

*EPHEMERA***Kansas Round-Up Stereoview**

Ron McCoy

Published in 1902 by the Keystone View Company, this doubled window into the past shows a cowboy astride his horse, rope at the ready, surveying a sea of cattle. In the distance, especially keen eyes or a magnifying glass reveal a pair of his compatriots, boxing in the milling herd. The caption tells us this image was made at round-up time on the Sherman Ranch, near "Genesee," Kansas. There is no town of that name in the state, but there is a "Geneseo" in Rice County, and the Sherman Ranch was established in adjoining Ellsworth County around 1896.

Mounted on a 7" x 4" piece of cardboard, this is a special kind of photograph: a stereoview. Stereoviews were an immensely popular Victorian era diversion. People gazing upon these double images through stereoscopic viewers equipped with a handle, picture holder, and mask-like lens (some artistically engraved and lined with suede), moved into the third dimension. Each of the paired images reflect a slightly different viewpoint, and the space between views corresponds roughly to the distance between viewers' eyes. The resulting optical effect creates an illusion of depth.

Stereoviews were originally made with a single-plate camera equipped with a slide bar. After exposing a picture the photographer inserted a new plate, moved the camera along the slide bar about three inches, and obtained a second image. Later, photographers used special twin-lens cameras.

Stereoviews were often sold in sets housed in boxes resembling books. They first appeared in the 1850s and remained popular until the 1930s. Families often gathered in the parlor to enter an exotic world featuring pictures of famous or notorious celebrities, natural wonders, far-off places, tribal peoples, inspirational scenes, and vignettes from popular plays.

Stereoviewers were forerunners of 3-D movies, which premiered in 1915 at New York's Astor Theater before an audience wearing spectacles equipped with red and green lenses. Predecessors, also, of the View-Master® which so entranced folks when it debuted at the 1939 New York World's Fair.

The reverse of this cowboy stereoview bears a flowing, flowery statement extolling the deity of Progress:

Here roamed the myriad herds of buffalo. Here might have been seen the terrible stampede before the devouring prairie fire. Here the Indian's war-whoop rent the air, and not far away the tomahawk and scalping knife put in their atrocious work. Now farms of the Golden Belt, richer with their wheat and corn than Golconda with its gems, and cattle ranches that feed New York and London fill the luxuriant plain. Prosperous farmers add hourly to their won and the nation's wealth, and sturdy ranchmen are among the most virile men in the world. From such rugged horsemen as the picture shows [Theodore] Roosevelt formed his Rough Riders who fought in Cuba and who, to speak in a figure, escorted their Colonel to the White House steps.

This stereoview appeared four years after Teddy Roosevelt's famous charge up San Juan Hill. As for T.R., he had been President of the United States for just a year.

And out in Kansas, where the prairie gave way to the Plains, a cowboy sat astride his horse, lariat at the ready, watching a herd of cattle as a camera's shutter softly clicked, forever capturing an image of a bygone era in the history and lore of the American West.

