

COWBOY WORK: A HARD WAY TO MAKE A LIVING



Stampedes were the most dangerous part of a trail drive. The cowboys would have to try to turn and slow down the cattle by riding in front of the charging mob.

Cowboys were the hired hands who worked for ranchers. In legend, they were hard-riding, gun-toting, hard-living men with great courage and romantic lives in the saddle. At least part of this was true. What is left out is also true: the dust, low pay, long hours, and danger. Consider what a want ad for cowboys would have looked like.

PAY. Willing to work long hours for \$25 per month. If employed in winter, will ride line looking for stray cattle that may have wandered over the divide from another ranch. During cattle drives, expect to be in the saddle from sunrise to sunset, with some time off for eating. At night, you will ride nighthawk at least two hours. During a stampede, you will ride until the cattle have finally been brought under control, which may take two or three days. If unemployed, you will probably spend the winter bounty hunting for wolves or working at odd jobs in town.

CLOTHING will be provided by the cowboy. A broad-rimmed *hat* protects the head from sun, hail, and cold and is your pillow at night. A *vest* is worn instead of a coat to give arms more freedom and allow perspiration to evaporate. A *bandana* protects the face from sun and the nose from dust, and *chaps* protect legs from brush. *Gloves* save hands from rope burn.

HOUSING. The cowboy lives in the bunkhouse or line shack. Both are dirty and smelly. Some reading material is available at both, mostly mail-order catalogs, old newspapers, and farm journals. These are often put up for decoration and to cover gaps in the wall. Line shacks are isolated outposts along the ranch's boundary, and two men usually live there. On cattle drives, the sky will be your roof. In case it rains, a slicker helps.

MANNERS. Certain customs are never violated. (1) Never ask a person's name. He might have some reason for hiding it. (2) Always treat a lady with respect. Cowboys sometimes ride miles to watch a girl comb her hair, but they never touch her. (3) Be hospitable to the passing stranger; offer food and coffee because someday you may be down on your luck, too. (4) Certain qualities are not acceptable. Theodore Roosevelt wrote: "Meanness, cowardice, and dishonesty are not tolerated. There is a high regard for truthfulness and keeping one's word, intense contempt for any kind of hypocrisy, and a hearty dislike for a man who shirks his work." (5) Don't talk too much or use fancy words.

Ranch hands don't like it.

MEALS. On the ranch, the cook takes care of the food. He is usually good at his job; the best hands will leave if he isn't. He is also "a mite tetchy," so you don't criticize him if the beans are burned or the coffee is too strong for a horseshoe to sink in it. On cattle drives, the cook runs the chuck wagon, which is supplied with food, cooking utensils, tools, medicine, and wood. On the cattle drive, the cook is also your doctor, dentist, and undertaker. Next to the trail boss, he is the highest-paid man on the drive. At line shacks, the cowboys cook for themselves.

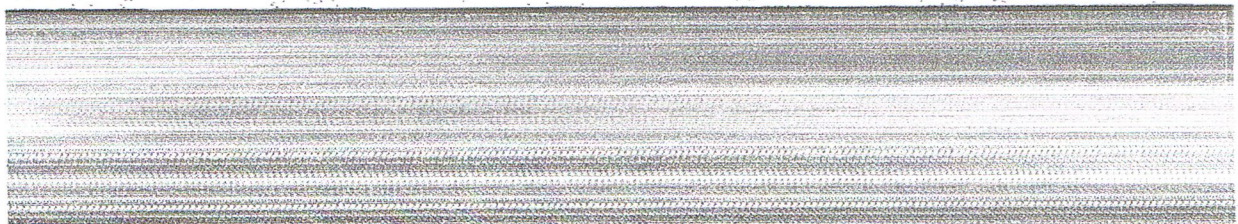
THE WORK. Theodore Roosevelt, himself experienced as a cowboy, describes learning the job as a hard apprenticeship, enduring "hard living, dirt, exposure of every kind, no little toil, and month after month of the dullest monotony." To fill time, cowboys often rope anything in sight, especially wild game. Three events bring life to the cowboys: breaking horses, the roundup, and the cattle drives.

Breaking horses provides great amusement. The job is usually given to younger cowboys. The horse is blindfolded, a cowboy saddles him and climbs on, the blindfold is removed, and the fun begins. Being bucked off is common. After two or three rides of an hour each, the horse is considered broken.

Roundup is the time cattle are gathered for branding. At daybreak, the cowboys hear the cook announcing: "Come and get it, before I throw it out." They go over to the cook, pour cold water over their hands and faces, pass a towel, and pass a comb around. After a hearty breakfast, the first men finished form a fence made up of ropes stretched around the horse herd, and ropers go inside to lasso the horses for the men. Horses are then saddled, and the men mount up. The remaining horses are led off by the wrangler to graze. By sunrise, the cowboys ride off to gather the cattle on the bunch ground. When the cattle come, those without brands meet the branding iron, usually after putting up some struggle. When the work is done for the day, each man rides nighthawk for at least two hours.

Cattle drives have much of the same routine as roundups, except this time they are moving the cattle to market. The chuck wagon heads the procession, followed by wranglers with spare horses, and then the herd. As it travels, the herd spreads out like a fan following the lead steer. Beside the herd, "point" riders guide the cattle in the right direction. Trailing the herd, the "drag" riders eat dust kicked up by 4,000 hooves, suffer the heat built up by the herd, and keep prodding the weak and crippled animals who always wanted to drop back.

DANGERS. There are many ways to get hurt or killed. There is the menace of animals: horses, temperamental cattle, rattlers, wolves, and flies and mosquitoes that attack in squadrons. There are human enemies as well: rustlers, hostile Indians, and armed farmers. Weather increases the risks: hail storms, lightning bolts, and tornadoes can strike suddenly, and the cowboy has no place to hide. There are diseases like cholera, and accidental injuries also take their toll. The most dangerous situation of all is the stampede, and that requires all your skill and stamina.



Name _____ Date _____

POINTS TO PONDER

1. Which parts of the manners required of cowboys do you think are still important? Which do not seem to fit among young people you know?

2. If roundups and cattle drives were so hard on the men, why did they look forward to them?

3. Considering the dangers, would young people today be excited by the opportunity to be a cowboy? Why or why not?

4. Some argue that the cowboy has had a major effect on modern America. Would you agree or disagree? Why?

Name _____ Date _____

CHALLENGES

1. How much pay did a cowboy receive per month?

2. Why did he wear the broad-brimmed hat?

3. What were the homes for cowboys called?

4. Why was it considered wrong to ask a person's name?

5. What qualities were not tolerated by cowboys?

6. Why was a good cook essential for a successful ranch?

7. What were the non-food duties of cooks on cattle drives?

8. What was the most common activity of cowboys during dull times?

9. What was the wrangler's job?

10. Which job was preferable: the point or the drag rider? Why?
