

True Grit and Romance of the Cowboy

Erwin Smith wanted to capture an accurate portrayal of the hardworking cowhand before the open range ways disappeared. While Smith was true to the clothing, equipment, and work of the cowhand, he also romanticized him in some of the views he captured. Images that depict the lone cowboy in the saddle against a landscape of brush, hills, and clouds stir the viewer's emotions. They suggest a cultural ideal of the cowboy as a rugged individual who is brave and loyal. This can be called the *romance* of the cowboy—that which is depicted with a flavor of the heroic.

In addition to the romance, Smith also depicted the reality of the cowhand's work that was gritty, dusty, and difficult. This reality is the *true grit* of the cowhand's life. Smith's artistic intent was to blend the romance and the true grit of the cowboy. As a result of this vision, the photographs could be viewed from both perspectives. The left side of the following table compares the romance and mythology of the cowboy with the reality of their life indicated on the right.

<i>ROMANCE:</i>	<i>TRUE GRIT:</i>
Cowboys were	Cowboys actually were
. . . loners or people with an excess of rugged individualism.	. . . cooperative. They could not have trailed thousands of head of cattle, rounded up, and branded calves without the cooperation of other cowboys and horses.
. . . only white or Anglo-American men.	. . . Mexican, African-American, and Anglo. In the 1920s approximately one third of all trail hands were either Mexican or African-American. A typical trail outfit was probably racially mixed. Much of the cowboy's working vocabulary was derived from Spanish words. The <i>vaqueros</i> in Mexico had been ranching on <i>haciendas</i> for many generations prior to the American cowboy. American Indians were cowboys in the Northwest and in Oklahoma. Many ranches in Indian territory were operated by American Indians.
. . . men only.	. . . mostly men. However, women sometimes disguised themselves as men and traveled West to work as cowhands. Wives worked just as hard as the husbands who were cowhands or foremen. Many learned to ride, rope, and brand, as well as cook and entertain.
. . . southerners.	. . . were Anglo. The largest subgroup came from Texas and Missouri.
. . . young southern men gone west after the Civil War.	. . . also former slaves from Texas, who after the Civil War joined other freedmen and went west. During the time of slavery, African-American men held as slaves were the ones who worked with the cattle and horses in the stables of white owners.

<p>. . . able to begin to build their own cattle fortune after the boss gave them some of his cattle. The boss also let the cowboy brand these cattle with a different brand.</p>	<p>. . . not working for generous ranch owners. Instead they probably worked for a corporation or absentee owner who was back East or in Europe. Additionally, cowhands were supervised by a ranch foreman. Most owners did not allow a cowboy to carry a different brand for themselves. One foreman hung two of his companions for "mavericking" (taking the owner's unbranded cattle).</p>
<p>. . . marrying the school teacher and settling down.</p>	<p>. . . single while working as a cowhand. Some cowboys did marry school teachers, but not until they were older. Being a cowboy wore a man out by his late twenties or early thirties. Then, if he stayed with the range, he would go into less strenuous work.</p>
<p>. . . wearing spotless decorated shirts and big white hats.</p>	<p>. . . wearing work clothes that were heavy duty wool pants and collarless flannel pullover shirts. Clothing was purchased because it was available and utilitarian. Pants were tucked into boots, which prevented them from being snagged on the brush and from chaffing between the boots and the stirrup leather. Cowboys seldom wore a coat because it interfered with the freedom required to throw a rope. A vest with pockets was almost always worn because the shirts and pants did not have pockets. A wide-brimmed hat protected the wearer from rain and sun. The handkerchief was used to filter dust.</p>
<p>. . . carrying two Colt .45 pistols on their hips.</p>	<p>. . . not wearing guns. In many outfits, there were rules against carrying guns. Carrying a loaded gun while working around cattle on horseback could be dangerous and was seldom done. Guns weighed a lot and often made it difficult to ride a horse and work. Guns were usually strapped onto a wagon rather than carried on the person.</p>
<p>. . . not working cattle, but were rescuing maidens and foiling bandits.</p>	<p>. . . working between ten and fourteen hours a day. There were four phases of this work: spring roundup, summer trail drive, fall roundup, and winter work. The work was difficult, dirty, and required great physical strength.</p>

Over time it has been the romance rather than the true grit of the cowboy that people want to believe. Simply by living life on the range, the cowboy presented a character for the public to admire and romanticize. That this romantic belief is still idealized today, over 100 years later, is testament to the strength of Americans' desire to hold on to this unique time in history.

Questions for discussion:

Today very few people work as farmers or ranchers as compared to those who work and live in cities.

- What has changed to make this so?
- What type of work do city people do?
- Do you know any farmers or ranchers?
- What type of work do they do?

Can you identify any other romantic ideas about the West?