

Black Cowboys

Economic Impact Yesterday & Today



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Economic Impact Yesterday (1800's)

As early as the 1500's, cattle from Spanish stock meandered north to graze. They had longer horns than other cattle. As they wandered across the frontier or were herded by landowners, they met sturdy, speckled-coated British-bred cattle moving west from the U.S. eastern coast. Nature took its course and by the 1800's, a new breed of strong, hardy, disease-resistant Longhorn cattle roamed the frontier by the millions.

In the early 1800's, more Europeans were moving west of the Mississippi to the territories and bringing their slaves with them. Some came through Spanish and Mexican land grants and build up large farms or ranches especially in the Southwest. During the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), Mexican landowners were told they would not have Mexican protection and were order to evacuate what we now call Texas. Many of them fled and left their cattle, horses and other ranch animals behind. These animals existed on the open range and multiplied over the next 13 years. During the Civil War (1861-1865), many Texans left their ranches and farms in the hands of their slaves to fight in the Confederacy. The Union Army eventually blocked the waterways and railroads so ranchers in Texas had no way to get their cattle to Southern Rebels. It's estimated that 36,000 African Americans died during or after the war due mostly to wounds and disease, 38% more than Whites. Although Emancipation was an Executive Order issued in 1863, it wasn't until June 1865 that Texas learned that all slaves were free.



After the Civil War in 1866, Congress formed two black cavalry and five black infantry regiments to support the war against the Indian Nations. These regiments consisted of the 9th and 10th Cavalry and the 24th, 25th, 39th, 40th and 41st Infantry. Regiments included black Civil War Soldiers and new recruits. These Black soldiers (many freed slaves) eventually became known as Buffalo Soldiers.

After the war there were many young men at loose ends and there was an enormous amount of unclaimed wild cattle – some estimate in the millions. Also burgeoning cities to the North and the territories to the West coveted meat and were willing to pay top dollar. Although most Ranch owners were Spanish or European (White) many of the men working on the ranches and the cattle trails were not. What many people today don't know is that Black Cowboys made up about 25% of the cowboys who worked the trails, ranches and cattle drives that occurred from 1866-1886. The rest were Spanish, Indian and European.



Out on the trail range equality existed, people cared more about whether a man could do his job, ride, wrangle cattle, break horses, shoot and do an honest day's work more than they cared about the color of a man's skin. However, discrimination did exist when they went into town it was a different story. Black men could gamble in the gaming halls, but often were not allowed in the saloons or eating establishments. They had to go to the back door to get their food so many cooked their own meals on the trail, and they certainly were not allowed in the Brothels.

From 1868 with 36,000 of head moving up the Chilsolm then the Goodnight-Loving trails to 1886 when the numbers reached 200,000 or more, the cattle industry was the most financially impactful activity in many Western communities and certainly in Texas. On average, a single herd of cattle on a long drive (for example, Texas to Kansas railheads) numbered about 3,000 head. To herd the cattle, a crew of at least 10-12 cowboys was needed, with three horses per cowboy. Cowboys worked in shifts to watch the cattle 24 hours a day, herding them in the proper direction in the daytime, pulling them out of the mud after rainstorms and watching them at night to prevent stampedes and deter wolves or thieves. The crew also included a cook, who drove a chuck wagon, usually pulled by oxen, and a horse wrangler to take charge of the spare horses. The cook was a particularly well-respected member of the crew, as not only was he in charge of the food, he also was in charge of medical supplies.

After the Civil War, Texas was selling cattle at \$1.50-\$4.00 a head and Chicago and other Meat Packing Plants were paying \$30-\$40 a head so getting cattle from Texas to the rail or stockyards in the midwest to be put on the trains and transported North was worth the 6 months of dirt, dust, disease, Indians, bandits and more. The ranch owners got rich and the cowboys made \$25-\$40 a month, horse wranglers \$65 and a trail boss \$125. The work was steady until the railroads made inroads across the vast Western and Southern states, barbed

wire was invented, and Native Americans were relegated to reservations, all of which decreased the need for cowboys on ranches. Though opportunities to become a working cowboy were on the decline, the public's fascination with the cowboy lifestyle prevailed, making way for the popularity of Wild West shows and rodeos. Popularized across the United States in 1873 by Buffalo Bill Cody, Wild West Shows showcased the skills and characters of cowboys and Native Americans.

GREAT NAMES

Bose Ikard – Born a slave in Mississippi in 1847, Ikard was brought to Texas when he was five. Growing up, he learned to rope and ride. After serving in the Civil War to gain his freedom, he hired out his services and skills as a trail driver to Oliver Loving. After Loving was killed by Comanches in New Mexico, Ikard continued working for Charles Goodnight often acting as a banker for who would think a Black man would be carrying all that money. Goodnight's fondness for Ikard is clear: *"Served with me four years on the Goodnight-Loving Trail, never shirked a duty or disobeyed an order, rode with me in many stampedes, participated in three engagements with Comanches. Splendid behavior."* He died in 1829 and is buried in Weatherford, Texas.

Nat Love – Born a slave on a Tennessee plantation in 1854, Love eventually became a cowboy in Dodge City and the Texas Panhandle. He possessed excellent horse-riding and shooting skills. In 1876, after winning several contests at a Deadwood, S.D., rodeo, he was given the nickname *"Deadwood Dick."* In 1907, he wrote an autobiography titled, *"Life and Adventures of Nat Love."* The first to write his autobiography, Love said it best. *"I gloried in the danger, and the wild and free life of the plains, the new country I was continually traversing, and the many new scenes and incidents continually arising in the life of a rough rider."* After retiring as a cowboy he worked for the railroad as a Pullman porter then as a bank guard in Los Angeles, California. He died in 1921.

Bill Pickett – Born in 1870 near Taylor, Texas, Pickett was one of 13 children. He worked as a ranch hand at a young age and went on to excel as a cowboy. He went to work for the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch in Oklahoma and participated in their Wild Ranch Shows. He inadvertently invented "bulldogging," when a steer got loose and jumped the rail into the crowded audience. After that Pickett became a star at Wild West shows. He continued competing in rodeos in Arizona, Colorado, and Wyoming and was a world famous bulldogger. He also performed in a number of movies. Pickett died in 1932. In 1971, he became the first African American inducted into the Rodeo Hall of Fame.