COWBOY NICKNAMES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY GREAT PLAINS CATTLE COUNTRY

by
C. Robert Haywood

-And if his name be George, I'll call him Peter;
For new-made honour doth forget men's names.
-Shakespeare, King John (Act I)

When Walter Johnson, as a green country boy of eighteen, joined a Kansas railroad crew, the boss asked him what his name was. "Walter, he said. "No," corrected the boss, 'Ve done got two Valters. You are Yack." And Yack he was as long as he pounded spikes for the railroad and was a "pet name" for years after for people who had known him as a young man.

In the days of craft guilds, each guild membership had as part of its manifestations of the bonding process the giving and acceptance of "in-house" titles, address, and familiar names. Even today, when an occupational group–such as a ship's crew, a squad of soldiers, or working crews like Walter Johnson's railroad gang–is small and thrown together in a close and prolonged manner, there is a tendency to drop old names (what the cowboys called the "onest name") and adopt new, more meaningful, addresses. Men on the Great Plains, who rode the range, trailed cattle to distant markets, and celebrated end-of-trail success, were in closer contact than most other occupations and were physically and emotionally dependent upon the other members of the "outfit." They worked long hours together, slept near each other, ate and complained about the same food. By the time they reached the climax of a long and wearying cattle drive or round up, they were about as closely bonded as any occupational group could be. New, familiar address came easily and nicknames came equally without effort.

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Whether bestowed as honors as Shakespeare had it, or for more practical reasons as Yack's section boss saw it, nicknames (sobriquets, pet names, diminutives, familiar address, "handles," or monickers) became a part of the tradition of nineteenth-century cowboy culture. The conferring of a nickname was generally a positive sign of good will and was rarely rejected or changed as long as the circumstances remained the same. Moving to a new spread, changing sides in a contest, or altering personal circumstances could cause a change of an old label, but generally a sobriquet was an advantage to all who were associated with the name and the owner kept it. Most nicknames were distinctive enough to be easily identified with the owner. The most common nickname reflected some physical characteristic. The West could count a legion of men known as "Red," "Lefty," or "Slim." The logic of cowboy humor, however, caused some ambivalence. "Shorty" could refer to either an extra tall man or one noticeably below average height. Usually, however, a descriptive term was immediately apparent when the person was first met.

The physical characteristic identified with a person generally was given great, at times seemingly brutal, candor. "Stub" or "Stubby" had a noticeable loss of a finger or arm. "Specs" wore his name on his nose. "Lofty" and "Lengthy" were never mistaken for the ranch hand named "Shorty." Many "handles" were very specific in their description: "Busted-nose Johnnie" and "Sand-blasted Pete" were graphic descriptions of a crooked nose and evidence of a severe case of smallpox.[1] "One-eyed" Davis, "Curley Kid," and "Bean Belly' were equally self-evident. The terms, "Big" and "Little," were not necessarily describing physical characteristics but could be used to distinguish father from son or an older brother from a younger one. But usually the terms did imply a person's stature. "Little Joe the Wrangler," the tragic hero of song who had left an abusive home, was never confused with "Big Joe" Smith, and neither was the runaway "Little Jim" Manning who killed a man over a horse race, or "Little Dick" Simpson, another runaway youth.[2] "Little" certainly never indicated that here was a person who could be ignored because he lacked courage or aggressive tendencies. On the other hand, because of size, strength or bearing, there were a large number of men called "Bull," but "Bull Durham," one of Andy Adams' card-playing partners, carried the origin of his nickname in his shirt pocket and had nothing to do with macho presence.[3]

Some descriptive monickers needed more than a casual explanation. Several men were given the unflattering sobriquet of "Dirty Face," which was misunderstood by later writers. Charles E. "Dirty Face" Jones, the co-founder of the Jones and Plummer Trail, carried the name but it had nothing to do with personal hygiene. He, like the others, owed the name to an accidental firing of a gun too close to his face which left pitted gunpowder and burns as an indelible

mark.[4] It was also something of a stretch to explain the nickname of one well-known cattleman, Abel Head ("Shanghai") Pierce as coming from his resemblance to a Shanghai rooster, but that was what first caused it to be used.[5]

A few descriptive nicknames did not clarify but only added to the confusion. Hyman G. Neill, the cowboy turned outlaw, used the alias "Hoodoo Brown" which served as advertisement of his wild and dangerous ways. George W. Brown, a stockman and way station operator in Meade County, who was generally law abiding, was given the "Hoodoo" nickname because he had the same last name as the outlaw, just as dozens of later boys whose family name was James were known as "Jesse." The two Hoodoos caused considerable confusion because they operated in the same general area for awhile.[6] Even as distinctive a monicker as "Three Fingers Jack" led to mistakenly identifying an itinerant gambler killed in Wichita as J. L. Patterson who also carried the same nickname.[7]

Frequently, the source of a nickname came from some incident an individual bragged about or that was associated with him. "Pretty Shadow" Mason, Charles Russell explained, was not an Indian, although the sobriquet might sound like it, but it was given to him due to his habit of "ridin' along, lookin' at his shadow."[8] Marby "Mustang" Gray earned his nickname when he lost his horse in a fall when out on the range by himself. He used remarkable ingenuity to capture a wild pony and ride it back to the ranch.[9] His was truly a nickname to be proud of. James H. "Dog" Kelly, Dodge City's notorious mayor, was rarely seen without his pack of hounds. Henry "Skunk Curley" Gould probably did not get the name the courts used as an alias from close association with animals but rather it represented a character judgment call.[10] Many of the names simply reflected the cowboy trade: for example, "Rawhide" Rawlines, "Waddy" Peacock, W. E. "Short Horn" Campbell, W. H. "Lasso" Sears, "Bunk" White, and "Pack-rat" Davis. The latter was a popular cowboy who kept a special warbag full of things such as needles, bandages, talcum powder, and razor blades that might come in handy for the entire crew. Jim Herron remembered the cowboy called "Handshaker" who "made a practice of introducing himself and shaking hands, like the businessmen in the East would do.[11] "Wild Horse" Johnson, whose profession was chasing down and selling wild horses, carried his name as a walking advertisement.[12] "Doc" was a fairly common name, not necessarily a title, and not from any formal medical qualifications, but was given to amateur veterinarians or for some act of kindness, helping someone through a siege of illness or setting a cowboy's broken arm.

Among other common sources of names were states, towns, rivers, or other geographic features.. Nearly every state in the Union appeared as a definer of someone's name. There were more "Tex" names than any other but there were many honored locations: "Denver Jack," "Colorado Bill," "Nevada" Smith,

"Arkansas Tom" Jones. The place so honored need not be as imposing as a state; but could be a landmark no larger than Tom James Smith's "Bear River."[13] "Jack," usually informalized from John, was one of the most popular names and because there were so many of them they needed additional distinctions. There were a number of "Happy Jacks" and especially the Texas type, including some of the more famous: "Texas Jack" Moore and "Texas Jack" Vermillion. Other common names needed the same kind of add-on definers. Laban S. Records rode with two Daves from Caldwell, Kansas: "Texas Dave" Thomas and "Missouri Dave" Thomas. The cowboys found it useful to be able to identify which Dave was being addressed.[14]

The cowboy did not have to be a native or even to have remained long in the place he was named after. All that was needed was to have mentioned the location with some enthusiasm as a place he had once visited. The casualness with which a nickname was given was explained by Charles Russell in describing one of his fellow riders nicknamed "Mormon Murphy": "This Murphy ain't no real Mormon. He's what we'd call a jack-Mormon; that is, he'd wintered down with Brigham an' played Mormon awhile."[15]

Respect for family position or age could be shown by adding a "Uncle," "Aunt," or "Dad" to the name, as in "Uncle Jim" Daugherty of Hudspeth County, Texas, "Uncle Billy" Ricks, "Aunt Sallie" Frazier of Dodge City, and "Dad Barnes." Such "pet names" sometimes reflected subtle differences of status. "Uncle" attached to an African-American name reflected a demeaning paternalistic affection, as in Uncle Remus. When attached to a white man's name, the intention was generally affection. "Uncle" had added usefulness because it did not connote advanced age, but only maturity and respect. "Pop" or "Dad" was usually reserved for old cowboys who had seen better days and to cooks who were considered to be already headed down the slippery side of the hill. A cook was lucky to escape with no more degrading title than "Sourdough," "Bean Master," or "Cookie."

If some nicknames were intended to signify lowered status, others added prestige, even macho power. Two lawmen in the cowtown days, B. A. Carr of Caldwell and William Barclay Masterson of Dodge and Wichita adopted the tough sobriquet "Bat" to replace the more dandified Barclay, Bartholomew, or neutral initials. But add "Old" to "Bat" and the image was toned down. John Slaughter's faithful black partner, "John Battavia "Old Bat" Hinnant possessed far more authority and wealth than his name ever admitted. "Mysterious Dave" Mather, one of the many cowboy killers cum lawmen, made considerable capital of his exotic monicker and in his day was considered a romantic figure. Nate Love created his own legend and he-man image with the "Deadwood Kid" label.

Racism among cowboys and cattlemen was evident although rarely allowed to interfere with the work of the range or trail. "Black" and "Nigger" or "Mex" and "Mexican" were frequently attached to minority cowboys. There is no doubt that such nicknames were intended to degrade. Men like John Chisum's "right-hand man," "Nigger Frank," however, were respected and accepted as boss and authority figure. Ranch-related jobs offered more dignity and more opportunity for self-expression than any other employment in the West. Still, only a few men ever achieved that status where they were considered equals to the white cowboys.

Black men could, however, develop a specialty that gave them added status. "Bronco Sam" garnered a reputation as a horse breaker and one of the most colorful black ranchers was known simply as "Snowball."[16] A few black cowboys, as well as some white cowboys, operated on the "shadow side of the law." Ned Huddleston, who put on and took off new names as he would working gloves, used a number of fanciful names to aid in keeping himself out of jail: "The Black Fox," "Calico Cowboy," and the less spectacular alias "Isom Dart."[17] "Big Eaf" tried to live up to his name by making a bullying nuisance of himself until the night he was gunned down in a black brothel in Dodge City by a quicker, if not bigger, black cowboy.[18]

Women, unless they became involved in the day-to-day outdoor operation of a ranch or were habitues of a dance hall or brothel, were given too much respect by the cowboys to be addressed by any name less formal than "Ma'am," "Mrs.," or "Miss." But Elizabeth E. Johnson, a school teacher turned cattlewoman in Hugo County, Texas, who was known as "Lizzie," and "Aunt Sallie" Frazier, ran an integrated restaurant in Dodge City, but these were exceptions to the rule. As for the prostitutes, the names they used were of their own making and were intended to be attractive or humorously flamboyant. Joseph Snell in his study of "Painted Ladies" indicated that if they used a normal first name, they chose Southern favorites: Katie, Hattie, and Jenny. The last name of choice was Lee because "most of their customers were former confederates."[19] In choosing nicknames the women demonstrated considerable creativity: "Cotton Tail" (obviously a blonde), "Squirrel Tooth" Alice, "Tit Bit," "Sawed Off," "Rowdy Kate" Lowe, "Katty Kril" and, the most impressive of all, Mayor Dog Kelly's mistress, "The Great Easton." For the prostitutes there appeared to be little to distinguish between nicknames, "nom de plumes," or aliases. In fact, even for the male cowboys, the use of aliases frequently sound much like nicknames.

Although nicknames and aliases might seem similar, there was a marked difference in them. One was a "working handle" usually given and not self-created, while an alias was deliberately created by the owner and was usually more dignified and designed to attract less attention. One old cowboy explained: "We

take a man here and ask no questions. We known when he throws a saddle on his horse whether he understands his business or not . . . all we care about is will they stand the gaff?"[20] One of the advantages of becoming a cowboy was that a man could leave his past behind him. Most cowboys and cattlemen were proud of their names and willingly defended their honor, but if a man wanted to change his real name, that was his business. More colorfully put, "many a real name had been bucked out of the saddle." Some, like the highly-romanticized Doc Holliday, were attempting to avoid exposure, not of their past, but of their present status. The only person given a death sentence in cattletown Dodge City had adopted an aristocratic alias, "Aresta H. Webb," to conceal from respectable relatives back in Kentucky just how low he had fallen.

Some cowboys adopted names almost by accident because they "never went to the trouble" to be identified or correct an error. For them, "one handle was about as good as another." When a man was killed in the Red River bottoms by Indians, his cattle crew friends buried him as Joe Bowers. One of the ranch hands who helped dig the grave said: "I knew only his nickname, we called him 'Joe Bowers'–he was always singing the song so much we finally called him 'Joe Bowers'."[21] He was only one among many who carried the name to their grave. "Joe Bowers" came easily to mind when a stranger asked the name of a man who did not care to give it. "Joe Bowers" was the title of a song that had originated in the gold-rush days of California, and had been picked up by the Confederate troops. When the ex-boys in gray came west, the song came with them.

> My name it is Joe Bowers and I've got a brother Ike;
> I came from Missouri, and all the way from Pike.
> I'll tell you why I left there, and why I came to roam,
> And leave my poor old mammy, so far away from home.

It was the kind of song a cowboy could identify with: a sad, slow tune telling of unrequited love when a certain Sally had done a man wrong. In the song, while Joe was in the West seeking his and Sally's fortune, there had been a child born with hair as red as the butcher who had stayed home tending his shop. It was a favorite from the line camps of Montana to the campfires of the Red River. The opening line just naturally came to mind when a cowboy wanted to politely tell someone to mind their own business. "My name it is Joe Bowers."

So, "Joe Bowers" became a kind of "John Doe" for the cattle country in the late 1870s and the 1880s. Not only was a Joe Bowers killed by the Red River Indians, but a year earlier, the Kinsley, Kansas, newspaper reported another one scalped.[22] Not all Joes shared that fate. Joe Bowers was also the white husband of

an "Indian maiden" and was adopted by the Cherokees in Sequoyah District in 1880.[23] Another ran a store in Tascosa, Texas. A Joe Bowers rode for Fred Taintor down on the Southwest Kansas border in the 1880s and the Dodge City paper reported another had "been cowboying on the Adam Telfer ranch."[24] About the same time, another Joe Bowers was rounding up steers for the Comanche Cattle Pool near Medicine Lodge, Kansas. A truly mysterious Joe Bowers had the liveliest saloon in the Flats just outside of old Fort Griffin in the Texas Panhandle.[25] Some said Joe Bowers was an associate of Billy the Kid and was killed in Alexander McSween's home during the Lincoln County War.[26]

The Fort Griffin Joe Bowers had the most convoluted, bizarre experiences with his alias or nickname of all those who used it. As a saloon operator at Fort Griffin , he accumulated enough capital to drive 500 head of cattle to southwest Kansas and establish one of the finest ranches in the area.[27] His ranch was one of the larger holdings that did not join the Comanche Cattle Pool. As a man of substance and supporter of law and order, he assumed his rightful name of C. C. Pepperd an ran for sheriff in 1879. Opposing him was the Joe Bowers who was riding from the Comanche Pool Since the Pool was larger than Pepperd's spread, the Comanche Pool cowboy won.

Capt. Pepperd, as he was known in Kansas, had one more turn with the old Joe Bowers name. Fate turned against him in the three blizzard winters from 1886 to 1888 and he lost his holdings. For a while, he was "ekeing out a few dimes" vending hot tamales on the streets of Dallas. An attorney friend came to his rescue by petitioning for a Confederate pension (apparently the "Capt." was not just an honorary title). Although he eventually received a small grant, it took four years to convince authorities that he had, as C. C. Pepperd, enlisted under the assumed name of Joe Bowers.

Jim Herron, who traveled over most of the cattle country for some fifty years without getting a nickname, marveled at the "widest assortment of men" who did have one and admitted that he had no idea why some of the names "stuck" to their owners. He was surprised when he found out that Boss Neff had been christened with the name that most people thought was an "adopted handle." There was no accounting for some nicknames such as "Bake" Hungate, "Original" John, "Bedrock" Jim, and "Highwood" Hank.[28] The important point was that the nickname was accepted and, as Herron put it, "it stuck."

In the practice of using distinctive nicknames, the cowboy culture was simply following a pattern of other occupational groups. Familiar salutations, even the apparently meaningless ones, were part of an exclusive discourse. A listing of the nicknames of sailors on a sailing ship or gandy dancers on a railroad would never be confused with the listing of cowboys on a cattle drive. The familiar names were

only a part of the practice of creating an exclusive sub-culture. Cowboys called all manner of things by other than their original name. This partially explains why Spanish or Spanish-corrupted words were such a prominent part of the cowboys' vocabulary: lariat (from *la reata*), dally (from *dar la vuelta*), and chaps (from *chaparejos*). Non-ranch folks in Montana, Kansas, or Oklahoma incorporated few Spanish words into their daily speech. The use of these unintelligible words served the occupational group as successfully as secret handshakes and special rings did lodge brothers. They were intended to and did set the cowboys apart as a separate fraternity. The most frequently used tools, such as rope and the words used in describing how it was thrown, created an argot that only those in the business could understand. The variety of such words made it hard for the casual participant to become a part of the group; Hondo, honda, free reata, dallied, vuelted, felted, dale vuelted, pitch, slip catch, heeling, forefooting slip catch, Hoolihan catch, and mangana were only part of the variations involving the rope.[29] The result was that the "sod-buster" was as confused around a cowboy camp as a landlubber was aboard a sailing vessel.

Cowboys adopted other distinctive conventions that were informally enforced, including how to address a woman, where and when to refrain from swearing, how to greet a stranger, where first loyalties lay, eating habits, smoking rituals, and a dozen other actions and manners. These rules of conduct were passed on orally or by example within the cowboy trade. The members were the only ones in "the know." This not only gave them an advantage in dealing with those outside cowboy culture (much as lawyers' use of Latin phrases gave them an advantage in dealing with clients), but made them feel superior to the uninformed (consequently, ignorant) "green horns" and put them at ease in dealing with those inside the specialized culture. An important aspect of establishing an exclusive trade is in fixing the rules for dealing with people inside and outside the occupation. A small, perhaps, but nevertheless significant fragment of the bonding ritual was found in the use of nicknames which others did not know, or if they did know, did not appreciate their significance.

NOTES

1. Philip Aston Rollins, *The Cowboy* (1936 reprint, New York: Scribner, 1922), 69; William H. Forbes, *The Cowboy* (Alexandria: Time-Life Books, 1973), passim.
2. Jim Hoy to C. Robert Haywood, February 17, 1995.
3. Andy Adams, *The Log of a Cowboy* (1964 reprint, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903), 76.
4. Bill Jones to C. Robert Haywood, July 29, 1983.
5. David Dary, *Cowboy Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 106.
6. *Parsons (Kansas) Eclipse*, April 8, 1880; C. Robert Haywood, *Trails South* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986).

7. Glenn Shirley, *William Matthew Tilghman* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1988), 222.
8. Charles M. Russell, *Trails Plowed Under* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1927), 3.
9. Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 84.
10. State of Kansas v. H. Gould alias Skunk Curley. Criminal Appearance Docket A., Case No. 46, Ms. Box 808, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka.
11. Jim Herron, *Fifty Years on the Owl Hoot Trail* (Chicago: Sage, 1969), 35.
12. Laban Samuel Records, *Cherokee Outlet Cowboy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 52-53.
13. Nyle H. Miller and Joseph W. Snell, *Great Gunfighters of the Kansas Cowtowns, 1867-1886* (1971 reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 419.
14. Records, *Cherokee Outlet Cowboy*, 613.
15. Russell, *Trails Plowed Under*, 69.
16. Everett Dick, *Vanguards of the Frontier* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963), 490. Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones, *The Negro Cowboys* (1983 reprint, New York: Dodd Mead), 163.
17. Durham and Jones, *Negro Cowboys*, 188.
18. *Dodge City Times*, June 20, 1878.
19. Joseph W. Snell, "Painted Ladies of the Cowtown Frontier," *The Trail Guide* 10 (December 1965), 13.
20. Forbis, *The Cowboy*, 107.
21. Mrs. Meadows, My Early Experiences, Ms., Panhandle-Plains Museum, Canyon, Texas.
22. *Kinsley* (Kansas) *Graphic* October 18, 1879.
23. 1880 Census Cherokee Rolls, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City, Vol. VI.
24. Milton Wallace ("Doc") Anshutes, "Fred Taintor," *Notes of Early Clark County Kansas* (Ashland, Kansas: np), II, 41; "Do You Know Joe Bowers? Nearly All the Old Timers Do." *Dodge City Live Stock Journal*, November 18, 1884.
25. Carl Coke Rister, *Fort Griffin on the Texas Frontier* (1986 reprint, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 129-30.
26. Robert M. Utley, *High Noon in Lincoln County: Violence on the Western Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 132, 218. The presence and death of Joe Bowers at McSween's place has not been proven and to confuse the issue even more, some accounts indicate that the man so identified was using an alias and others believe that the man killed was Charlie Bowdre.
27. *Coldwater* (Kansas) *Western Star*, August 14, 1886.
28. Herron, *Owl Hoot Trail*, 35-36.
29. Rollins, *The Cowboy*, 138-39.