

## American Cowboys

Although cowboys still ride the range today, the heyday of the American cowboy stretched from just after the Civil War until the 1880s. During those post-Civil War days, an estimated 40,000 men worked in the thriving cattle business in the American West.

In colonial times, cattle-raising was common in states such as Georgia and Florida. However, cowboys did not become recognized as such until after the Civil War when they started to work in the states and territories that were west of the Missouri River. At the time, about 40 million people lived in the eastern half of the United States, and the supply of beef there had been greatly diminished by the war. In contrast, in the area that stretched from the Great Plains west to California, there were more cattle than there were people! As a result, a steer worth four dollars in the West was worth ten times that much in the East.

The cowboys' duties included leading cattle to summer grazing pastures, branding them, and protecting them until they reached market. Often, the market was many hundreds of miles from the ranch. Because of the economics involved, stealing cattle was a common event. Other risks to the cattle involved stampedes, lightning, rattlesnakes, and drought.

Cowboys were also responsible for the health of the cattle. That included treating them for infestations of blowflies, which laid eggs in open wounds such as fresh brands. If not eliminated with medicines, the eggs grew into screwworms, which could kill the animals.

The average age of cowboys was 24. Most did not have much formal education except the work skills they had picked up along the way. Being a cowboy was not an easy life. Riding accidents, including being dragged by horses, were the leading cause of death. The second cause of death was pneumonia, which cowboys contracted by being exposed to the elements.

## Unit 4

About one in every four cowboys was black. One of the most famous black cowboys was Nat Love. Love was born in a Tennessee slave cabin in 1854. He headed west as a teenager and landed in Dodge City, Kansas, when he was 15. He worked on a trail herd for a time and then joined a rodeo where he became a popular performer.

- The image of the cowboy carries with it an appeal that refuses to go away. Why do you think cowboys inspire such envy?
  
- Some have suggested that the Great Plains be returned to the way they were during the cowboys' heyday. Is that a conservative view? Why or why not?
  
- Many fallacies exist about cowboys and their way of life. Pick one and describe it.