

History Topic of the Month

Black cowboys in the American West

If you have ever seen a photograph of a cowboy or watched a Western film, it is likely that all the cowboys you saw were white. But just like today, America was a multi-cultural, hugely diverse society. There were many black cowboys in the American West. Who were these individuals, and why have so many of them been forgotten by history?



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Native American & African American Cowboys

Who were cowboys?

Cowboys were cattle herders who rode on horseback. Their main responsibility was to manage the herds of cattle on the open plains.

Cowboys appeared after 1836, when Texas became independent from Mexico. There were many American settlers in Texas, even though it was not yet a part of the USA. These settlers took over the Mexican cattle industry. They admired the highly skilled Mexican and Native American vaqueros, horse riding cattle herders whom the Texans nicknamed cowboys. Some vaqueros continued to work for the cattle ranchers, whilst American settlers also learned to herd cattle on horseback. By the 1870s and 1880s, there were thousands of cowboys driving cattle towards cow towns for transport to cities all over the USA.

The name 'cowboy' was originally used for black, Plains Indian and Hispanic cattle herders. It is likely that white employees were called 'cowhands', whereas 'boy' was used for anyone who was not white. However, over time 'cowboy' became the normal name to use.

Were there any black cowboys?

Yes! There were many black cowboys in the American West. No one is exactly sure of the number, but many historians think that between 25% and 35% of all cowboys were African American. This probably means that in the years 1860-1880 there were between 5,000 and 10,000 black cowboys. In an outfit of a dozen cowboys, about three to five would usually be black or Hispanic. It was rare for the trail boss (the cowboy in charge of a group) to be black, but it did happen.

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What different reasons could explain why so many African Americans chose the life of a cowboy?

Plamen

Many black cowboys had previously been enslaved. When slaves were freed in 1865, up to 250,000 African Americans in Texas, the centre of the cattle industry, gained freedom, and they all needed to find employment. Many continued to work in agriculture, but some found work as cowboys. Many more African Americans moved west in search of a better life. Many wanted to escape discrimination or to seek 'a white man's wage' through employment on a ranch. For example, in 1879, about 40,000 black Americans travelled to Kansas to start new lives. Many found work in shops and bars, in domestic work or on farms, but thousands of African Americans became cowboys.

Nat Love

One of the most famous black cowboys was Nat Love. He was born into slavery in 1854, but was freed in 1865. He moved to Dodge City, Kansas, and spent 20 years as a cowboy. He got the nickname Deadwood Dick when he competed in a rodeo in Deadwood, South Dakota in 1876. He was able to calm, saddle and mount a horse in a record time of nine minutes, compared to twelve minutes for the next competitor. He also won the sharpshooting contest. Love retired in 1890. In 1907 he published his life story in the book *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*. Historians believe many of the details in the book are exaggerated but, even so, he certainly lived an adventurous life.



Contributor: © The Granger Collection / Alamy Stock Photo

Nat Love (b. 1854) also known as 'Deadwood Dick' was a black American cowboy.

Bill Pickett

Another famous, black cowboy was Bill Pickett. He was born in 1880 and learned the skills of cattle herding. He became a rodeo star with the nickname 'Dusky Demon'. He invented a move for catching bulls which became known as 'bulldogging'. He would jump from a horse onto the running bull, grabbing it by the horns, and then reach round and bite it on the lip. The bull could then be wrestled to the ground. This skill led to him gaining fame as a performer and even appearing in films. However, he was not allowed to participate in some rodeos as he was African American – he had to pretend to be Native American. After his death, Pickett was inducted into the Rodeo Hall of Fame.



Contributor: © Historic Collection / Alamy Stock Photo

Black cowboy, Bill Pickett an image from the collection of North Fort Worth Historical Society



Contributor: © Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

Bill Pickett starred in several films, such as *The Bull Dogger* (1921)



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Bose Ikard

Bose Ikard was born into slavery in 1843. As an enslaved man, he learned the skills of a cowboy, so after the Civil War he returned to cowboy work as a free man. He worked as a trail boss for the wealthy rancher, Charles Goodnight. Goodnight reportedly said that he trusted Ikard more than any other man. Ikard became famous as Goodnight's manager, trail boss, banker and detective. He often carried thousands of dollars in cash for Goodnight. When he left this employment, Ikard went on to run his own farm with his family.



Contributor: © History and Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo

Black cowboy, Ned Huddleston, also known as 'Isom Dart', Brown's Hole, WY circa 1890s

Isom Dart

Isom Dart was born into slavery in 1849, with the name Ned Huddleston. In 1865 he was freed and headed west. He worked in Texas as a cowboy and became famous for his shooting and riding skills. He also earned money as a stunt rider. However, he soon realised that he could make more money from crime. In 1875 he worked with a group of cattle rustlers, but when they were all ambushed and shot, he escaped and returned to cattle driving. He changed his name to Isom Dart to avoid arrest. For several years he mixed legal cowboy and ranching work with criminal activities. In 1900, he was shot, probably by a detective who had been hired by wealthy ranchers to prevent cattle rustling.

What about African American women in the American West?

Being a cowboy was almost exclusively a male role, with few cowgirls. However, there were many black women in Texas and the American West. Many found work in bars, hotels and shops and some became successful business owners. For example, Bridget Mason was born into slavery and only freed aged 37. She worked as a nurse in Los Angeles and saved hard from her small wages. She used this money to buy property and, by the time she died in 1891, aged 72, she was very wealthy.

Clara Brown was freed from life in slavery in 1857 and she travelled west. She saved money from her wages to buy land, and loaned money to miners in return for a share of any gold that they found. By her death in 1885, she was very wealthy and used her money to help other African Americans migrate to the West.



Contributor: © Gibson Green / Alamy Stock Photo

Portrait of Clara Brown



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Mary Fields, also known as Stagecoach Mary, lived an exciting life. She was freed from slavery in 1865 and she found work doing building maintenance. Aged about 63, she became a mail carrier, a dangerous job which required strength as well as skill with a gun. She was the second woman to do this job. When she retired, she settled in Cascade, Montana, where she was so popular that the local government made an exception to a law banning women from saloons so she could go in, and the town celebrated her birthday each year.

What was the experience of black men and women in the American West?

Life in the American West was tough for everyone. Migrating and settling was a challenge, and the growing settlements were full of crime. The life of a cowboy was also tough, with months on the trails and winters spent out on the Plains looking for cattle in a blizzard. Black cowboys faced the same challenges as everyone else.

Black cowboys also faced the same discrimination as African Americans all over the USA. For example, they were not allowed to stay in 'whites only' hotels. However, some historians think black people in the American West may have faced less discrimination than those living elsewhere. This is because even if a business owner did not like serving black people, the need for customers in a small settlement would make it less likely for them to turn away black customers. Wages were also similar between black and white cowboys, and if fights broke out in town, white and black cowboys were likely to defend members of their own outfit, regardless of skin colour. Out on the trail, needing to work together to cope with hardships may have been a bigger concern for white cowboys than racist ideas. This has led some historians to conclude that, despite continuing racism, many black cowboys may have had a better experience than African Americans elsewhere.



Contributor: © Glasshouse Images / Alamy Stock Photo

Black Cowboys on horseback, USA, Circa 1880

On the trail, many cowboys sang for entertainment. The black cowboys brought the influence of blues singing which had origins in songs of enslaved Africans on plantations. This style of 'cowboy blues' was made famous by singers like Huddie Ledbetter, known as Leadbelly. It has influenced modern music. For example, cowboy blues have influenced country and western music, as well as jazz, rock and R&B.



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The end of cowboys on the Range

By the 1890s, the time of cowboys as adventurers who rode across the Plains herding cattle had passed. But the cowboy lifestyle stayed alive in the form of Wild West shows run by showmen like Buffalo Bill. Talented cowboys entertained crowds with their skills. Many of these performers were Hispanic, Native American or African American. Some African American women performed in these shows as well.



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Native American & African American Cowboys

What happened to black cowboys in the media?

There were many black cowboys in the American West. Yet very few films show this reality. The American film industry in the early twentieth century was deeply racist. Instead of trying to show real history, filmmakers focused on the stereotype that the 'Wild West' just involved white Americans and Native Americans, or 'cowboys and Indians'. Over time, these films affected how people remembered the history of the American West. In later decades, even when African Americans began to be better represented in the media, people did not think of the American West involving black people. Even today, in the twenty-first century, many Americans do not think that there were black cowboys.

For over a century, black cowboys have been ignored in history, as if they never existed. But their role in creating the American West played a crucial part in the creation of modern America. Even though most of their names have been lost over time, it is a good thing that historians in recent years are realising the important role these individuals played in the creation of the modern world.



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Discussion points

- Why do historians have to estimate the number of black cowboys in the American West?
- What different reasons could explain why so many African Americans chose the life of a cowboy?
- Imagine you are a black cowboy in the period 1860-1880. What do you think would be the most challenging part of your life?
- Hollywood and the media played a big role in making people think that African Americans had not played a big part in the American West. Why do you think films have such a big impact on people's ideas about the past? Can you think of any other historical topics where the media has affected how people think about it?
- Historians only know about the individual lives of a small number of black cowboys, like Nat Love, Bill Pickett and others. What could be the advantages of studying their lives to learn about the experience of black cowboys? Are there any disadvantages?
- Bill Pickett was recognised for his achievements thirty years after his death, and historians are only now researching black history in the American West. Why did it take so long for people to consider this part of history? Is it worth doing this research after so much time has passed?
- You have learned a little about several individuals. Pick one of them and try to find out a bit more about their life. Alternatively, try to find something out about two cowboys called Charlie Glass and George McJunkin.

About the author

This piece was written by Ben Armstrong, History Consultant for Pearson with a background in teaching history at secondary level and writing educational resources. It was prepared using various source listed below.



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History Topic of the Month: Black cowboys in the American West

Books



Black Cowboys of the West – Tricia Wagner

Black Cowboys in the American West – Michael Searles

The Life and Adventures of Nat Love – Nat Love

Videos



[Why the first US cowboys were black](#) (Youtube)

[Black History Month: Black Cowboys](#) (Youtube)

Articles



[African American Cowboys on the Western Frontier](#) (JSTOR)

[African American Women on the Western Frontier](#) (JSTOR)

[African Americans and the History of Rodeo](#) (JSTOR)

[Cowboy Blues: Early Black Music in the West](#) (JSTOR)

[Deadwood Dick and the Black Cowboys](#) (JSTOR)

(The JSTOR articles are available for free by [registering](#) for an account).

Websites



[Black Cowboys](#) (Texas State Historical Association)

[Cattle Ranchers](#) (Bullock Museum)

[Vaqueros](#) (Bullock Museum)

[America's Forgotten Black Cowboys](#) (BBC)

[Cowboys](#) (History.com)

[African American Women of the Wild West](#) (Signature Theatre)

[The Lesser Known History of Black Cowboys](#) (Smithsonian Magazine)