only a few dozen years in the late nineteenth century. In fact, this small segment of America’s past seems rather inconsequential when measured against other developments of this period such as the growth of railroads or the proliferation of industrial mining operations in the West. Yet for more than a century cowboys have captured the imagination of individuals both within the United States and abroad. Authors, artists, and film producers have enshrined cowboys as cultural icons, standard bearers of freedom and individuality. The American cowboys of popular conceptions, whether characterized as myth, legend, or reductive stereotype, far outshine the very real historical actors who earned a hard living riding the range.

Those men who called themselves “real cowboys” were keenly aware of the chasm that existed between fiction and fact, and as Barrow’s memoir suggests, they often felt compelled to contest the stories being told about themselves and their peers. If such representations were inaccurate and challenged by men who possessed intimate knowledge of the West, they also were deeply ingrained in American culture and nearly impossible to erase. An examination of

working cowboys' relationships with the mythic West and its appropriation of their material culture reveals the intertextuality of life in the region. Aspiring cowboys' expectations of the open range were frequently based upon sensationalized accounts that quickly crumbled under the harsh realities of the plains. In turn, the recollections of many cowboys were shaped in later years by Hollywood's adoption of earlier cowboy heroes from dime novels or literary classics like *The Virginian*. "Old timers" frequently criticized silver-screen cowboys for being more concerned with their flashy ensembles than branding steers, however many also mimicked the cowboy dime novel genre by emphasizing violence and danger. The ways in which these individuals interpreted, recalled, represented, and relied on their memories to make sense of their world provides a window into how they rationalized their experiences. By carefully reading the life-narratives produced by these men, historians can gain access to the cultural framework utilized by aging cowboys to understand their role in America's westward expansion and settlement.

Although the historical inaccuracies of the mythic West and its iconic cowboys have been the subject of much scholarship, the real cowpuncher's relationship with his fictional counterpart has escaped much attention. This chapter examines the published memoirs written or dictated by men who worked as cowboys during the last decades of the nineteenth century. It seeks to investigate two separate but related issues: first, how did the cowboy become a classic icon of the West, and second, how did the writings of cowboys both reflect and reject the symbolic West of popular culture. What is at stake is a better understanding of how "true westerners" engaged with the rhetoric of the mythic West, the opportunities that individual

cowboys had to shape their collective identity, and the power that discourse has in affecting memory.³³

How Cowboys Became Symbols of the West

While fur trappers, explorers, cavalymen, and outlaws all found parts in the great production of the West, cowboys arguably secured the starring roles. The hard-working, self-reliant, sincere horseman easily encapsulated all that many Americans by the end of the nineteenth century believed to be good about the West. The fact that popular culture cowboys were nearly always white and exceedingly masculine made the stereotype all the more compelling. Historian William Savage, Jr. noted that no other group of westerners has received so much notoriety nor been commemorated to the extent that cowboys have; novels, movies, and television shows, popular poetry and music, advertisements for cigarettes and salsa, museums and halls of fame, and even an entire professional sport have capitalized on the cowboy-as-cultural icon phenomenon.³⁴ Over the last several decades, however, historians have proven that very few of the men who served as cowhands during the latter part of the nineteenth century possessed all or even some of the characteristics ascribed to them by popular culture. The reality of the cowboy's experience seems to have had little bearing on the iconography deployed by those who dealt in the myth of the West, whether they be politicians, advertisers, or entertainers.

The closing of the frontier may have spelled the end of the cowpuncher way-of-life, but it also

³³ The recent words of one prominent historian of cowboy culture compliment the motivations behind this study. "Instead of trying to bury or ignore frontier myths, I suggest that we 'take our myths seriously' (Slatta 2001b, 2001c). By delving into the origins, growth and impact of myths over time, we can illuminate their subtleties and expose their banalities." Richard Slatta, "Making and Unmaking Myths of the American Frontier," *European Journal of American Culture* 29, no. 2 (2010): 89.

³⁴ William W. Savage, ed., *Cowboy Life: Reconstructing the American Myth* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1975), 3.

marked the birth of the immortal American cowboy.³⁵ The academic and popular declarations that the frontier closed in the 1890s turns out to have been premature in many ways, but it quite accurately depicted the state of the open range in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Since the colonial period Americans had associated westward expansion with a pioneering mission that amounted to the core of the country's character. The uncharted West retained dreams of prosperity and destiny for members of every strata of society. The frontier, in the words of Richard Slotkin, represented "a refuge from tyranny and corruption, a safety valve for metropolitan discontents, a land of golden opportunity for enterprising individualists." Additionally, the late-nineteenth century obsession with the frontier was linked to a crisis of confidence in a country and an economy that no longer had access to their mythical roots.³⁶ A number of nineteenth-century intellectuals expounded on the ways that the frontier experience was of paramount importance to America's success, including in the 1890s Fredrick Jackson Turner with his agrarian myth and earlier James K. Polk who aggressively promoted the idea of Manifest Destiny.

In part the appeal of the cowboy was his status as a relic of a disappearing space; nostalgia and popular fiction perpetuated an infatuation with cowboys far more than any empirically verifiable history. Against this backdrop we can understand the cowboy's rise to cultural super-stardom, and the process by which he became "the predominant figure in American mythology?"³⁷ One of the first boosters of cowboy mythology was Theodore Roosevelt, an immensely popular figure in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century America

³⁵ Cowboy, cowpuncher, and cowhand are all suitable terms for a man who made his living working on or for a ranch. It should also be noted that there are still a small number of men and women who make a living as cattle wranglers, but that the popular conception of the cowboy is generally one based in the past and assumes that the cowboy is a historic figure, not a contemporary individual.

³⁶ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 30.

³⁷ Savage, ed., *Cowboy Life*, 3.

and an advocate for the “strenuous life” and “rugged masculinity.” Cowboys figured prominently in Roosevelt’s conception of the pacification of the frontier, which he believed was an essential component of American identity.

Roosevelt embraced industrialism and the harnessing of resources previously beyond the pale of civilization. The rugged and hardy men who cleared the way for settlers and productive development were the stars of such a frontier. It was comprised of mountain men, explorers, soldiers, and the early representatives of capitalism in the West, including ranchers and cowboys. Most importantly, Roosevelt’s frontier ideology romanticized the violent process through which the “west was won.” Indeed Roosevelt’s widely read *Winning of the West* chronicled the repeated displacement of American Indians and celebrated the very physical triumph of modernization over savagery.³⁸ Similarly, the tireless promotion of a “wild West” on the part of Buffalo Bill Cody provided tens-of-thousands of easterners with a glimpse of a West where white men pacified blood-thirsty Indians and dominated nature’s harshest elements. Cody’s show might have been fiction, but as Richard White notes, he “produced a master narrative of the West as finished and culturally significant as Turner’s.”³⁹ Regardless of their accuracy in portraying historical events or actors, Roosevelt and Cody made the violent western frontier an essential part of America’s exceptional history.

Esteemed western historian Ray Billington identified two dominant causes of this infatuation with a violent frontier. First, the very real existence of a limited number of lawless communities such as mining towns or rendezvous encampments, as reported on by newspapers,

³⁸ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 29-35. For additional information on Roosevelt’s ideas about civilization and racial hierarchies, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

³⁹ Richard White, “When Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill Cody Both Played Chicago in 1893,” in *Does the Frontier Experience Make America Exceptional?*, Richard W. Etulain, ed., (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1999), 47.

travelers, and historians, fed the imagination of Americans already interested in the mysterious region that lay west of the Mississippi. In addition, Billington writes that “just as discursive of truth was the failure of western travelers, and even of some westerners, to distinguish between the ‘backwoodsmen’ or ‘squatters’ and the small-farmers who made up the bulk of the frontiersmen.”⁴⁰ Western writers who devoted a disproportionate amount of attention to “maladjusted discontents” represented the frontier as a corrupting force on civility and a tinder-box of violence. Even more inaccurate, according to Billington, was the popular belief that “swaggering reprobates or indolent backwoodsmen” won the West.⁴¹ It was in fact the landed entrepreneurs of Turner’s thesis that secured the frontier for America in Billington’s assessment. Regardless of his ultimate conclusions, the essay highlights the clear disconnect that existed throughout the twentieth century between the historical interpretation of America’s frontier and a popular conception of the West’s importance.

Theodore Roosevelt’s unwavering praise of cattle wranglers and ranchers was expressed in both his writings and his public lectures. More importantly, he used cowboy imagery to craft his political persona. According to Roosevelt, the open range provided a highly democratic space where all men had a chance at success; the fact that he also subscribed to highly racist and classist ideologies was generally downplayed. After spending more than a year on his North Dakota ranch, Roosevelt asserted that he had been transformed from a soft and sickly easterner into a true cowboy. “Regeneration-through-regression,” as Slotkin termed it, allowed him to claim kinship with the last of the hunter-race, those men who truly won the West.⁴² The cowboy was Roosevelt’s ideal prototype of an American because he was “uncontaminated by alien

⁴⁰ Ray A. Billington, *America’s Frontier Culture: Three Essays* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1977), 55.

⁴¹ Billington, *America’s Frontier Culture*, 56.

⁴² Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 38-39.

influences, immune to the poison of labor unionism,” and eager to distribute justice through any means necessary.⁴³ As his fame grew with the governorship and later the presidency, so too did the reputation of America’s cowboys. Images of Roosevelt, both in support of and in opposition to the man with the big stick, presented him in the western attire made famous by Buffalo Bill’s shows and dime novel covers. He was frequently atop a horse, no matter the setting, and many political cartoons included Roosevelt branding or roping one foe or another.⁴⁴ All of this imagery fed the imagination of Americans who felt a connection to the disappearing horsemen of the West. If a cowboy could be the president, he must certainly be part of an exceptional class of men.

Writers of fiction also added significantly to the mystique of the western cowboy, though this would actually take some time, as the evolution of the dime-novel plot shows. The dime novel was very much a product of its time; the 1860s through the 1890s saw a marked increase in the nation’s literacy rates, and mass production techniques made the novels widely available and affordable. Prior to the late 1880s the predominant storylines of the dime novels included sea adventurers, urban detectives, and Indian scouts. The few cowboys who did appear were never cast as heroes.⁴⁵ For most Americans living in the east, a cowboy or herder was assumed to be a “semibarbarous laborer who lived a dull, monotonous life of hard fare and poor shelter” and was therefore a less than interesting subject.⁴⁶ The few cowpunchers featured in dime novels or popular magazine articles were portrayed as ruffians, nomadic *desperados* who reveled in causing mayhem and shedding blood. The violent proclivities of the herder class were so widely

⁴³ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 39.

⁴⁴ Karen R. Jones and John Wills, *The American West: Competing Visions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 90-100.

⁴⁵ Jones and Wills, *The American West*, 73-77.

⁴⁶ Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950), 109.

accepted that in 1881 President Arthur famously labeled a band of outlaws terrorizing the Territory of Arizona as cowboys, though the men were clearly not in the employ of any rancher.⁴⁷

It was not until the 1880s, which was also the decade that marked the beginning of the decline of the open-range cattle industry, that cowboys began appearing as protagonists in the dime novel series published by Irwin Beadle and others. A growing interest in the “real life” of the cowboy was in large part a product of Buffalo Bill Cody’s popular traveling show that was created between 1882 and 1883. In 1887 one of Beadle’s most famous authors Prentiss Ingraham sparked a movement within the dime novel industry when he produced the biography of Buck Taylor, a key member of Cody’s earliest shows. Ingraham’s account of Taylor’s life was undoubtedly embellished as the star cowboy’s capabilities as a cattle wrangler could not provide a plot.⁴⁸ *Buck Taylor: King of the Cowboys* claimed that Taylor had honed his skills as a horseman and defender of justice as a young Texas Ranger.⁴⁹ Taylor’s exploits, which were chronicled by Ingraham in a series of subsequent dime novels, included rescuing damsels, fighting off savages, making friends with good Indians, tracking down bandits, and distrusting justice. The actual business of being a cowboy rarely made it onto the pages. Ingraham’s work is indicative of a larger trend within the genre, and indeed within popular culture, which separated cowboy imagery from the real work done by cowpunchers and from the real men who performed those duties. According to historian Henry Nash Smith, the use of cowboys by

⁴⁷ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 109-110.

⁴⁸ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 110.

⁴⁹ Prentiss Ingraham, *Buck Taylor, King of the Cowboys: Or, The Raiders and the Rangers. A Story of the Wild and Thrilling Life of William L. Taylor* (New York: Beadle and Adams, 1887). The subtitle seems indicative of the author’s primary interests, which were not the experiences of a wage laborer.

Ingraham and his peers was “little more than an effort to achieve an air of contemporaneity.”⁵⁰

A more recent study of violence in the West of popular culture came to a similar conclusion, noting that dime novel cowboys were simply one more figure in a pantheon of gun-toting westerners.⁵¹ Once again the reality that cowboys rarely rode the range with cumbersome firearms, and the fact that most cow towns had strict policies against carrying weapons, did not factor into popular representations.⁵²

More sophisticated works of fiction also forwarded a mythic cowboy whose primary concerns rarely involved handling cattle. Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*, published in 1902 and the first and most widely-read full-length western novel, with a cowboy as the protagonist, became a standard by which nearly all subsequent cowboy novels have been measured.⁵³ The cultural impact of Wister’s novel was immense, as Slotkin articulates, because it was both widely read and imitated by playwrights, film producers, and other authors.⁵⁴ *The Virginian* is loosely based on the events of the Johnson County, Wyoming range wars, which Wister had experienced firsthand while working with the Wyoming Stock Grower’s Association (WSGA) in the mid-1880s. Like most members of the WSGA, Wister came from a privileged, eastern background and was a well-educated young man looking for opportunity and adventure when he moved west. While Wister believed in the regenerative power of the frontier, his time spent among cowboys and cattlemen revealed to him that not all men were equally predisposed to greatness. The protagonist of Wister’s novel is a man of exceptional gifts, including an incorruptible moral compass and a cunning intellect, which allow him to escape childhood poverty to eventually

⁵⁰ Smith, *Virgin Land*, 111.

⁵¹ Jones and Wills, *The American West*, 77-78.

⁵² Richard Dykstra’s economic assessment of cattle towns on the southern Plains convincingly showed that places like Abilene and Fort Worth were much less violent than the myth proposes. *The Cattle Towns* (New York: Knopf, 1983).

⁵³ Owen Wister, *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (New York: Macmillan, 1902).

⁵⁴ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 169.

become a partner in a major cattle company. He was not born to aristocracy, however his status as a Virginian and his inherent characteristics make him an exemplary representative of a new American master race. Although Wister acknowledged that most working cowpunchers lacked the will or mental capacity to move beyond their status as a wage laborer, his use of cowboy iconography further entrenched a public image of the western horseman consumed by ideals of justice and romance.⁵⁵ The weighty overtones of social Darwinism in *The Virginian* also reinforced a belief that those men who thrived in a space as dangerous as the West were prime specimens of American manhood and were best equipped to lead the country to greatness.⁵⁶

Additionally, literary cowboys who sprang from the minds of novelists such as Wister were admirably pragmatic. Dime novels may have characterized cowboys as hot-headed and rash in the 1880s and 1890s, however by the turn of the century those horsemen were more likely to be heroes rescuing the reckless. Indeed as William Savage, Jr. noted, the cowboy was “popular because he, more than any other historical or mythical figure from America’s past, represents the fine middle-class virtue of common sense...If the cowboy functions as spokesman for the people, he is in a real sense First Citizen of the Republic, a guardian, a righter of wrongs, or at the very least, a perceptive and philosophical observer of the human condition.”⁵⁷

According to Savage, such common wisdom was thought to be inherent to cowboys and refined by interactions with nature. A cowboy was superior to an urban dweller, moreover, because the rugged environment had prepared him for any adversity that life could conjure, despite his total lack of formal education. Of course even the most stoic and thoughtful of

⁵⁵ In Wister’s estimation, cowboys may have shared a racial affiliation with their aristocratic employers, but “these wild men sprang from the loins of no similar father, and begot no sons to continue their hardihood.” They could not, therefore, escape their inherited class to become part of the ruling race of America. Quoted in Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 171.

⁵⁶ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 169-183.

⁵⁷ William W. Savage, Jr., *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History and Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 20.

protagonists could lose his head over a beautiful woman. The trope of the cowboy undone by a single glance from a female, be she a rancher's daughter or school teacher, comes out of the Wister tradition of placing the love-story plot within a western.⁵⁸ Just as tales of banditry and Indian raids had dominated dime novels purportedly written about cowboys, the more substantial fiction set in cattle country was so saturated with themes like justice and romance that it scarcely had room to describe a real livestock roundup or a long, cold shift on night herd.

The cowboy's fame grew in the twentieth century as new forms of entertainment perpetuated the noble western horsemen-as-hero trope. Indeed as one scholar noted, "so many western films, television shows, and books have been cast in the ranches, cattle drives, and cattle towns of Kansas and the Southern Plains that names such as Bat Masterson, Charlie Goodnight, and Wyatt Earp have been added to the American mythic pantheon."⁵⁹ Similarly, Slatta argued that while the work of Turner, Cody, and Roosevelt had been highly influential, "the visual arts from painting to photography to film to television have perpetrated the lion's share of frontier myths."⁶⁰ Hollywood cowboys professed and defended some of America's most cherished ideals, namely individualism and dedication to justice, and they deployed violence when such ideals were jeopardized. Creators of the silver-screen cowboy also crystallized the imagery of dime novels by equipping every cowpuncher with a six-shooter and a rifle and with a proclivity for tracking down bad men and saving beautiful but helpless maidens. In the interest of preserving the cowboy's rugged self-sufficiency, the actual duties of the cowhand were rarely

⁵⁸ Savage, Jr., *The Cowboy Hero*, 22-23.

⁵⁹ Robert A. Mead, "Ambivalence and Myth in the History and Literature of the Southern Plains," *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 30 (Spring 2007): 53.

⁶⁰ Slatta, "Making and Unmaking Myths of the American Frontier," 84.

part of Hollywood's cattle frontier; the inherently communal nature of cowboy labor, like roundups and brandings, did not easily fit into the myth of the West.⁶¹

By the late twentieth century a new generation of western historians was once again questioning the usefulness of the myth of the West. New trends in historical scholarship, and particularly a commitment to studies of gender and race, exposed major flaws and fault lines in the traditional narrative of the West which had been forwarded by authors of fiction as well as historians. In fact Gerald Nash argued that throughout the twentieth century historians routinely conflated two versions of the West which existed in tension with one and other, a "West of reality" and a "West of myth."⁶² Scholars who subscribed to the school of the New West challenged their colleagues to move beyond outdated models of civilization-versus-wilderness, virgin West as haven from corruption, and most of all the exceptionalism of the West. Of course the New Western historians were correct, the history of the region could only be enriched through a more comprehensive look at the men and women who shaped the frontier, and a view which was free of sentimental attachments to a bygone era. That it did not accurately depict empirically evidenced history did not mean, however, that the mythic West should be cast aside as a relic of antiquated scholarship. The American West of popular conception had a powerful impact on the nation's identity and left an imprint of many of its policies. Even those historians who most enthusiastically sought to debunk the myth of the West acknowledge that it is an essential component of the region's history, and indeed the history of America.⁶³

⁶¹ Slatta, "Making and Unmaking Myths of the American Frontier," 84.

⁶² Gerald D. Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations 1890-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), 198.

⁶³ As Richard Slatta noted, "Most historians have concluded that the concept of the frontier is here to stay... In the span of a few years, leading revisionist Patricia Nelson Limerick went from condemning the frontier concept to accepting its near-ubiquitous presence and influence (contrast Limerick 1987 with Limerick 1994)." Slatta, "Making and Unmaking Myths of the American Frontier," 88-89.

Myths are, to quote Jeffrey Wallman, “the spiritual and intellectual images of a culture’s values – of how the citizens of a culture view themselves and view how they as a culture fit into the world.”⁶⁴ The mythic West became a cornerstone of American identity and the cowboy was its designated champion. Historians, therefore, continue to study cowboys and the West in all its forms, both real and imagined, because Americans drew upon western imagery in profound ways. The cowboy, a media-generated symbol of individualism, masculinity, democracy, and freedom, was everything that American men aspired to be. What remains unconsidered is what actual cowboys, men who earned their livings on horseback tending to cattle on the open range of the late nineteenth century, thought about their unique role in American mythology.

The Intersection of Cowboy Mythology and Life-Narratives

Historians studying the experiences of cowboys have a variety of source material at their disposal as they reconstruct the lives of men who rode the open range. The most revealing sources, I would argue are those like John R. Barrows’s *Ubet* – documents that actual western cowboys themselves produced.⁶⁵ Of particular importance are the recorded reminiscences of cowboys, generally penned later in life and often times published by a popular press or personally by an individual’s family. When approached with a careful respect for the unique

⁶⁴ Jeffrey Wallman, *The Western: Parables of the American Dream* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1999), 16.

⁶⁵ Diaries reveal the day-to-day thoughts of men who lived in isolation and often under duress. The trouble with diaries, however, is that only a small number have survived time and the elements to arrive in archives where historians might utilize them. The contents of those diaries, moreover, may relate only weather conditions or personal finance issues. For example the diaries kept by E.C. Abbott, better known as “Teddy Blue,” carefully chronicle the weather during his long stints on the open range. While a small number of references to “feeling blue” indicate the loneliness of the cowboy lifestyle, the diaries primarily convey descriptions of his working conditions and his finances. By comparison, his memoir conveys a vibrant sense of Abbott’s identity and experiences. See Edward Charles Abbott, diary, 1887-1888, folder 1-31a, Edward Charles “Teddy Blue” Abbott Papers, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

qualities of autobiographical writings, memoirs and reminiscences can provide historians with an unparalleled window into the experiences and memories of their subjects. It is through these life writings that historians might probe issues of identity construction among cowboys, the creation of personal memory, and of most significance here, the ways that popular culture is integrated into individual realities.

The relationship that existed between cowboys and their legendary cultural representatives, as expressed in autobiographical accounts, turns out to have been multi-faceted. On the one hand, veteran cowpunchers felt compelled to correct the wildly inaccurate portraits of cattle wrangling perpetuated by Hollywood and others; cowboys were evidently quite aware of the fictional quality of western mythology, as the above reference remarks from Barrows also show. A deep-seated desire to belong within the framework of an exceptional mythic West, on the other hand, seems to have inspired many reflective cowboys to present their experiences as an integral part of the winning of the frontier. Despite the exclusionary tendency of writers like Wister and Roosevelt who preferred to identify only members of the owner class as the real champions of the West, cowpunchers voluntarily upheld the legend of regional superiority. The remembered experiences of cowboys suggest that those men went through many of the same challenges as working-class men faced in other parts of the country, but the myth of an egalitarian and exceptional West shaped their memory and defined the construction of their own life-narrative.

Life writings, which include autobiographies, memoirs, and reminiscences, occupy a unique space in the pantheon of literature. Historians of today recognize that personal narratives often straddle a middle ground between fiction and non-fiction. A leading scholar on the production of life writings, English professor Paul John Eakin, explains that an autobiography

should be treated not as “a faithful and unmediated reconstruction of a historically verifiable past; instead, it expresses the play of the autobiographical act itself, in which the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness.”⁶⁶

Authors of life narratives are bound by the perceived realities of their experience, just as readers expect to encounter empirically evidenced truths in the memoirs they read. Yet memories, as we know, are not fixed. Psychological and cultural forces continually reshape how individuals remember events and how they understand their own role in any community, be it local, regional, or national. In Eakin’s words, “autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation.”⁶⁷ Memoirs, therefore, provide a truly unique opportunity to investigate how cowboys generated their own group identity in light of both the realities of their experiences and the iconography of the popular culture cowboy. These texts were usually published years after an individual retired from the range, therefore providing the author with ample time to reflect on his place within the larger narrative of the West. Their publication after the so-called closing of the frontier also meant that cowboys had already entered into the cultural pantheon of mythology and it would have been nearly impossible for memoirists to disengage from that discourse.

Richard Hutson’s essay in the anthology *Western Subjects: Autobiographical Writing in the North American West*, which analyzes a particularly famous cowboy memoir written by E. C. “Teddy Blue” Abbott, demonstrates how a life narrative can be understood as both fiction and non-fiction. Hutson’s primary argument is that Abbott’s memoir, *We Pointed Them North*, is the culmination of a lifetime of storytelling, a practice that had become a defining part of the

⁶⁶ Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 5.

⁶⁷ Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography*, 3.

author's identity. Even before the publication of his book Abbott was known throughout much of Montana as an avid storyteller who had perfected his craft on the long and lonely trail drives of a former life. Although the accuracy of a number of the accounts given in Abbott's memoir seems dubious, the fact that Abbott recounts them as part of his history is a significant indicator of the forces at work in his reminiscing. According to Hustson, "Abbott's memory of these days solidified with his own and others' multiple retellings and with the aid of memoirs, histories, fiction, and movies...[his stories] are an intricate weaving of his memories, his self citations, and the stories and memories and writings of untold numbers of other men."⁶⁸ While *We Pointed Them North* is presented as a personal recollection, it is perhaps more accurate to understand the text as a transcription of the oral traditions which shaped Abbott's experiences as a cowboy.⁶⁹ Abbott is less concerned with conveying his personal story than with documenting the cowboy community in which he lived for many years. Preserving the camaraderie he once felt with his cowboy colleagues seems to dominate Abbott's recollection, even as he praises the dedicated individualism of his chosen profession. The unique or individual is downplayed in favor of preserving a particular vision of the cowboy, one that is perhaps more authentic than the dime novel version but no less generalized.

According to Hutson, as long as his vignettes fit within the larger narrative of the West, readers could not challenge Abbott's reliability. Indeed authenticity seems to have been in the forefront of Abbott's mind as he dictated his life story to a freelance writer in the late 1930s. Frequently Abbott identifies himself as a "real old cowhand" and as an exemplary member of a

⁶⁸ Richard Hutson, "Ecce Cowboy: E. C. Abbott's *We Pointed Them North*." In *Western Subjects: Autobiographical Writing in the North American West*, Kathleen A. Boardman and Gioia Woods, eds., (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2004), 132.

⁶⁹ Hutson, "Ecce Cowboy: E. C. Abbott's *We Pointed Them North*," 133.

distinct group of men.⁷⁰ He also assures his readers that all of the individuals mentioned in the text are real, that is accounts are accurate, and that “there is no fiction in it.”⁷¹ The intertextual relationship between Abbott’s memories and the broader genre of literature concerning cowboys creates the foundation for the author’s claim to authenticity. Abbott begins the book by noting that he was inspired to record his story after reading a number of other cattle trail histories that were “entirely accurate as to facts” but were not “told right.”⁷² To Abbott’s mind, the accounts of cowboys up to that point had been overly sanitized, leaving out all the “fun” parts of the lifestyle. *We Pointed Them North* meant then to fill a void in the public’s understanding of cowboys.

Similarly, T. B. Long set out to supplement the existing literature of the West with his personal recollection of cowpunching on one of the last open range regions, the Shortgrass Country of Montana, Alberta, and Saskatchewan. Long noted that his narrative begins where many others have ended, around 1900, and that he intended to provide his readers with “first-hand knowledge of the actual range country and the men who worked it.”⁷³ Writing in the 1950s, Long also critiqued western fiction for glamorizing the western cowboy and making him synonymous with banditry. “There were tough customers among us,” Long writes, “but let us not harbor the impression that we were all the same.”⁷⁴ A propensity to create corrective narratives is not only a feature of cowboys’ writings; it can be traced throughout western literature as a whole. Writers of the West, wherever their work may fall on the spectrum of fiction or nonfiction, have long been preoccupied with maintaining a realistic representation of

⁷⁰ Hutson, “Ecce Cowboy: E. C. Abbott’s *We Pointed Them North*,” 131.

⁷¹ E. C. “Teddy Blue” Abbott, *We Pointed Them North: Recollections of a Cowpuncher*, ed. Helena Huntington Smith (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), 4.

⁷² Abbott and Smith, *We Pointed Them North*, 3.

⁷³ T. B. Long, *70 Years a Cowboy: A Biography* (Regina, Sask.: Western Printers Association, 1959), foreword.

⁷⁴ Long, *70 Years a Cowboy*, foreword.

the region. American Studies scholar Nathaniel Lewis notes that as a result, most western writing has limited itself to revising earlier work. “If there is a tradition of influence in western writing, this may be it: call earlier representations inauthentic and unrealistic and determine to do a better job.”⁷⁵ This was clearly a major motivation for reminiscing cowboys.

Examples of the corrective impulse in the cowboy-author community abound. A fellow cowboy author expressed similar feelings when he wrote that the prospect of growing up in Iowa to become a farmer like his father paled in comparison to the opportunities he read about in the West. “The Black Hills was a center of wild tales during all my boyhood...by the time I was twenty-two, I decided that the West was the place for me, and headed for the land of adventure.”⁷⁶ The years spent riding the range may have provided these men with a different perspective on the validity of popular culture’s presentation of the West, but it remained influential throughout their lifetimes.

While most cowboy memoirs are presented as a series of anecdotes, many employ a theme of transformation to hold the narrative together.⁷⁷ For example in *Ubet*, Barrows evolved from a young emigrant boy just arriving in the Musselshell Valley of Montana into a seasoned cowboy working for various outfits throughout the territory. Barrows’ tale of his pursuit to become a real cowpuncher provided readers with countless examples of the hardships that actual cowboys faced on the range, as well as the necessity of teamwork among trail or ranch crews.

⁷⁵ Nathaniel Lewis, *Unsettling the Literary West: Authenticity and Authorship* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 10. The editor of one memoir makes this claim explicitly in her preface to the text when she writes that “the story’s value lies in the degree of its authenticity.” See Grace Stone Coates, “Foreword” in Patrick T. Tucker, *Riding the High Country* (Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1933), 9.

⁷⁶ Bruce Siberts, *Nothing But Prairie and Sky: Life on the Dakota Range in the Early Days*, edited by Walker D. Wyman (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 9.

⁷⁷ Hutson explains in his essay that the theme of transformation is common in life narratives. “Scholars and theorists of autobiography such as Jean Starobinski have posited as a primary feature of the genre a narrative of a conversion experience...In such an experience, the life of a subject is divided into the person the subject was before the conversion event and the new person the subject has become.” Hutson, “Ecce Cowboy: E. C. Abbott’s *We Pointed Them North*,” p.131.

The need to correct inaccuracies shines through Barrows' narrative as he criticized popular portrayals of cowboys. After proclaiming that "the picturesque features of our life have been stressed to a point approaching burlesque, not much resembling the cowboy as I knew him at work" by moving pictures and artists, Barrows provided his own description of what he believes is a real cowpuncher. Among the stereotypes he took most issue with was the misrepresentation of a cowboy's duties. Seeming to take direct aim at the stories first circulated by dime novels, Barrows wrote, "punching cows was work, and did not consist solely in justifiable homicide and rescuing distressed maidens."⁷⁸ Barrows also made a noticeable effort to qualify the individualism of cowboys by recounting stories of the "militant democracy of the old west and the cowboy's loyalty to his outfit."⁷⁹

Although Barrows' *Ubet* resembles Abbott's *We Pointed Them North* in many ways, most notably the frequent digression from the author's primary narrative to include the stories of other cowpunchers largely unrelated to the author's life, the former account was much more self-reflective. While Abbott generally abstained from acknowledging his role as the creator of the text he deemed to be true and accurate history, Barrows mused about the role that time played in his recollections. For example, when he recounted the deeds of a vigilante posse in which a number of his associates rode, he repeatedly admitted that his memories could be faulty. He retold the events, "not as historical fact, but as detached items, with a strong admixture of conjecture."⁸⁰ More significantly, he remembered his disappointment when left behind to tend to the ranch while the vigilantes were on the chase, but he recognized later in life that the deeds of the vigilantes were less than admirable. Although he assured his readers that the members of the

⁷⁸ Barrows, *Ubet*, 148.

⁷⁹ Barrows, *Ubet*, 239.

⁸⁰ Barrows, *Ubet*, 212.

posse were among the most upstanding citizens of the region, he acknowledged that “the bald narrative reviewed in the security and quiet of these days has a quality of brutality and unnecessary inhumanity altogether outside our convictions and stands of 1884.”⁸¹ In presenting an admittedly unflattering portrait of his cowboy community, Barrow demonstrated his commitment to conveying a conventionally accepted representation of the West while also correcting a misconception about the bloodthirsty nature of vigilante justice. Finally near the end of his memoir, Barrows waxed poetic about the frontier that was, recognizing that in his youth he could not have known that he occupied a unique space in history. “We were witnessing and taking our parts in that great drama, ‘The Subjugation of the Wilderness,’ without appreciating the fact.”⁸² *Ubet* showcased the memories of a man who lived out his childhood dreams, dreams about the West that were undeniably shaped by popular culture, and at the end of his life felt compelled to share those memories that he had been formulating for many years.

Like Barrows, the 1888 recollections of cowboy and amateur writer Frank H. Maynard reflected the transformation of a naïve midwestern boy enchanted by the stories of Buffalo Bill into a true cowpuncher of the open range. In the author’s words, “for a long time I had been reading glowing accounts of the wonderful wealth and exciting adventures in the ‘Wild West,’ and had often expressed the desire to go and see for myself.”⁸³ The passage of time enabled Maynard to express regret over his dispatching of a particularly vicious pony that belonged to a fellow cowboy. Yet, the compulsion to produce an “authentic” narrative outweighed any embarrassment Maynard may have felt; “there may be some events in this narrative that I would fain pass over without mention, but having started out to tell a true story, I will only ask the kind

⁸¹ Barros, *Ubet*, 218.

⁸² Barrows, *Ubet*, 268.

⁸³ Frank Maynard, *Cowboy’s Lament: A Life on the Open Range* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2010), 49. Prior to this publication, Maynard’s memoir was held by family members and had never been circulated.

reader to cast the broad mantle of charity over any faults.”⁸⁴ Maynard’s contemporary readers likely did forgive his uncouth behavior, knowing that the Wild West had a corrosive power on men’s civility. Dime novels and Hollywood productions taught the public that good manners might be a liability on the cattle frontier, but that even the crassest of cowboys could still have a heart of gold.

At the close of Maynard’s account, he mourned the loss of frontier space while also justifying his work as a way to preserve some part of the cowboy experience. Many of Maynard’s former trail compatriots were already “lying beneath the sod,” but through his writings the author intended to immortalize them.⁸⁵ The preponderance of cowboy memoirists confessed their nostalgia for the open range of a bygone era, even after recounting numerous instances of the hardship and discomfort they experienced on the frontier. T. B. Long mused that he was living out the final chapter of the cowboy’s history, and he and his peers would soon be nothing more than a footnote.⁸⁶ The most powerful words were penned by David L. Shirk, who expressed the hope that his recollections might “inspire young readers to hold to the hardy traditions of those early days and to keep this spirit alive in a country soon to be densely people with new-comers from the long-settled parts of the world.”⁸⁷ Anxiety regarding the irretrievability of the frontier lifestyle was pronounced in the life narratives produced by cowboys, revealing that such sentiments were not reserved for intellectuals concerned with the future of American prosperity, nor were they restricted to the purveyors of popular culture.

⁸⁴ Maynard, *Cowboy’s Lament*, 67.

⁸⁵ Maynard, *Cowboy’s Lament*, 134. The editor of Patrick Tucker’s memoir draws upon these same themes of commemoration in her praise of the work when she writes that the recollections “will not interest those who are looking for synthetic thrills. It is for those who are waking to the fact that a significant culture of the West has gone.” Coates, “Foreword” in Tucker, *Riding the High Country*, 9. Tucker himself dedicates the book “To All Who Remember THE OLD TRAILS” and specifically to his close friend and artist Charles Russell.

⁸⁶ Long, *70 Years a Cowboy*, 61.

⁸⁷ David L. Shirk, *The Cattle Drives of David Shirk: From Texas to the Idaho Mines, 1871 and 1873* (Portland, OR: Champoeg Press, 1956).

Maynard recorded his recollection around 1888, less than a decade after he had retired from the range. Because of the relatively early period in which he produced it, Maynard's memoir reflected the dime-novel style particularly clearly, with fewer instances of self-reflection than can be found in Barrows' work. He described cowboys as part of a heroic group of men tasked with "clearing a way through the wilderness for the approaching civilization."⁸⁸ In similar ways to Abbott's work, Maynard's narrative deviated from his own experiences to recount the deeds of a horse thief or desperado known only to the author through gossip or hearsay. It is as if the author's primary concern was to entertain his reader through the literary conventions of the day, and his personal narrative was of secondary importance. Maynard's characterization of minorities such as Mexicans and Indian "savages" also reflected late-nineteenth century stereotypes.⁸⁹ The intertextuality of Maynard's memories were not only implied through his preoccupation with violence, but was also explicitly referenced in regards to the literary work of another cowboy, Charlie Siringo. Siringo's *A Texas Cowboy* was first published in 1885 and within just a few years it had been widely circulated by a number of publishers. J. Frank Dobie's introduction to a mid-century edition proclaimed Siringo's book the most widely-read nonfiction work on cowboys, the first authentic cowboy autobiography, and the genesis for all cowboy reminiscences that followed.⁹⁰ Dobie would argue, and indeed it seems likely, that Siringo's work inspired Maynard shortly to record his own memories of the rapidly closing cattle frontier.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Maynard, *Cowboy's Lament*, 134.

⁸⁹ By comparison, a number of the memoirs published in the 1930s or later present a sympathetic, if no less racist, portrait of the American Indian.

⁹⁰ J. Frank Dobie, "Introduction: Charles Siringo, Writer and Man." In *A Texas Cowboy: Or Fifteen Years on the Hurricane Deck of a Spanish Pony – Taken from Real Life*, Charles A. Siringo (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), x-xiv.

⁹¹ Maynard, *Cowboy's Lament*, 102.

Assuming that Siringo's memoir served as a catalyst for the wave of late-nineteenth century cowboys who eventually produced their own life narratives, the preface to *A Texas Cowboy* pointed to another motivation for recording one's recollections; Siringo made no attempt to justify his musing as corrective or redemptive, instead proclaiming that "money – and lots of it" was his excuse for writing and doggedly promoting his first manuscript.⁹² The author believed that writing was among the most straightforward paths for a common man to secure wealth and fame, and so he chose to chronicle his own life because it seemed to be the easiest choice. Within this humorous but honest introduction the intertextuality of the cowboy's life was once again revealed; a story about a rich playboy in the *Police Gazette*, the nineteenth-century equivalent to a tabloid newspaper, set Siringo to thinking about ways that he might make his own fortune.⁹³ The very fact that cash-strapped cowboys living on the open range bothered to send away for a periodical must have struck Siringo as indicative of the power of the printed word. Tales of cowboy deeds figured prominently in the news of the day, moreover, as Dobie discovered in his survey of the Caldwell, Kansas newspaper during 1884 when Siringo lived and wrote there.⁹⁴ The popularity of literature on cowboys encouraged Siringo to pursue his plans. Although no other memoirist so openly admitted his desire for fortune or fame, and indeed no other open range cowboy ever obtained the same level as Siringo on either front, it would be naïve to assume that authors did not have monetary aspirations for their publications.

Historians long assumed that Nat Love, the most famous black cowboy of the nineteenth century, published his memoir in an effort to obtain notoriety and wealth. Tall tales and self-promotion make up much of Love's narrative, particularly the portion dedicated to his years as a

⁹² Siringo, *A Texas Cowboy*, 3.

⁹³ Siringo, *A Texas Cowboy*, 3-5.

⁹⁴ Dobie, "Introduction," in Siringo, *A Texas Cowboy*, xxviii-xxix.

cowboy before he became a Pullman porter. His account of being shot fourteen times while escaping from a band of desperados, only to recover within a fortnight, is just one example of the material that led many readers to dismiss his work as inauthentic. Indeed Love's narrative bore a striking resemblance to late-nineteenth-century pulp fiction. Love's claim of being the original inspiration for the dime novel character Deadwood Dick further solidified the memoir's connection to popular culture literature of the day. For these reasons it is easy to assume that Love simply "ripped-off" the style of the dime novel to create a book with wide-appeal, in much the same way that Siringo professes to have done.⁹⁵ A recent essay by Charity Fox takes a different approach to understanding the memoir, however, and in doing so rescues Love from his relegation to the status of braggart and liar.

Fox argues that *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love* could be read as a satirical parody of the dime-novel genre and popular culture's conception of the mythic West. Fox bases her argument on the juxtaposition that Love creates with his narrative and the black and white sketches included in the work. Within the text of the memoir, Love avoids identifying individuals by race, and almost never refers to his own status as a minority on the open range. Yet, the sketches of scenes from the narrative clearly depict Love as black with heavy pencil shading. While other scholars have interpreted the "racial erasure" as an attempt by Love to fit into the white and mythic West, Fox believes that the author was making a statement about the "absurdity of using racial categories to measure a man's worth."⁹⁶ In an era when black men were never allowed to forget their second-class citizenship, Love totally disregarded the color-line in his written account to create a story that could have easily been part of the *Beadle's Half*

⁹⁵ Charity Fox, "Cowboys, Porters, and the Mythic West: Satire and Frontier Masculinity in *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*," in *Fathers, Preachers, Rebels, Men: Black Masculinity in U.S. History and Literature, 1820-1945*, Timothy R. Buckner and Peter Caster, eds., (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 192-193.

⁹⁶ Fox, "Cowboys, Porters, and the Mythic West," in *Fathers, Preachers, Rebels, Men*, 194.

Dime Library.⁹⁷ By assessing Love's memoir for what it can reveal about how he understood his place in the nation and in the West, rather than viewing it as a transparent record of historical facts, Fox demonstrates just how valuable life narratives can be for cultural historians.

This survey of cowboy memoirs illuminates a real and significant example of the mythic West's power to shape the memories of individuals. The myth tempted many young men to strike out on their own, swelling the ranks of open-range cowpunchers. Perhaps because so many of those men found their assumptions about the West incongruent with the realities they met on the other side of the Mississippi River, cowboy memoirists made significant efforts to correct misconceptions about their chosen profession. Men like Barrows and Maynard felt compelled to authenticate cowboy iconography and believed that the glamorized cowboy of Hollywood did not fairly depict how difficult their work truly was. Reminiscing cowboys actively debunked the myths that had catapulted their profession into cultural superstardom. Semi-nomadic cowboys were neither the advance guard of civilization nor extreme individualists bent on delivering justice. Cowboys, rather, were hardworking men who dealt primarily with cattle, not with guns or girls. They were also dependent on one and other both in their work life and their social life; cowboys certainly needed a high tolerance for isolation but they were rarely "lone rangers."

⁹⁷ Blake Allmendinger commented on the uniqueness of Love's memoir, arguing that the black cowboy's attempt to "whitewash" his own history created a barrier to serious analysis of the book. Instead of following the literary format of a slave narrative, for reasons not entirely clear, Love chose to model his life-narrative after those produced by white cowboys of the same era. "If Love had cast in his lot with other black men and women...perhaps *The Life and Adventures* would now be profiting from the boom in African American studies and enjoying a renaissance," noted Allmendinger, instead, "having cast in his lot with white cowboys, Love now shared their fate: along with the open range and the cowboys who rode it, Love sank over the horizon and disappeared with the West's setting sun." Unlike Fox, Allmendinger avoids providing a clear answer as to why Love chose to ignore his race. He does, however, speculate that Love may have been trying to avoid raising the ire of white readers, thus providing for a more widely accessible book. "Deadwood Dick: The Black Cowboy as Cultural Timber," *Journal of American Culture* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1993), 79-89, quote from p. 88.

Yet for all of their honest reassessments of the true western cowboy, not a single memoirist challenged the larger myth of an exceptional West. As Americans and as westerners, the “Significance of the Frontier” was embedded within them. Cowboys mimicked popular culture’s caricature of their community by lacing their narratives with tales of violence. Their assessments of the cattle industry’s importance, moreover, reflected ideas about the “winning of the west” and the civilizing process acted out on the frontier. As we will see, these men also frequently perpetuated a component of the mythic West that dominated visual representations of the frontier; the hyper-masculine cowboy was neither wholly real nor wholly imagined. This sub-genre of western literature, the cowboy life-narrative, reveals that late in life many old cowpunchers were precariously straddled between a myth that attributed significant importance to their lives’ work, and an empirical reality that betrayed their true nature as average wage laborers.

In the following chapter, the most fascinating and entrenched component of the mythic West’s cowboy iconography will be examined. The manliness of cowboys became a topic of national interest during the late-nineteenth century “crisis of masculinity.” Theodore Roosevelt and others touted the cowboy lifestyle as exceedingly masculine and encouraged middle-class men to emulate cowpunchers in both character and deed. Cowboys, for their part, were finding that a changing work environment was creating barriers to their normal expressions of manhood. In response, cowboys created new ways to demonstrate their gender identity on the open range. Once retired, old-timers recounting and trying to make sense of their lives turned to popular culture’s definition of cowboy masculinity. Just as it was with the larger myth of the West, cowboys simultaneously embraced and rejected this manufactured manhood.

Chapter Two: Popular Conceptions and Practical Uses of Cowboy Masculinity

Introduction

A significant component of the cowboy's mythic persona was his bold and brash masculinity. In part, this characterization was a product of Theodore Roosevelt's close affiliation with cowboy iconography. As a public figure, Roosevelt embraced aggressiveness, bravado, and straight-talk. The autobiographical description of his integration into a cowboy community, however, reveals a very different set of behaviors. Despite Roosevelt's best efforts to construe himself as a cowboy of "true grit," it was no simple task to shed his association with eastern money and high society, not to mention, his obvious inexperience. Rather than assert himself as a champion of the west, Roosevelt pursued a different path to acceptance, as he describes here:

My own experience was that if a man did not talk until his associates knew him well and liked him, and if he did his work, he never had any difficulty in getting on. In my own round up district I speedily grew to be friends with most of the men. When I went among strangers I always had to spend twenty-four hours in living down the fact that I wore spectacles, remaining as long as I could judiciously deaf to any side remarks about "four eyes."⁹⁸

According to Roosevelt, the most expeditious path to admission into the brotherhood of cowboys was to leave all but the most necessary words unsaid, to refrain from showing any signs of fatigue or hunger, and to generally remain out of the way.

When a "tenderfoot" like Roosevelt failed to maintain his composure and anonymity, he risked incurring the ire of his crewmates and subsequently a good deal of damage to his ego. As

⁹⁸ Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1913), 100.

Roosevelt rather humbly recalled, “a newcomer, of course, had any amount to learn, and sometimes the simplest things were those which brought him to grief.” He went on to describe an occasion in which he set out for a shift on the night guard but rode out in the wrong direction (his full uses of his spectacles notwithstanding). Although he searched throughout the night for the herd, he did not find his bearings until daybreak. Upon arriving back at camp, Roosevelt remembered that he “was greeted with withering scorn by the injured cow-puncher, who had been obliged to stand double guard because I failed to relieve him.”⁹⁹ Only after proving himself proficient at herding, or at the very least not an encumbrance, could Roosevelt hope to be accepted into the fold. After a few days of riding with a round-up crew, Roosevelt explained, “I would have been accepted as one of the rest of the outfit, and all strangeness would have passed off, the attitude of my fellow cow-punchers being one of friendly forgiveness even toward my spectacles.”¹⁰⁰ The stoicism and reserve described in Roosevelt’s account reflect the attributes that many working cowboys ascribed to themselves and peers in their life-narratives. Yet, the stereotypical cowboy that emerged from Roosevelt’s various writings was not a carbon copy of the men who actually worked on the open range. In particular, his definition of manliness was incongruous with the cowboy experience both because of his emphasis on exaggerated and aggressive displays of toughness as well as the lack of access to women on the frontier.

Roosevelt’s memoir of his ranching days, along with many other artistic representations of rugged cowboy masculinity such as the paintings of Frederick Remington or the prose of Owen Wister, fed the imaginations of urban men who longed to fortify their virility. A public that believed traditional values of quiet restraint and lack of passion were weakening society

⁹⁹ Roosevelt, *An Autobiography*, 104-105.

¹⁰⁰ Roosevelt, *An Autobiography*, 104.

embraced the masculine aggressiveness of dime-novel cowboys.¹⁰¹ “Men from the eastern seaboard of North America,” historian Warren Elofson once noted, “became convinced of the ‘superior calling’ of the cowboy and were anxious to emulate it ‘in a hundred tricks of dress and attitude and even speech’.”¹⁰² In his study *American Manhood*, Anthony Rotundo made a similar point when he wrote that the cowboy became a cultural hero because he “was a man in his exploits but as heedless of civilized restraint as a boy.”¹⁰³

While scholars like Elofson and Rotundo have long examined questions of middle-class men at the turn of the century who were grappling with changing definitions of manliness, and in some cases turning to cowboys for inspiration, somewhat less examined has been the question of cowboys during the same era who faced a number of their own quandaries regarding changing gender roles and their sexual identity. The traditional Victorian beliefs of most cowboys not only crashed against the turning tide of American culture, but were also challenged by the isolation and gender imbalance inherent on the open range. Although popular media presented cowboys as the epitome of unencumbered masculinity, a number of factors actually chipped away at the manly autonomy of cowpunchers. As a result, the hired men of the cattle industry had to find ways to assert their masculinity and negotiate novel definitions of what it meant to be a man. An analysis of the ways in which cowboys constructed and defended their masculinity provides for a more fully developed understanding of the process by which the cowboy myth was constructed, disseminated, and resisted.

¹⁰¹ Richard Slatta, “Making and Unmaking Myths of the American Frontier,” *European Journal of American Culture* 29, no. 2 (2010): 85.

¹⁰² Warren M. Elofson, *Frontier Cattle Ranching in the Land and Times of Charlie Russell* (London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004), 34.

¹⁰³ E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to Modern Era* (New York: BasicBooks, 1993), 259.

The following chapter begins with a discussion of the avenues available to working cowboys as they constructed a gendered identity. Scholars, and here I draw particularly on the work of Jacqueline Moore and Blake Allmendinger, versed in the theories of masculinity studies have provided a number of examples of ways that cowpunchers on the open range defined their masculinity in relationship to their work, their peers, and their employers. This study then proceeds to an analysis of the invention and promotion of a hyper-masculine cowboy icon. That project, which was begun during the last years of the open range era but stretched into the twentieth century, created a discourse of cowboy manliness in which both good and bad cowboys existed. Finally, the study turns to unexplored relationship between the self-described masculinity of reminiscing cowboys and the masculinity generated by middle-class concerns and popular culture.

Constructing a Masculine Identity

In seeking to better understand the relationship between a cowboy's sense of self and the larger mythic role he and his peers were written into, the work of gender scholars provides an important foundation for the investigation of identity construction. In particular, Jacqueline Moore and Blake Allmendinger have made significant contributions to the study of cowboy masculinity. Moore's book, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men*, examines the interrelation of class identity and masculinity among the two sets of people named in her title and who were the primary actors on the western cattle ranges. The existence of an owner class and a worker class highlights the fallacy of the mythic, egalitarian frontier, Moore argues, and so too does the distinction of some males as "men" and some as "boys." Allmendinger's study of cowboy work

culture picks up on similar themes of gendered class divisions. One of Allmendinger's primary objectives is to showcase the subversiveness of the folk art produced by cowboys who felt marginalized in the cattle industry and the settled communities that were advancing onto the plains. The combined subversive efforts of cowboys reveal a great deal about the gendered aspects of the employer-employee relationship, the value of work in calculations of manliness, and the challenges to sexuality presented by a male-dominated frontier space.

Moore's study of the experiences of Texas cowboys and the cattlemen who employed them investigates how both groups of men demonstrated their masculinity amidst the changing cultural norms of latter-nineteenth century America. As part of the proprietary class, cattlemen were expected to uphold the standards of Victorian-era manliness, which included self-restraint, emotional composure, and a certain degree of etiquette and refinement. Cowboys were part of the frontier-huntsman tradition, however, and they had long demonstrated their masculinity through feats of physical strength and endurance, straight talk, and wild bravado. Yet while his predecessors, the fur trapper or the Indian scout, had cleared a path for settlement and then disappeared, the cowboy's tenure on the frontier began to overlap with widespread homesteading and the growth of communities. The rough-hewn manners and behaviors of the cowboys who visited cow towns after payday or between jobs now confronted a different reality. At the very least town folks considered them a minor nuisance. At the most cowboys caused a major concern for safety and propriety. "Unable to ignore the cowboys, the townspeople tried to rein them in and make them invisible," Moore explains, "the cattlemen, always businessmen, adapted to new conditions, and joined in the efforts to regulate the cowboys."¹⁰⁴ In their attempts to manage their employees' behavior, cattlemen now increasingly restricted the activities through

¹⁰⁴ Jacqueline Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men: Class and Masculinities on the Texas Frontier, 1865-1900* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 6-7.

which cowboys had traditionally expressed their masculinity, such as gambling or drinking. They also reinforced the power hierarchy through language. “A cowboys was always a boy,” writes Moore, “a cattleman was always a man.”¹⁰⁵ Cowboys adapted to their changing working environment by imagining new rituals of manliness.

Allmendinger discusses one such invented ritual, which was the consumption of bovine testicles. The act of castrating a calf and eating the discarded testicles, Allmendinger argues, provided an outlet for frustrated men seeking to reassert their virility: cowboys imagined that consumption of the sex organ increased their own sexual potency and carnal appetite. While cattleman attempted to negate the masculinity of cowboys by isolating them on the plains, away from women, cowboys actively reversed this metaphoric castration with their own symbolic acts.¹⁰⁶

Changing work dynamics also threatened traditional cowboy masculinity through the loss of autonomy. During the very early days of the western cattle industry, the period where Moore begins her study, wild cattle roamed throughout the southern plains. Entrepreneurial ranchers hired cowboys to ride the vast regions of the open range. Because the latter were mostly out on their own, the contact they had with their employer was minimal. Cowpunchers might go several months between visits to the home ranch or to a town, and as a result, scholars reason, those men had a great deal of personal freedom. The spread of peripheral railroads and the advent of barbed wire, however, attenuated the open range and thereby cut down significantly on the amount of time it took for cowboys to round-up, brand, and deliver cattle to market. Many ranch owners took to laying off most of their crew after the round-up season, creating a system

¹⁰⁵ Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men*, 7.

¹⁰⁶ Blake Allmendinger, *The Cowboy: Representations of Labor in an American Work Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 5.

of perpetual unemployment in a community whose members based a great deal of self-worth on work. For the fewer cowboys who did find year-round employment, they spent the winter months working on a home ranch and living under the watchful eye of cattlemen.¹⁰⁷ In a world that increasingly valued economic success and independence as indicators of manliness, cowboys instead grounded their masculinity in work experience, physical toughness, and common sense. Moore argues that cowboys defined their masculinity “as their ability to perform their work, to control their own lives, and respect other men who did the same.”¹⁰⁸

As he did in the instance of cattle castration, Allmendinger shows how cowboys in adapting to a more controlled setting established symbolic meanings for some routine elements of their work in an effort to correct the power imbalance that existed between the “men” and the “boys.” For example, ranchers might believe that when cowboys branded calves the laborers were acknowledging the superior economic status of their employer; cowboys, conversely, came to associate their branding rituals with a process by which God designated them as his preferred children. “In poems about branding, ranch hands stated that they took brands from ranchers and gave them to God,” Allmendinger explains, “who then branded cowboys in order to illustrate that cowboys were God’s chosen race or ‘livestock’.”¹⁰⁹ The intense work of branding calves, moreover, was a powerful reminder of the physical manliness that cowboys possessed and that their employers likely did not.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century the cowboy’s work environment was changing and subsequently challenging established definitions of manliness, just as it was for scores of American workers. Changes to the cowboy’s social environment lagged in

¹⁰⁷ Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men*, 7, 14.

¹⁰⁸ Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men*, 3.

¹⁰⁹ Allmendinger, *The Cowboy*, 5.

comparison; on the fringes of settlement, men outnumber women by a staggering margin. Yet despite this pronounced gender discrepancy, masculinity was still calculated in relationship to femininity and what today is labeled as heterosexual activities. For cattlemen who hoped to or were expected to marry respectable women and help establish new communities, restraint and responsibility were essential components of manliness. Cowboys, by contrast, had little access to women outside of brothels. As Moore notes, cowboys' definitions of masculinity reflected their lives "outside of 'civilized' society...theirs was an all-male fraternity and they prized male camaraderie and friendships above most else."¹¹⁰ Most ranchers exclusively employed unmarried cowpunchers because they could be accommodated in cheap bunkhouses and worked for a bachelor's salary. Cowboys who did fall in love and married were compelled by societal expectations to move to town and father children, circumstances that generally spelled the end of their days as a ranch hand and prompted many young men to choose bachelorhood. Another historian commented that the predisposition of cowboys towards "wanderlust" and "the somewhat arrogant attitude of self-importance" also curtailed their marriage prospects.¹¹¹

Of course cowboys had very little contact with women, regardless of their intentions. Cowboys who ventured into town for a square dance might hope to enjoy the company of the opposite sex, but the frontier's heavy imbalance in the ratio of men to women often meant that there were far more male than female participants in attendance. Not only were many cowboys denied access to young, available women, they were also frequently prevailed upon to act as women themselves. According to Allmending, "because cowboys enjoyed fewer social privileges than did wealthy, influential, and 'respectable' cattlemen, cowboys often made up for

¹¹⁰ Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men*, 3.

¹¹¹ Clifford P. Westermeier, "The Cowboy and Sex" in Charles W. Harris and Buck Rainey, eds., *The Cowboy: Six-Shooters, Songs, and Sex* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), 90.

the absence of women...posing as women with other cowboys in couples, and joining with other couples in square dances.” To denote their status as submissive dance partners, those cowboys would don a handkerchief around their arm, a symbol that was colloquially known as a “heifer brand.”¹¹² Social and economic power dynamics once again left cowboys emasculated. Ranch owners were able to better control their workforce and secure their own relationships with available women, explains Allmendinger, by suppressing their employees masculinity.¹¹³

Masculinity, by its very nature as a product of personal identity and external forces, is nebulous and difficult to define. “Concepts of manhood rely on subjective qualifications,” wrote Moore, “that vary according to historic, social, cultural, and economic circumstances.”¹¹⁴ In the case of cowboys, the concept of masculinity was further complicated by competing ideologies derived from popular culture and from personal experiences. As a stereotype, cowboys were hyper-masculine role models of physicality and bravado. They were idolized for their uninhibited action and unchecked passion. The realities of the open range led to a separate definition of masculinity among actual cowboys, however, which reinforced some elements of the mythic persona but challenged others. Courage and toughness were certainly valued characteristics among the men who rode the range, but so too were thoughtfulness, compassion, and camaraderie. The middle-class promotion of virility utilized cowboy imagery, but most ranch hands had limited access to the respectable women that were also idealized at this time. Many of the alternative expressions of sexual identity pursued by cowboys were never part of the

¹¹² Allmendinger, *The Cowboy*, 66.

¹¹³ Newer scholarship, notably Clare Sears’ “All that Glitters: Trans-ing California’s Gold Rush Migrations,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no. 2-3 (2008), 383-402, argues that in the early western gold-rush regions, where like on the cattle ranges men likewise outnumbered women in staggering proportions, that when some men took the role of women in dances, this had the effect of actually reinforcing heteronormativity. That is, men who performed women’s roles did not so much experience a denigration of their masculinity by playing a feminine role, so much as collectively the otherwise all male society used such dances as a way to recreate a gender-balanced society in a place where the gender ratio was unbalanced.

¹¹⁴ Moore, *Cow Boys and Cattle Men*, 4.

popular cowboy narrative. As the works of Allmendinger and Moore reveal, knowledge regarding the unique and complicated ways that cowboys constructed their manliness can be gleaned from the art they produced and the stories they told. A comparison between personal memoirs and more popular representations of the cowboy lifestyle can take the investigation of gender identity one step further by illuminating the role that mythic masculinity played in individual understandings of manliness. By understanding how cowboys resisted popular culture representations and how they reinforced them one can learn a great deal about the power of the mythic West to distort reality and about the pervasiveness of middle-class values enshrined in that myth.

The Rise of the Hyper-Masculine Cowboy

Among the most famous and widely-referenced cowboy memoirs ever published stands Theodore Roosevelt's *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (1888), which focuses on the future president's transformation from a naïve and underdeveloped eastern boy into a bold and brawny rancher of the open plains. The narrative chronicles the few years that young Teddy managed his North Dakota ranch and his encounters with all manner of westerners. Woven throughout Roosevelt's tales of adventure is a clear sense of his infatuation with the frontier, a place where men could still fortify themselves through a battle against nature. In particular, Roosevelt identified cowboys as successors of the frontiersmen tradition. As the men who labored day in and day out to shepherd cattle and horses across harsh terrain, thus ensuring the financial success of their employers, cowboys represented a segment of America's population essential to the country's growth. Their stoic fortitude in the face of environmental hardships so impressed

Roosevelt that he adopted their imagery as his own. Cultural assumptions about the exceedingly democratic nature of cattle herding outfits also made the cowboy character attractive to the young politician.¹¹⁵ The popularity of Roosevelt's autobiography solidified his image as a cowboy, though of course his social and economic status set him apart from most of the cowboy community. As one scholar noted, "if he was a gentleman by nature and birth, he had become a cowboy by artifice, calculation and pure determination," and that persona of a sickly boy redeemed by physical education and labor was masterfully integrated into the twenty-sixth president's personal narrative.¹¹⁶

In the proceeding years of his public life, Roosevelt often referenced the working ranch hands he met during the Dakota period of his life as superior examples of American masculinity, just as his descriptions of cowboys in *Ranch Life* reflected a deep respect for their character. Roosevelt devoted many pages to the impressive feats of physical prowess and moral uprightness demonstrated by the cowboys he encountered. For example, Roosevelt heaps praise on a pair of cowboys who came to his aid during an occasion when his horses were scattered during an overnight ride, leaving him mountless. Although the men were not previous acquaintances of Roosevelt's, they nonetheless spent the next day tracking down the young rancher's horses and returned them without expectation of reward. This prompted Roosevelt to note that cowboys were, "in the main, hard-working, faithful fellows," honorable virtues that seemed to resonate more with Victorian manly ideals that the future president brought with him from New York.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Richard Slatta, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 38.

¹¹⁶ Arnaldo Testi, "The Gender of Reform Politics: Theodore Roosevelt and the Culture of Masculinity," *The Journal of American History* 81, no. 4 (Mar., 1995): 1515.

¹¹⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, *Ranching Life and the Hunting Trail* (New York: The Century Co., 1888), 88.

Roosevelt's eagerness to claim ownership of the cowboy lifestyle also seems to have led him quite literally to whitewash his accounts of life on the open range. While historians have definitively identified the existence of many thousands of African American, Hispanic, and American Indian cowboys, Roosevelt "represents the whole class as essentially Anglo-Saxon." In an era when minorities of all shades were accused of fomenting labor unrest, harboring dangerous sexual proclivities, or simply being lazy, the pure whiteness of cowboys was an essential element of middle-class America's infatuation.¹¹⁸

Such a favorable opinion of cowboys allowed Roosevelt to dismiss any bad behavior as harmless and good-natured. Not only did he describe the earlier homicidal exploits of the aforementioned pair as "justifiable" on the grounds that "they were both good fellows," but he went on to write that most cowboys were "good men; and the disturbance they cause in town is done from sheer rough light-heartedness."¹¹⁹ Indeed it was the cowboy's matter-of-fact abrasiveness that made him a perfect role model. Without mincing words, Roosevelt expressed these sentiments, that "A cowboy will not submit tamely to an insult, and is ever ready to avenge his own wrongs; nor has he an overwrought fear of shedding blood. He possesses, in fact, few of the emasculated, milk-and-water moralities admired by the pseudo-philanthropists; but he does possess, to a very high degree, the stern, manly qualities that are invaluable to a nation."¹²⁰

Similarly, in his autobiography Roosevelt described the indispensable lessons of "self-reliance, hardihood, and the value of instant decision" which the solitary life of cow punching

¹¹⁸ Slatta, *Gunfighter Nation*, 39.

¹¹⁹ Roosevelt, *Ranching Life*, 89, 91.

¹²⁰ Roosevelt, *Ranching Life*, 55-56.

had taught him.¹²¹ Roosevelt's recollection of his time spent among the cowboys of North Dakota reflected much of the dramatic and flamboyant tone for which he had become famous:

There were monotonous days, as we guided the trail cattle or the beef herds, hour after hour, at the slowest of walks; and minutes or hours teeming with excitement as we stopped stampedes or swam the hers across rivers treacherous with quicksands or brimmed with running ice. We knew toil and hardship and hunger and thirst; and we saw men die violent deaths as they worked among the horses and cattle, or fought in evil feuds with one another; but we felt the beat of hardy life in our veins, and ours was the glory of work and the joy of living.¹²²

These "brave, hospitable, hardy, and adventurous" men opened the West for civilization, lived by the tenets of self-reliance and honesty, and experience true freedom in a world increasingly bound by rules; by Roosevelt's calculations this made cowboys worthy of praise and emulation.¹²³

Roosevelt's promotion of a cowboy lifestyle coincided with a larger trend in American middle-class culture that questioned the long-term impacts of industrialization and modernization on older gender norms. The late-nineteenth century was a time of social change in the U.S., with growing numbers of women entering the public sphere and fewer middle-class men working manual labor jobs. Those changes generated a great deal of anxiety regarding the perceived deterioration of American manliness. The ideology, if not always the reality, of separate spheres dominated much of the 1800s, but the last decades of the century saw a backlash against "feminized definitions" of civility. Historians today often refer to these social/gender alterations as a crisis of masculinity; this was a period during which Victorian manly values of restraint and refinement were superseded by a preference for rugged masculinity and primordial instincts. As

¹²¹ Roosevelt, *An Autobiography*, 96.

¹²² Roosevelt, *An Autobiography*, 94-95.

¹²³ Roosevelt, *Ranching Life*, 100.

historian Anthony Rotundo explained, “men took the negative labels affixed to their character and made them into virtues...the underside of male character that bourgeois culture had stigmatized was now brought to light for fond inspection.”¹²⁴ Public figures encouraged parents to toughen up their young boys by getting them involved in contact sports and outdoor clubs. Edgar Rice Burroughs’ series of novels on Tarzan, which depict an orphaned colonial boy in Africa who is adopted and reared by apes of the jungle, became instant bestsellers.¹²⁵ And child psychologist G. Stanley Hall became a proponent of nurturing the more “savage” instincts of boys through directed activities, including playing “cowboys and Indians,” as a way to ensure that they did not grow up into effeminate and ineffectual men.¹²⁶

Similarly, Roosevelt insisted that for a good boy to become a good man, he must “not be a coward or a weakling,” and he should “bear himself well in manly exercises and to develop his body – and therefore, to a certain extent, his character – in rough sports which call for pluck, endurance, and physical address.”¹²⁷ Roosevelt prevailed upon parents to ensure that their male children received a properly gendered education, warning that familial failures would surely be felt by the nation as a whole. “If he is not thoroughly manly, then they [other children] will not respect him, and his good qualities will count for but little.”¹²⁸ In this light, Roosevelt’s *Ranch Life* even made a significant impact on the founder of the Boy Scouts of America, Daniel Carter Beard. As Beard created an organization for urban youth to gain access to wilderness

¹²⁴ Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 253. For further information see a foundational work in this area of study, such as Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

¹²⁵ Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 217-222.

¹²⁶ Julia Grant, “A ‘Real Boy’ and Not a Sissy: Gender, Childhood, and Masculinity, 1890-1940,” *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 4 (Summer, 2004): 833.

¹²⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Life* (New York: The Review of Reviews Company, 1901), 129.

¹²⁸ Roosevelt, *The Strenuous Life*, 136.

experiences, he recalled that frontier living had not only energized Roosevelt, but also taught him important lessons about strait-talk and brotherly solidarity.¹²⁹

Adult men, moreover, might recapture their fleeting masculinity by adhering to Roosevelt's "strenuous life." In speeches and articles for popular magazines, Roosevelt directed men of means to forego the bourgeois trappings of middle- or upper-crust living so that they might avoid becoming burdens to American society. He opened one particularly famous address by stating "I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life, the life of toil and effort, or labor and strife." He went on to note that "a life of slothful ease" provided no value to a man's country, and that a culture of men who were adverse to hard work and vigorous health spelled doom for the nation.¹³⁰ Drawing upon his personal triumph over physical weakness, Roosevelt encouraged men to measure themselves against the examples set by frontier laborers, among others, as opposed to their white-collar colleagues. In what Richard Slatta terms the "regeneration-through-regression" tradition, Roosevelt's life narrative demonstrated that even the most gentrified men could revive their manly character through communion with savagery and unspoiled wilderness.¹³¹

Roosevelt was not alone in his praise of the "knights of the prairie." Edgar Rye, a Texan and a journalist who witnessed the height of the free-range cattle industry in that region, also painted the cowboy in an exceedingly positive light. In 1909 Rye published a history of Fort Griffin, Texas, that chronicled the settlement of the area, and like so many other writers of this era, he cast cowboys as the heroes. Cowpunchers, according to Rye, were nature's most

¹²⁹ Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 228.

¹³⁰ Theodore Roosevelt, "The Strenuous Life, Speech to the Hamilton Club, Chicago, April 10, 1899," in *Theodore Roosevelt: Letters and Speeches* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2004), 755.

¹³¹ Slatta, *Gunfighter Nation*, 38.

successful example of “manly men.”¹³² The aging cattlemen whom Rye interviewed described their ranch hands as “bold, reckless, dare-devils,” but insisted “nowhere on God’s footstool were women and children safer than under the protecting care of the cowboys.”¹³³ Indeed Rye portrayed cowboys as incredibly chivalrous and bound by a strict moral code, noting that it was his distinct pleasure to retell the stories of a group “who bravery was beyond question and whose honor was always above suspicion.”¹³⁴ Of course bravery and honor were indispensable components of manliness, and according to Rye it was no mystery why cowboys possessed these qualities. “Nowhere on earth is true manhood put to a more severe test than on the frontier,” argued Rye. Similarly, in his biography of an Oklahoma pioneer, John J. Callison described the open range cowboy as “an almost perfect specimen of physical manhood.” According to Callison, “his life in the open air was conducive to health, and the hardships and privations he endured only toughened his muscles and strengthened his lungs.”¹³⁵

Despite their generous assessments of cowboys as perfect phenotypes of masculinity, Rye and other sympathetic writers maintained a striking silence on the topic of cowboys’ sex lives. Iconoclastic western historian Clifford Westermeier first spoke to this literary phenomenon in the 1970s. According to Westermeier, “the early periodical journalists and dime novelists, in their enthusiasm for him, created a forceful image. But, as for sexual activity or relations between the sexes, this enthusiasm is prudish.”¹³⁶ Heroic cowboys were rarely associated with “indecent or sexual impropriety” and their virtuous virility was devoid of sexual connotations, thus

¹³² Edgar Rye, “The Genuine Cowboy at Work and Play,” in *The Quirt and the Spur: Vanishing Shadows of the Texas Frontier* (Chicago: W.B. Conkey Co., 1909), reprinted in Ramon F. Adams, ed., *The Best of the American Cowboy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), 27.

¹³³ Rye, “The Genuine Cowboy at Work and Play,” 28.

¹³⁴ Rye, “The Genuine Cowboy at Work and Play,” 28.

¹³⁵ John J. Callison, “The Cowboy’s Winding Sheet” in *Bill Jones of Paradise Valley* (Chicago: M.A. Donohun and Co., 1914), reprinted in Ramon F. Adams, ed., *The Best of the American Cowboy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), 265.

¹³⁶ Westermeier, “The Cowboy and Sex,” 85.

mimicking middle-values concerning propriety. Conversely, when fiction writers or social critics deployed the cowboy character as a villain, he was “the wild, wanton, wayward man in the cattle towns where, in the minds of the righteous, every weakness was fostered.”¹³⁷

Newspaper accounts of alcohol-fueled debauchery in saloons and dance halls perpetuated the image of the over-sexed cowboy. Popular conceptions of cowboys thus evolved along two separate and parallel tracks; good cowboys were chaste and morally upright citizens worth emulation while bad cowboys were promiscuous and predatory threats to law and order.¹³⁸ The reality for most cowboys, of course, fell somewhere in the middle of these polarities. After many long months of isolation on the open range, young cowboys were likely to seek comfort in the arms of the most readily available women. That may have been a morally indefensible act in more “civilized” communities, but that on the western frontier it was simply a fact of life. “For decent women, the cowboy’s animal drives, obscenity, crudeness, and arrogance were unbearable,” Westermeier argues, “while his respectful gallantry toward ladies has become legend, his role of cavalier did not extend to the inmates of brothels.”¹³⁹

Westermeier goes on to explain that cowboys’ sexual activities were not always heteronormative. Much of what can be learned about sexual encounters among cowboys and homosexuality on the open range come from the songs and limericks created by these men. For example, Westermeier points to the following poem as an indicator of accepted, if not common, behavior within the cowboy community:

Young cowboys had a great fear,
That old studs once filled with beer,
Completely addle’
They’d throw on a saddle

¹³⁷ Westermeier, “The Cowboy and Sex,” 87.

¹³⁸ Westermeier, “The Cowboy and Sex,” 86-87.

¹³⁹ Westermeier, “The Cowboy and Sex,” 90-91.

And ride them on the rear¹⁴⁰

The work of psychologists also supplemented Westermeier's argument. According to Alfred Kinsey, incidents of homosexual activity were highest in remote and rural places where boys and men spent most of their time with other males and where interactions between men and women were strictly controlled. "Such a background," Kinsey argued, "breeds the attitude that sex is sex, irrespective of the nature of the partner with whom the relation is had. Sexual relations are had with women when they are available, or with other males when the outdoor routines bring men together into exclusively male groups."¹⁴¹ Westermeier also includes the thoughts of Larry McMurtry, a prolific fiction writer and expert on cowboy lore, in his discussion of sexuality. McMurtry believed that same-sex sexual activities were the result of "repressed heterosexuality" rather than "repressed homosexuality."¹⁴² It is impossible to know exactly how cowboys understood their sexual activities, partly because they did not write seriously about those encounters and partly because the discourse of sexuality available to them was limited. Westermeier's work, however, is an important reminder of the error in assuming that cowboys adhered to societal expectations about heteronormative sexuality.¹⁴³

While Roosevelt and other proponents of a particularly physical yet wholesome form of manliness played significant roles in generating and disseminating this hyper-masculine cowboy stereotype, participants in the cattle industry often reinforced it through their own representations of life on the range. Most cowboy memoirists who wrote later in life were not so skilled with a

¹⁴⁰ Westermeier, "The Cowboy and Sex," 93.

¹⁴¹ Westermeier, "The Cowboy and Sex," 96; quote from Alfred Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Man* (Philadelphia, 1948), p.457-45.

¹⁴² Westermeier, "The Cowboy and Sex," 97; quote from Larry McMurtry, "Take My Saddle From the Wall," *Harper's*, Vol. CCXXXVII (September 1968), p.45.

¹⁴³ For more recent scholarship on cowboy homosexuality and its representation in popular culture see William R. Handley, ed., *The Brokeback Book: From Story to Cultural Phenomenon* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011). For more on the process by which the frontier became a heteronormative space see Peter Boag, *Re-Dressing America's Frontier Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

pen as was Roosevelt, however they seemed to take equal pleasure in recounting the feats of strength and bravado that they had performed during their youthful cowboy days. John Barrows, a Montana “old timer” who recorded his recollections in the 1930s, wrote extensively on the physical hardships and near fatal encounters that tested his mettle. He described the breaking of his first horse as “Homeric,” concluding, “I never lost the confidence engendered by this, my first successful attempt at broncho busting.”¹⁴⁴ Indeed the victory was especially sweet for Barrows who, just a short time earlier, had known the embarrassment of being pitched off a bucking horse while attempting to demonstrate the finer points of cowboy style to an immigrant family from Minnesota. As an older and wiser man, Barrows wryly noted, “I still marvel at my foolhardiness.”¹⁴⁵ While he admitted that his days as a “tenderfoot” were filled with such humiliating situations, he counterbalances those follies with many more tales of his physical endurance and sharp wit. In this style Barrows is able to convince readers of his honesty as well as his validity as a cowboy, a symbol of essential manhood. Allmendinger in fact identifies the “ritual initiation” as an accepted convention of both the cowboy autobiography sub-genre as well as western fiction written about cowboys.¹⁴⁶

A young cowpuncher’s first successful attempt at bronco busting was just one of many rituals that reminiscent cowboys identified as part of becoming a man. E. C. Abbott, for example, recalled that when he was just 15 years old he had his first chance to stand in front of a barkeep and order a round of drinks for his friends. “I sure felt big,” wrote Abbott, but nothing could compare to the first time he was identified as a “real cowboy.” Abbott recalled, “I grewed

¹⁴⁴ John R. Barrows, *Ubet* (Caldwell, ID: The Claxton Printers, Ltd., 1934), 160-161.

¹⁴⁵ Barrows, *Ubet*, 129.

¹⁴⁶ Blake Allmendinger, “Deadwood Dick: The Black Cowboy as Cultural Timber,” *Journal of American Culture* 16, no. 4 (Winter 1993), 79.

three inches and gained ten pounds that night.”¹⁴⁷ T.B. Long had similar feelings regarding his first pair of spurs; the moment he fixed them onto his boots he experienced both “bursting pride” and “a great thrill” because he finally felt “ready to start punching cows.”¹⁴⁸ For a boy who idolized the men working local round-ups, the chance to earn even a small wage on horseback could be life altering. A young Barrows was hired to manage a small herd of work oxen for a bull-wacker who had taken ill near the family’s home, and after just two weeks of service he felt confident that he was a “properly qualified cowboy.”¹⁴⁹

Of course Barrows the writer possessed a good deal more humility than his younger self, and his memoir revealed that he had many lessons yet to learn as both a cowboy and a man. His metamorphosis into a cowboy, however, seems to have been complete by his early twenties. With a rather comical anecdote about an encounter with a dog while visiting his old hometown in Wisconsin, Barrows demonstrated his fulfillment of the cowboy transformation:

In self-defense I swung my bundled luggage at his head and he withdrew in ignominious defeat, for out of the bundle he had been showered, as if by shrapnel, with a navy revolver, a pair of spurs, a cartridge belt, and the scatter contents of a boy of .45 cartridges. While I was engaged in ‘mopping up’ the sidewalk, the church doors opened, and my old playmates and associates with their staid elders were upon me. I will confess to considerable embarrassment, but I was not recognized. It was no wonder, I had left the congregation less than three years before a well-mannered, well-dressed, pale and thoughtful boy, and I had come back as brown as an Indian, three inches taller, and clad in outlandish garb, from my high-heeled boots to my exotic sombrero. Who could imagine Johnny Barrows on his hands and knees gathering up implement of death from the sidewalk, almost at the door of Zion Church on a Sunday morning?¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ E. C. “Teddy Blue” Abbott, *We Pointed Them North: Recollections of a Cowpuncher* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), 22.

¹⁴⁸ T. B. Long, *70 Years a Cowboy: A Biography* (Regina, Sask.: Western Printers Association, 1959), 1.

¹⁴⁹ Barrows, *Ubet*, 46.

¹⁵⁰ Barrows, *Ubet*, 154.

Barrows's exoticism won him a good deal of attention from his former neighbors and classmates. As a "real cowboy" and a newly minted Westerner, Barrows found no shortage of spectators to watch his roping demonstrations or audience members to listen while he spun his yarns. To the great excitement of young men in that Wisconsin village, he would have seemed like the flesh-and-bones incarnation of the heroic cowboys that filled their popular fiction novels and magazines.

Barrows also maintained a strong opinion about the qualities that made for a good cowboy. First, because the work was relentless and physically demanding, a cowpuncher had to possess strength and endurance. Roosevelt's deployment of the cowboy stereotype as a model for fitness was not without merit; his emphasis on bodybuilding, however, would not have stood a true cowboy in good stead. Heavy riders only wore out their mounts more quickly.¹⁵¹ The physicality of the work also created a natural barrier to older men. "In spite of superficial diversities, the round-up was homogenous in one significant aspect," wrote Barrows, "the riders were young."¹⁵² This fact suggests another reason why cowboys became popular symbols of masculinity; late-nineteenth century cultural conceptions of manliness began to focus on youthfulness and aggression rather than experience and wisdom.¹⁵³ Most cowboys found formal employment on ranches or trail drives in the mid-teenage years, and by the time they were middle-aged most had settled in one spot to farm or run their own cattle. Indeed, as both Moore and Allmendinger argued, most ranchers preferred to employ young men because they were unencumbered by families and were therefore cheaper and more dependable.

¹⁵¹ Abbott, *We Pointed Them North*, 7.

¹⁵² Barrows, *Ubet*, 112.

¹⁵³ Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 5-6. Also see Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 158-159.

While many of these young ranch hands were born and raised in cattle country, a man with gumption, courage, and a good deal of physical toughness could become a good cowboy. As Teddy Roosevelt's account revealed, even a bespectacled Easterner could find a home among cowboys if he adopted their ways and took his lumps like a man. In a passage that echoes the reminiscences of Roosevelt, Barrows recalled that "my joy in my new employment was somewhat tempered by the consciousness that I was considered in my true character, a tenderfoot...a kid, picked up to fill as nearly as possible a place made vacant by the defection of a real cowboy."¹⁵⁴ As these words suggest, the label of "tenderfoot" indicated a man had only child's capacity for work and it was a moniker that should be cast off quickly unless the individual enjoyed ruthless belittlement. Within the hierarchy of masculinity described by Jacqueline Moore, tenderfoot cowboys found little respect. Indeed for cowboys like Barrows who began their careers as inexperienced and naïve boys, after earning their rightful place as seasoned wranglers their relationship with other "pilgrims" and "dudes" often became antagonistic or openly hostile. Edgar Beecher Bronson certainly experienced the cruelties of cowboy hazing during his first season as a ranch hand in the 1870s. Bronson not only lack the toughness of veteran cowpunchers, but he was also an Easterner and college educated dude; the combination made him an irresistible target of insults and pranks. His grammar and manners, which had been refined in accordance with societal definitions of manliness, only irritated his new colleagues whose own conceptions of masculinity had evolved in direct response to the cultural standards they had no hope of achieving.

Throughout Bronson's memoir, the tenuous negotiation over what constituted true manhood plays out. When seasoned cowboy Tobacco Jake prodded Bronson about his

¹⁵⁴ Barrows, *Ubet*, 57.

diminutive stature, he replied that he “had been something of an invalid, and that it was true my physical condition was hardly up to par.” Bronson’s record of the dialogue continued: “‘Look yere, Kid,’ replied Jake, ‘ef yu caint talk our langwidge, you jus make signs. What’n hell yu tryin’ to say, anyway?’”¹⁵⁵ The “joshing” persisted in much the same fashion for several days, prompting Bronson to devise a plan by which he might finally earn a modicum of esteem from his peers. He decided that he would take on one particularly rambunctious heifer in hand-to-head combat while the crew performed some rather uncharacteristic work on foot. Unfortunately for Bronson, and to the great amusement of the group, he ended the match facedown in the dirt while the cow raced past him unscathed. Among other jests, Bronson recounted, “‘Mama! But who’d a thot th’ kid was locoed enough t’ tackle a fightin’ heifer afoot? His thinker must shore be as puny as his carcass. Ain’t nuthin’ but him ‘tween th’ two Plattes fool enough t’ tackle thataway...D-----d ef we don’t have t’ neck him t’ the’ cook t’ keep ‘im from killin’ his fool self ‘for we hits the Pawnee.’”¹⁵⁶ Bronson goes on to reveal that over the next months he was able to win the approval of most of the cowpunching crew by developing his physical endurance in the saddle, his skill with the lasso, and his capacity for bearing insults without injury. By repeatedly putting himself in dangerous situations and wordlessly enduring any hardships that resulted from over-exertion or pure foolishness, Bronson was able to establish a report among a group of men very different from himself.

Yet, such elaborate attention to colloquialisms and pronunciation on the part of Bronson the writer arguably reflects his sentiments as a cattleman regarding the intellect of born and raised cowboys. Even though the young tenderfoot worked hard to earn the acceptance and

¹⁵⁵ Edgar Beecher Bronson, *Reminiscences of a Ranchman* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1908), 31.

¹⁵⁶ Bronson, *Reminiscences of a Ranchman*, 39.

respect of his crewmates, Bronson was a man of means who set out west with intentions of owning his own ranch. While he learned the cowboy trade, he was always a member of a more distinguished class and therefore had reason to maintain a distinct definition of manliness that excluded less refined individuals. Class conflict was no more evident than in Bronson's recollections of his early days as a cattle owner. "For an outfit of thoroughbred Texas brush-splitters a tenderfoot owner was bad enough, always the object of ill-concealed distrust and contempt," Bronson explained, "while a tenderfoot foreman was nothing short of a downright humiliation."¹⁵⁷ The tensions between Bronson and his hardened crew escalated with the intensity of the work, and when several cowpunchers threatened to abandon camp he was forced to assert his masculinity aggressively. While cowboy conventions prompted him to draw his weapon, his own traditional values of restraint ultimately won the day by demonstrating his capacity as a reasonable leader. Cowboys could expect to settle their disputes with gunfire, but Bronson knew that cattlemen had much to lose through such frivolous actions.

By identifying the genesis of the hyper-masculine cowboy stereotype and tracing its multiple, and sometimes contradictory, manifestations, one can gain a clearer sense of how and why real cowboys adopted some parts of the mythic iconography. The late-nineteenth century "crisis of masculinity" may have begun in eastern middle-class circles, but a changing work environment left cowboys feeling equally vulnerable to erosion of their manhood. By the time cowboys sat down to pen their memoirs, their status as cultural icons had solidified. Professing the masculine characteristics promoted by Roosevelt therefore became a new avenue for cowboys seeking to assert their gender identity. Just as ranch hands on the range found novel

¹⁵⁷ Bronson, *Reminiscences of a Ranchman*, 74.

ways to define their gender identity, aging cowpunchers utilized the rhetoric of tough, physical manliness to the same end.

Challenging and Rejecting the Myth

While popular conceptions of cowboy masculinity reflected many realities of the ranch hand experience while also feeding into the developing myth of cowboy masculinity, reminiscing cowpunchers also challenged that very myth. In some instances, memoirists lavished praise on characteristics that were not part of popular culture's cowboy stereotype. In other cases, cowboys provided details about their lives that broke the societal norms of manliness. Although they were less transparent about their desire to critique the existing concepts of masculinity, when compared to their efforts to rebuke the larger "myth of the West," cowboys demonstrated a keen awareness of their personal definitions of manliness in their life-narratives.

On the subject of what made a cattleman worthy of admiration, cowboys had good deal to say. E. C. Abbott, better known as "Teddy Blue," praised his former boss Zeke Newman for being generous with both his time and his money. Newman's propensity to bestow gifts of gratitude upon his foreman and his willingness to lend cowboys cash when they were in a pinch prompted Abbot to describe him as "one of the greatest men that ever was in the cattle business, and the kind of a boss that cowpunchers understood and respected." As Abbott explained it, "like so many of those old-time cattlemen he was a big spender and very liberal."¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ Abbott, *We Pointed Them North*, 85.

Indeed Abbott was not alone in his preference for cattlemen who had not yet prescribed to a new definition of middle-class masculinity that valued economic success and ruthlessness in business above all else. Both Abbott and Barrows remarked that Granville Stuart, the preeminent frontiersman and entrepreneur of the northern plains, was the very best example of the type of cattleman whom they most admired. His willingness to allow cowpunchers in his employ to own their own cattle earned Stuart the adoration of Abbott, who described him as the “fairest and the best friend of the cowpunchers.”¹⁵⁹ During the 1880s most proprietors of large cattle outfits were engaged in the national trend of industry consolidation. Wealthy cattleman and their financiers saw cattle ownership on the part of independent cowboys as small but bothersome barriers to market monopolization. Not only would cowboys-turned-cattlemen compete for grazing space, but they would also be tempted to brand maverick calves or rustle wayward stock while performing their duties as hired hands.¹⁶⁰ Stuart’s openness to competition and support of opportunities for working-class men to make a name for themselves were rare and revered qualities for a cattleman in the late-nineteenth century.

Stuart’s concern for the wellbeing of his crew also prompted John Barrows to write that he was “a man who so commanded my respect and admiration that his influence upon my character and conduct was profound.”¹⁶¹ Barrows’s description of the pioneer cattleman’s best qualities provides insight into the unique combination of characteristics that came to convey true manhood on the open range. In keeping with Victorian values, Stuart was praised for his gentlemanly instincts, his intellect and education, and his bravery. Yet Stuart also moved beyond societal expectations by opening his personal library to the cowpunchers that visited the

¹⁵⁹ Abbott, *We Pointed Them North*, 129.

¹⁶⁰ Abbott, *We Pointed Them North*, 129.

¹⁶¹ Barrows, *Ubet*, 156.

home ranch and encouraging men to educate themselves. Stuart's egalitarianism speaks to a code of conduct that appears to have been relatively unique to cowboy culture; those actions subverted both the class-consciousness of urban America as well as the predatory and exploitive business culture that dominated the West. Such glowing reminiscences of Stuart indicate that his brand of manliness was not only respected but also emulated by working-class men who had little hope of establishing their gender identity through financial success or power. The fact that Stuart's prestige was never diminished by his marriage to a Shoshone woman who "held her place in his household as a loved and respected wife," presents yet another example of the cowboy's partial rejection of popular culture's whitewashed masculinity.¹⁶²

On the subject of proper cowboy decorum, Barrows noted that they were expected to endure the hardships of range living without complaint so long as they received fair compensation, and he applied such standards even to his own behavior.¹⁶³ In recounting his transformation into a skilled and successful cowpuncher, he revealed that stoicism, like roping or brand reading, was a skill that had to be learned. "In course of time I found myself. The depressing difficulties of my position were found to be largely imaginary."¹⁶⁴ Abbott remarked similarly when he described cowboys "as a rule very good-natured; in fact it did not pay to be anything else."¹⁶⁵ Despite pervasive stereotypes of the reckless and spontaneous cowboy, individuals who could not manage their emotions were considered unmanly. Barrows described a former ranch boss as "utterly lawless, a happy-go-lucky, unreliable friend," concluding that, "no small boy carried a chip more constantly on his shoulder."¹⁶⁶ Throughout most of his

¹⁶² Barrows, *Ubet*, 156.

¹⁶³ Barrows, *Ubet*, 147.

¹⁶⁴ Barrows, *Ubet*, 136.

¹⁶⁵ Abbott, *We Pointed Them North*, 6-7.

¹⁶⁶ Barrows, *Ubet*, 131.

memoir, Barrows refers to his colleagues as “men,” making his description seem deliberate and pointed. Popular conceptions of cowboys, most notably their iterations as dime novel protagonists, characterized the men’s actions as reactionary and impassioned, ready to administer violent retribution for any perceived slight. True cowboys, however, valued thoughtfulness and common sense.

As the work of Moore suggests, cattlemen expected their employees to conduct themselves with a certain degree of restraint both on the trail and while in town. Similarly, the cohort of popular writers who promoted cowboys as role models frequently emphasized their gentlemanly manners. Roosevelt’s description of a gathering in Miles City provides a clear example of this perspective:

At the stockmen's meeting in Miles City, in addition to the big stockmen, there were always hundreds of cowboys galloping up and down the wide dusty streets at every hour of the day and night. It was a picturesque sight during the three days the meetings lasted. There was always at least one big dance at the hotel. There were few dress suits, but there was perfect decorum at the dance, and in the square dances most of the men knew the figures far better than I did.¹⁶⁷

In reality, however, when cowboys were between assignments they were more likely to be found engaging in the sorts of activities described by Clifford Westermeier. “He is best described as a hard-working man of restricted and sober habits,” Westermeier writes, “who, after several months in the saddle, had built up a head of steam not unlike the seaman head toward port.”¹⁶⁸

Generally, this meant a trip into town.

A great deal has been written about the lawlessness of the West, and cattle towns like Abilene and Dodge City became synonymous in popular culture with violence and vice.

¹⁶⁷ Roosevelt, *An Autobiography*, 111.

¹⁶⁸ Westermeier, “The Cowboy and Sex,” 87.

Although certainly exaggerated for dramatic effect by purveyors of fiction, the appeal of the frontier town was very real for cowboys. Barrows recalled, for instance, how he and his friends would make the seven-mile trek to a mining camp over the crest of the mountains rather frequently during the round-up season. The mining camp of Maiden was appealing, Barrows recalled, because it lacked restraint or strict law enforcement, and there was “always the possibility that something might happen.”¹⁶⁹ Abbott’s recollections of his time spent in cow-towns prove to be more revealing, however, because of his openness regarding his sexuality. In a passage that calls to mind Allmendinger’s discussion of square dances and cross dressing, Abbott reminisced about an incident of cross-dressing that occurred in a Miles City, Montana saloon. During a night of drinking and socializing, Abbott found himself donning the accessories of a local prostitute. After the crowd had enjoyed a good laugh over Abbott’s new gold necklace and head scarf, the prostitute dared him to put on her ruffled underpants. “I said yes, naturally,” recalled Abbott, “so she pulled them off, and I put them on over my pants. And we all paraded down the street...it turned the place upside down.”¹⁷⁰ Far from being a symbolic act of subordination to an employer, Abbott’s cross-dressing was a voluntary expression of bravado and dare-deviltry in the company of women who were quite aware of his sexuality. Abbott’s antics would have certainly characterized him as a wild man, not the variety of cowboy worthy of emulation. Yet instead of sliding into wickedness and moral corruption, “Teddy Blue” grew into one of the most respected cowpunchers on the northern plains and even married one of Granville Stuart’s daughters. Through his life-narrative Abbott proves that a cowboy’s identity was not nearly so black and white as the myth would suggest.

¹⁶⁹ Barrows, *Ubet*, 173.

¹⁷⁰ Abbott, *We Pointed Them North*, 111-112.

Although many cowboy memoirs admitted to drinking and gambling, Abbott's self-narrative is unique because of his candor on the topic of prostitution. As he described it, nothing could keep a virile young cowpuncher out of the cathouse following payday. They were "hot-blooded young fellows who hadn't seen a woman, hardly, for six-months," and they were willing to spend all of their cash to enjoy the company of a female.¹⁷¹ With little embarrassment Abbott recalled a number of encounters with prostitutes, noting that extended visits to town allowed him "marry a girl for a week" and have quite a good time. As an older man Abbott admitted that he supposed, "those things would shock a lot of respectable people. But we wasn't respectable and we didn't pretend to be, which was the only way we was different from some others."¹⁷² What is most striking about this admonition is that throughout his memoir Abbott frequently praises the superior qualities of the cowboy class, such as loyalty and self-reliance. Abbott indeed seems to argue *for* the respectability of the cowboy; chastity, however, seems to fall outside of the definition of manliness. Indeed Abbott's openness regarding his youthful indiscretions works to undermine the myth that Westermeier first identified, that a true and manly cowboy was morally unambiguous and asexual, at least until he married. The protagonist of Wister's *The Virginian* may have talked about sex and the female body with his comrades, but he was chaste until he finally convinced the long-courted schoolmistress to marry him. It is important to remember, however, that marriage compels the Virginian to essentially forsakes "the cowboy brotherhood" forever, again reinforcing the myth of a celibate, bachelor cowboy existence.¹⁷³

Of course, just as there was a shortage of "decent women," so too was there a shortage of "paid ladies," and competing claims on a woman could become a source of contention. Abbott's

¹⁷¹ Abbott, *We Pointed Them North*, 79.

¹⁷² Abbott, *We Pointed Them North*, 107.

¹⁷³ Chris Packard, *Queer Cowboys: And Other Erotic Male Friendships in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 43.

description of the prostitute Cowboy Annie provides insight into the complexities of such relationships:

She was the N Bar outfit's girl. They were all stuck on her except the bookkeeper, the nigger cook, and me...but Cowboy Annie surely had the rest of them on her string, and that was true as long as the N Bar outfit in that part of the country held together...She had a little black book, with all her fellows' names written down in it, and she would say to me: 'Now just make all the brands in it, Teddy.' The boys wouldn't all get to town at once as a rule, but when they did there was hell apopping.¹⁷⁴

Cowboys could attempt to secure their claims on a particular woman through two routes: money or muscle. The former scenario worked to the lady's advantage as she could play one man against another in order to obtain material rewards. Abbott's friend Johnny was mortified by the idea that another man from a competing cattle outfit might purchase an expensive gift for Cowboy Annie; in a demonstration of his superior manliness he rushed to the express office to pick up her package before he could be humiliated. This example speaks to the incompatibility of popular culture's view of manliness and the experiences of cowboys living on the frontier. Calculations of masculinity among middle-class men who played at being cowboys were made in relation to chaste and pure women of a similar station; actions taken in service of those women mainly in part because they mimicked sentiments of courtly chivalry. A man who acted out grand gestures for the benefit of a prostitute was, by comparison, a fool. Cowboys who had no access to respectable women, however, would not be denied their opportunity to demonstrate their manliness as "knights of the plains." Their circumstances pressed them to transgress against the moral trappings of popular masculinity, and in doing so they forged another unique component of cowboy gender identity.

¹⁷⁴ Abbott, *We Pointed Them North*, 105.

While his friend may have been ready to marry Cowboy Annie and make an “honest” woman out of her, Abbott claims that he never considered marrying “that kind.” He wanted to find a woman who was pure of body and heart, though he obviously had no aversions to having some fun along the way. His treatment of these working women, however, illustrates a more complicated relationship than might be expected between Abbott and the women he saw as flawed. In one of the most interesting passages in the memoir, he discusses his contempt for the pimps who profited from the sex trade, the men that Abbott refers to as “P.I.s.” At first Abbott’s disdain for the P.I.s comes across as selfish; a cowboy who wanted to see his favorite girl might run the pimp out of town to avoid paying for his entertainment.¹⁷⁵ A subsequent recollection, however, reveals that his deep-seated beliefs about the proper treatment of women brought him into conflict with men who did not share his viewpoints.

I can tell you about something that happened to me one time, and the close shave I had, all because of these notions of chivalry toward women, no matter who they were...In the middle of the night we heard this fracas downstairs – a woman’s screams and then something that sounded like a body falling...I got up and got my six-shooter and went and stood at the head of the stairs, and there was a woman coming up, slowly. She had on a white nightgown, and the front of it was all covered with blood...I heard someone coming behind her, and I called down: ‘If you take one more step, I’ll shoot you.’ And I would have, because I thought I couldn’t do less.¹⁷⁶

Abbott went on to curse himself as a “damn fool” because he had almost killed a man in an act of compulsive masculinity. “Knight of the plains,” Abbott wrote about himself, “Had to protect all females. Lord!”¹⁷⁷ For cowboys raised in the twilight years of Victorian values, acts of chivalry came naturally but the social realities of the frontier presented challenges to the definition of “woman,” and by association “man.”

¹⁷⁵ Abbott, *We Pointed Them North*, 103.

¹⁷⁶ Abbott, *We Pointed Them North*, 109.

¹⁷⁷ Abbott, *We Pointed Them North*, 110.

Finally, in a passage that calls to mind Westermeier's discussion of physical intimacy among cowboys, one is left to wonder if Patrick Tucker and Charles M. Russell maintained a relationship that transgressed the heteronormative expectations of the frontier. Tucker's narrative focuses on his friendship with Russell, before the latter became a famous western artist. In the closing pages, Tucker recounts the last night that he and his friend spent together on the open range:

What we talked about will never be in print. I asked Charley to help me round up the Cross-Hack cattle, but he said he was through punching cows. He was going to take up a homestead in Great Falls, and paint pictures. We camped that night on Arrow creek, and bedded down together. We didn't sleep much. I told Charley that I was married – my wife was still down South waiting for me to send for her. The next morning I cooked chow while Charley get the hosses. After breakfast we had the big smoke, and then packed our hosses. Charley took my hand, and we said good-by. We got on our hosses and went our different ways. Almost the next thing I knew of Charley, he was married. His being married didn't spoil our friendship, we were pals to the end; but things were different.¹⁷⁸

It is possible that Tucker and Russell were more than just crewmates during the years they rode together on the Montana cattle range. As the work of Westermeier suggests, the absence of women on the frontier created an environment in which men turned to other men for both emotional and physical intimacy. Westermeier goes on to argue that this became an accepted, if not publicized, component of cowboy culture. Certainly few would argue that Russell was anything less than manly, as his paintings came to symbolize the West during this period and he was admired by Roosevelt and the public at large. Instead, this passage highlights yet another deficiency of the popular culture masculinity myth; cowboys, it would seem, rejected the notion that their intimate relationships could only exist with women.

¹⁷⁸ Patrick T. Tucker, *Riding the High Country* (Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1933), 209-210.

The process of becoming a man, defending one's manhood, and adapting to changing ideals of masculinity was no more complicated for cowboys than for other men living in late-nineteenth century America. Changes in the workplace, differences in class, and evolving relationships with the opposite sex all contributed to a rather nebulous definition of manliness. Cowboys' experiences were made unique, however, by the presence of the frontier. The frontier existed outside of the strict control of societal norms, and as a result cowboys were able to negotiate their own definitions of masculinity with relative ease. Their particularly physical brand of manliness was then promoted and largely distorted by middle-class society in conjunction with larger changes in gender norms. A dichotomous discourse of cowboy masculinity emerged, moreover, that bestowed value judgments on specific characteristics and activities; good cowboys were honest, assertive, and asexual, while bad cowboys were lazy, immoral, and attracted to vice. In reality of course, a cowboy's experience was rarely all of one and none of the other. The accounts of old-timers reveal that the process by which cowboys defined their manhood was dialectical; when one avenue of gender expression was closed to them, cowboys would engineer another. Sometimes their definition of masculinity reflected their own popular imagery, and other times the definition rejected the mythology. When cowboys recounted their experiences several decades after their turn on the open range, they rarely reflected openly on the processes through which they defined their masculinity but their anecdotes suggest that the proper characteristics of manhood were never far from mind.

Thesis Conclusion

When E. C. “Teddy Blue” Abbott published his memoir in 1939, the book received significant praise and recognition. Even *New York Times* ran a glowing review of *We Pointed Them North*, noting that “any one who cares for the West and its history and the way of life which was the cowboy’s must be grateful.”¹⁷⁹ The reviewer Horace Reynold’s assessment that the memoir would be “authentic source material for the historian of the West,” turns out to have been correct. Reynold’s description of Abbott’s work, however, reveals many of the same assumptions that shaped mythic cowboy imagery, which I have argued that “Teddy Blue” was attempting to contest. For example, in reference to the open-range era, Reynold’s wrote “it was a short phase, but a picturesque one, and it bred men independent, proud of their caste, loyal to their code and their outfits and with some of the swagger which has marked all mounted men in all times.” Similarly, his characterization of the cowboy who trailed cattle north out of Texas, with “his soft voice and his quick temper,” betrays a bias towards dime-novel caricatures. Reynold’s ends the review by categorizing the life-narrative as one more addition to the pantheon of mythic cowboy literature. “Reading it is like sitting on the curb of the main street of Carlsbad, N.M., and listening to John Merchant, boss of the San Simon, tell his stories of the days of the open range,” wrote Reynolds, “And that’s high praise of both matter and style.” The veracity of Abbott’s accounts seem of little doubt to Reynolds, and yet he lumps them in with all other “stories” of the West. *We Pointed Them North* might be an important contribution to the study of history, but no demarcation between fact and myth seems to exist. As the famous line

¹⁷⁹ Horace Reynolds, “‘Teddy Blue’s’ Long Memories of the Open Range,” *New York Times* (April 30, 1939).

from *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, an immensely popular western from the 1960s, goes, “When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”¹⁸⁰

Cowboy legend, as I have demonstrated, was a deliberately generated narrative full of ideas about morality, physicality, and masculinity. The myths should be attributed to the minds of political and social actors, fiction writers and purveyors of popular culture; real cowboys may have served as models, but they had very little to do with the actual creation of their own iconography. Instead, “Buffalo Bill” Cody and Prentiss Ingraham utilized a caricature of the cowboy to sell their products, and Theodore Roosevelt blended his own set of beliefs and his adopted cowboy persona to form a new, very public image of the men of the open range. Americans accepted this manipulated representation of the western cowboy as factual and accurate. More importantly, they came to associate it with important national tenants, namely freedom and self-reliance. In the late-nineteenth century, this public adoration translated into emulative behavior. Middle-class men in the east aspired to dress like, talk like, and act like western cowboys; in doing so they hoped to recapture lost virility and manliness. This phenomenon did not disappear in the twentieth century, but went through successive phases in which the cowboy’s popularity ebbed and flowed according to political and social trends. The Cold War era, in particular, saw a reemergence of the cowboy as a symbol of American exceptionalism. Hollywood westerns of that period carried heavy over-tones concerning the value of capitalism and personal accountability. In addition, the major star of many of those films, John Wayne, was a staunch anti-communist who no doubt helped to perpetuate the message that cowboys were bastions of individualism.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ John Ford, director, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, film (Paramount Pictures, 1962).

¹⁸¹ William W. Savage, *The Cowboy Hero: His Image in American History and Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 25-26.

While the mythic cowboy continued to dominate popular culture, the academic community saw a growing disagreement over the appropriate focus of cowboy studies. Writing in 1979, William Savage expressed frustration over the conservatism that dominated western studies, particularly on the topic of cowboys. Savage wrote, “there is a small but monied ‘cowboy establishment’ that deals in the preservation of the cowboy myth, linking it with the nebulous concept of a western heritage and arguing, in effect, that the cowboy is the last sentinel of the parapet of Americanism.”¹⁸² Cultural histories, like Savage’s, were unwelcome additions to the historiography because they threatened to undermine cowboy legend and western lore. When the cowboy was exposed as a laborer capable of unionist thought, an African American or Hispanic who was not met by an egalitarian frontier, or a virile man who might also, in fact, be homosexual, the protectors of the myth circled their wagons and deemed any “revisionist” history unpatriotic.¹⁸³ More recently, the debates raised by the release of the feature film *Brokeback Mountain* prove that cowboy imagery continues to maintain a near-sacred status among sizeable segments of America’s population. Indeed, a *New York Times* article written just days after the movie’s release quoted a senior member of the politically and socially conservative group Concern Women for America as saying, in reference to the film, “their major agenda is to make this [homosexual lifestyle] normal. They know cowboys have this macho image, cowboys are particularly admired by children. Cowboys are heroes.” The reporter went

¹⁸² Savage, *The Cowboy Hero*, 15.

¹⁸³ Savage, *The Cowboy Hero*, 15-18. See David E. Lopez, “Cowboy Strikes and Unions,” *Labor History* 18, no. 3 (Summer 1977), 325-340; Kenneth W. Porter, “Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry, 1866-1900,” *Labor History* 10, no. 3 (1969): 346-374; Clifford Westermeier, “Cowboy Sexuality: A Historical No-No?” *Red River Valley Historical Review* 2 (1974): 92-113.

on to note that the group was accusing the film's creators of "subverting a sacred American symbol."¹⁸⁴

What these preservationists of mythic cowboy history have failed to recognize, however, is that cowboys *themselves* were challenging the popular narrative even before historians took up the task. Many felt betrayed by Hollywood's glamorization of their image, claiming that movie star cowboys were more concerned with flashy clothing and damsels in distress than with tending to cattle or the seemingly endless search for employment. Earlier forms of popular culture, such as dime novels and Wild West shows, could be accused of doing the same. As my research revealed, the desire to correct popular misconceptions drove many of the memoirists to recount their experiences "in all truthfulness" as they remembered it.¹⁸⁵ Their concern for authenticity was not merely a product of retrospection; it was a quality that had long been defining character of working cowboys. More than tough talk or conspicuous bravado, a cowboy's ability to perform the essential tasks of riding, roping, and herding, along with branding and castrating, determined his masculinity. Inexperience or incompetence were greeted with contempt and mockery by skilled cowpunchers, a custom that was evident in the memoirs of both "tenderfeet" and veterans alike.

Cowboys also took issue with their popular association with violence, a phenomenon that Richard Slotkins elaborates on in great detail in *Gunfighter Nation*. Most cowboys, as it turns out, preferred not to carry weapons while riding because they were heavy and cumbersome. Nor were they compelled to enforce law and order on the range, despite their reputations as men of unparalleled moral fiber. Popular fiction writers and social activists successfully created a

¹⁸⁴ Guy Trebay, "Cowboys, Just Like in the Movie," *New York Times* (December 18, 2005).

¹⁸⁵ Paraphrased from T. B. Long, *70 Years a Cowboy: A Biography* (Regina, Sask.: Western Printers Association, 1959), foreword.

dichotomy of cowboy stereotypes, in which “good cowboys” were near-perfect examples of virility and virtuousness, and “bad cowboys” were dangerous yet alluring ruffians. Actual cowboys, however, lived much of their lives in a moral middle-ground. “Teddy Blue” Abbott’s brothel visits and John Barrow’s retelling of vigilante justice are just two examples.

Like most other wage laborers, cowboys were primarily concerned with making a living and finding ways to enjoy themselves. Some of the activities, which cowboys pursued in the name of pleasure, also came into conflict with cultural expectations. The chaste cowboy, a beacon of late-nineteenth century masculinity, was no more a reality than the loner cowpuncher that relied on no other man. Sexual encounters with prostitutes and even, perhaps, with other men were never included in the popular narrative of the “good cowboy.” Reminiscent cowpunchers were fully aware of their cultural significance, and their memoirs reflect the intertextuality of their life-narratives and the myth of the western cowboy. Through a careful analysis of those accounts, I have uncovered the variety of ways that cowboys received, internalized, and projected the mythic West.

In the future, I would like to expand on this thesis in at least two specific ways. First, in much the same way that I approached masculinity as an element of the larger cowboy myth, I would consider the definition of “whiteness” both in popular culture and in the cattle industry. As I have already noted, masculinity and race are related categories of investigation, but a more thorough investigation of minority experiences in an industry perceived as totally white would be in order. Second, this study of cowboy memoirs would benefit from a comparative analysis with oral history accounts from men of similar age and experience. Specifically, I would like to utilize Federal Writer’s Project interviews with cowboys during the 1930s to determine if or how

the formal process of writing and publishing a life-narrative, versus informal verbal recollections, effects memory.

At this point, it is clear that cowboys were neither the creators of popular culture representations of themselves, nor were they passive recipients of the myth. Parts of the open-range era cowpuncher experience informed the stereotypes promoted by writers, politicians, and social commentators, but in many cases the imagery reflected predetermined cultural values rather than reality. Cowboys who interpreted the myth as an affront to their life's work found the memoir a particularly useful tool in combatting inaccuracies and misrepresentation. At the same time, reminiscent cowboys understood just how powerful their own mythic existence was, and so they utilized it in the process of creating their identity and determining the value of their life's work. Particularly in the case of masculinity, cowboys constructed their identity in relation to the dominant cultural understanding of cowboy manliness, despite its many identifiable flaws. In closing, I am reminded of the sentiments of Jacqueline Moore, who believed that the "truthfulness" of cowboy memoirs, a category that has long defined the usefulness of this primary source, was less important than the ways in which stories were told. In reading these life-narratives for elements of the mythic West contained within, I have attempted to demonstrate the power that myths can have over the people they purport to explain, as well as the continued value of studying the dual American Wests of imagination and reality.

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