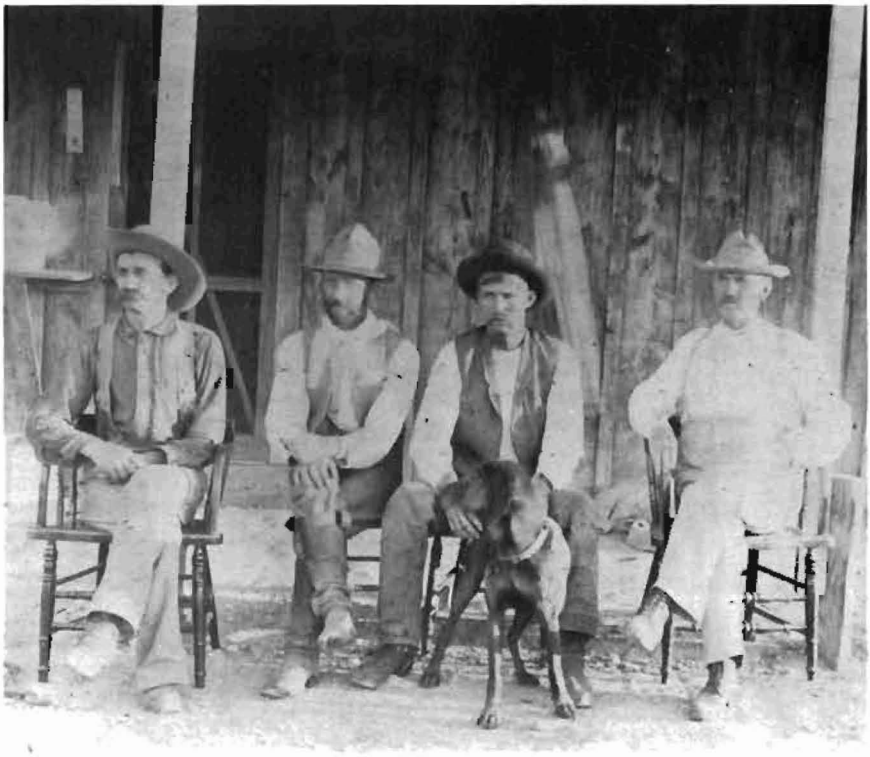

"Good whiskey and bad women will be the ruin of you varmints yet."
The Log of a Cowboy by Andy Adams

Four cowboys on the 101 Ranch, known today as the Whitney Ranch, in Chase County, Kansas. Photo courtesy of the Whitney family.

THE COWBOY: SOME VIEWS ON THE AREA OF HIS ORIGIN

by
Lawrence Clayton

The cowboy has become an American folk hero, an icon of the American West. This figure, dressed in traditional regalia and mounted on a horse, is recognized around the world. His emergence onto the public scene came with dime novels and later B-Westerns. He took over prime time on television in the 1950s and 1960s before losing mass appeal in the face of a more sophisticated public entertainment.

The origin of the cowboy has been obscure. This uniquely American figure did not begin in America. Instead he drew his origin from Old World influences. The principal one was certainly the vaquero, who had seen centuries of development in North America before Anglos and their black slaves moved into the eastern United States and developed a cattle trade. Two schools of thought dominate the discussion about the area of origin of the cowboy.

The first stems from the work of Walter Prescott Webb, renowned historian, who places the birth of the cowboy and ranching as we know it in the United States in a diamond-shaped area of Texas with San Antonio on the north, Laredo on the west, Indianola on the east, and Brownsville on the south. He says, "In this region and on its borders were to be found all the elements essential to the ranch and range cattle industry."[1] The Nueces River, once the border between Mexico and Texas, runs through this region.

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The theory is an interesting one, because this area is now the Brasada, the Brush Country that J. Frank Dobie, an equally famous Texas folklorist and friend of Webb, called home. Dobie doted on this region's unique Spanish-influenced culture and inhabitants. Both Webb and Dobie agreed that the most important influence was this culture with its Spanish roots. This area is, without doubt, that in which the vaquero influence grew out of Mexico to shape the cattle business in Texas.

To the influence of the vaquero on this ranching culture, Dobie, in his *The Longhorns*, adds a second factor, the herd-owning *caballero*, a Spanish gentleman. Since the first Texas cattlemen both owned and saw after cattle, Dobie seems justified in his view.[2] Later some of these men established large ranches and hired cowboys to do the work, just as the Spanish priests and Conquistadors had done in Mexico and Mexican Texas.

These cattle raisers maintained an open range attitude, one in which large numbers of cattle roamed much at will and survived as best they could with a minimum of care, even in the winter months. The men held periodic roundups to brand and gather cattle for slaughter or market. From this cattle-rich area much of the stock for the trail herds later came.

Two other scholars offer support for Webb's and Dobie's basic theory of the area of origin. The first is Joe Graham, a folklorist with a special interest in south Texas ranching and the product of a family ranch in the Big Bend area. He places the main area of influence on Texas ranching further to the west and south, thus acknowledging only part of the diamond-shaped area Webb describes. In his *El Rancho in South Texas*, Graham cites as support for his vaquero theory, among other notions, the more than two dozen Spanish terms used to describe items and techniques essential to cowboy life.[3] The second is Bill Wittliff, a talented photographer, film director, and writer, who holds that the vaquero is the source of the cowboy and has excellent photogrpahs to support the theory in his *Vaquero: Genesis of the Cowboy*.[4] A traveling exhibit from the Institute of Texan Cultures carries these photographs to a large audience.

The second school of thought is a revisionist view denying the

predominance of the vaquero influence. It is espoused strongly by Terry Jordan in his *Trails to Texas*[5] and to a lesser degree in *North American Cattle-Raising Frontiers*. Jordan, a cultural geographer, holds that the impetus for an early cattle-raising culture in Texas came especially from the South as elements of mostly British culture were transferred to Texas by newly arrived immigrants from Georgia, Florida, and the Carolinas by way of Louisiana, where many of the people had settled temporarily before being allowed by Mexican authorities to move into Texas around mid-1800s. While it is true that these people had a long history of cattle raising in woodlands with some open areas, it is also true that they did not have experience raising cattle on the vast, open, mostly treeless plains found in Texas. Southerners referred to these open areas as "prairie," not by the Spanish term "*llano*" or even by the word "plain" found in the term "Great Plains" used to describe the flat, rich, one-time grassland now given largely to farming stretching from the Texas Panhandle into Canada. These newcomers from the South made extensive use of dogs to do this work, and identified the activity with the English term"cowpens" instead of "ranch" from Spanish "*rancho*." They used whips to drive their cattle and did not rely upon the "*lazo*" or lariat used by the vaqueros and later the cowboys. There was little need for the Southerners to rope their cattle if the men had pens in which to catch the animals in order to work them. These Southerners also used salt licks, which cattle regularly visit, as a means to manage stock. These ranchers had what Jordan describes as a "greater attention to the welfare and quality of livestock"[6] than was common in the open-range culture further west. Their cattle were better bred than the Longhorn cattle that formed the basis for open-range ranching in Mexico, Texas, and California. The slender conformation of Longhorn cattle was not a negative factor at this time because the main market for cattle was in hides and tallow, not beef. The Anglos, according to Jordan, established themselves and the basis for ranching culture in an area in southern Louisiana, some four hundred miles east of Webb's diamond in south Texas, and later moved their way of stock raising to Texas. He discusses at some length the tradition of trailing herds of cattle to market by these people.

There is, however, doubt as to the validity of some of Jordan's eonclusions, and in some eases he is just wrong. Historian Riehard Slatta in his *Comparing Cowboys and Frontiers* criticizes Jordan's errors as stemming froni "overrevisionism." This practice in the 1980s and 1990s charaeterized the role of some historians who offered alternative views of several phases of settlement in the West. In this eamp are the likes of Patrieia Limerick's *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*,[7] Richard White's *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West*,[8] and an exhibit entitled "The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier," held at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American Art in 1991. Slatta correctly links this drive for revisionism to the Deconstruction movement that has dominated the arts, especially literature, during the same period and admits that some correcting of the image is overdue. Thesc historians have revised the notions that Anglo males were the prime movers in the Westward movement and emphasized the roles of other ethnic groups and women. A general feeling that some revisionism resulted in over eorrection is gaining followers, just as Deconstruction seems to be losing ground.

Slatta notes that Jordan "ignores" both linguistie and material culture cvidcnce to draw some "feeble" conclusions. Among the errors of Jordan's early thesis is the claim that *buckaroo* and *corral*, both of Spanish origin, derived from African terms *buckra* and *kraal* and came west with thc slaves accompanying new Anglo scttcrs from the South. Another is that the Africans "shaped" the ranching culture and strongly influenced the development of the cowboy. The most specious of Jordan's claims is that thc role Texas culture played in the developmcnt of ranching techniques and institutions has been greatly exaggerated.[9] In thcse matters, Webb and Dobie were closer to being on target than is Jordan. The corrcctive that Slatta has brought to Jordan's notions is encouraging and may lead to further correction of the notion that the cowboy is dead and gone.

On the positive side of Jordan's extensive work, however, is his discussion of the fact that there were–and are–Cajun cowboys, some of

them black descendants of slaves who worked cattle on horseback and drove herds of cattle to various markets, mostly to the east. Jim Bob Tinsley, an authority on cowboy songs and cowboy life, notes that the black mounted herders were called "cattle hunters or graziers" and the white ones "cow keepers,"[10] not "cowboys" and certainly not "vaqueros." This Southern terminology was carried to Texas where early settlers from the South went on "cow hunts," not "roundups." When these people came to Texas, however, vaqueros had been ranching in south Texas for centuries. My personal preference in terminology for this largely Southern culture, which formed my youthful experience in East Texas, is "stock farming" rather than "ranching." A journal that serves the industry has the notion captured in its title *Farmer-Stockman Magazine*. The practices of stock farming serve better in areas where water and timber are plentiful, population dense, and private parcels of land smaller than in less populous areas. These are regions where rainfall is ample and the soil is suitable for farming. Here stock farmers raise cattle, row crops such as small grains, and hay that help feed the stock during the winter. In some areas in which these activities developed, early stockmen have to pay greater attention to the cattle than in areas where cold weather does not deplete the nutritional value of the forage.

Open range ranching could not have developed in areas where this kind of care is required for cattle to survive. In southern Texas around Victoria, for example, once cold weather (not cold by Northern standards but with low temperatures in the thirties and forties) hits the grass, it loses its nutritional value. In this region frost is uncommon, and ice and snow are almost unheard of. The cattle in these areas are dependent upon supplementary feed until the return of consistently warm temperatures and rains in the spring. Here cattle will starve to death while standing in useless grass. Even during the growing season, cattle must consume these grasses in huge portions to maintain themselves.

This difference in nutritional value accounts for the fact that a cow brought into this region from far west Texas or northwest Texas will lose weight or even starve in ample pasture for cattle native to the region just because she is not conditioned to eat enough of the grasses to maintain

herself. By contrast, however, in the Davis Mountains of far west Texas, a cow from east Texas will gain weight on what to an inexperienced stockman looks like inadcquate pasture. Thc forage maintains its nutritional value even in the cold of wintcr. Thcre will, however, be an adjustment period, often one year, during which the animal must learn what to eat from the grasses and browse available. No sea of waving grasses belly deep on the cow will be found here, even in the best of years.

In Webb's diamond, cattle survive on the browse and the nutrient-rich prickly pear, which ranchers encourage the cattle to eat by burning off the spines with propane torches. Therefore, the cattle can survive in the brush year round without intcrvcntion from the rancher, except in time of severe drought. Here the cattle brought by the Spanish multiplied to huge herds that survived without any human intervention whatever. This eondition fosters the concept of open range ranching in whieh the owner sees the cattle only irregularly at times of roundup for working and selling. The brush is now so thiek that the animals are penned these days by using trap pens around watering sites or by using helicopters with horses and dogs to drive the cattle from the brush. J. Frank Dobie's *A Vaquero of the Brush Country*[11] is a good touchstone to remember here and offers examples of men who ride horseback in this brush and bring the cattle out. In view of this information, it seems apparent that Jordan's Louisiana ineubator theory for the origin of open-range ranching as an institution in the United States and for the cowboy lacks validity.

Analysis of development of ranehing in northwest Texas serves to illustrate how various influences merged to form a variant culture. Along the rich lands of the Clear Fork of the Brazos River in Shackelford, Stephens, and Jones counties and further cast in Palo Pinto and Parker counties, cattle barons such as Oliver Loving, Jesse Hittson, and others established ranching kingdoms and spread them all over the West. Men like John G. Irwin, Joseph Beck Matthews, and Barber Watkins Reynolds, all of Scottish descent, established significant and long-standing ranching operations and later trailed cattle to distant points on both sides of the Rocky Mountains. They were followed in the trade by

George and W.D. Reynolds, John A. Matthews, John Chadbourne Irwin, and others, whose descendants have continued their ranching interests into the present. The early practices were open range ones, but over time, other practices suited to the region have evolved. Pastures have ben fenced and eross-fenced, some land has been put into cultivation mainly for growing wheat in the winter, and cattle suited to the land selected, especially Herefords and Black Angus, often crossbred. In fact, Albany is called "Home of the Hereford" because of the early introduction of this British breed into the region. Other regions have similar development histories that make them unique while varying only slightly from the norm. For example, at the National Finals for Ranch Rodeo in Glen Rose in 1996, I asked a young cowboy friend what the gear of the various teams looked like. His response was that all of the clothing, gear, and taek looked just like what he was accustomed to seeing in west Texas. These men eame from Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Nebraska, and Arizona.

In *A Texas Frontier*, Cashion credits Scottish roots for the kind of operation found along the Clear Fork and cites two paths of entry. One, he ways, spread "through the Piedmont and Appalachians into the Ohio Valley and the Midwest" and on "through Missouri" en route to North Texas. The other strand eame "through Georgia, the Florida Panhandle, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana before reaehing deep East Texas" and eoming to the ranges of Texas.[12]

A eowboy culture still thrives in this area, especially along the Clear Fork where the soil is shallow and rainfall scant in most seasons. Despite this reality, however, the area is one of the best eattle-raising areas in the world. There is little doubt, however, that the eowboy originated further south.

Whatever theory of the genesis of the eowboy that one accepts, it is sufficient to say that in the southern part of Texas developed a ranching eulture that spread along with its cattle over the western part of Texas and hence on to other areas, especially the Northern Plains, where free grass beekoned to hardy souls that found ranching a promising way of life. It was carried on the heads of Longhorn cattle brought in by the Spanish

and allowed to multiply on the open ranges of south Texas. Here a man on horseback could look at the horizon and make a living at least as good as the man following a mule with a hand on the plow and eye on the mule's posterior, a way of life that allowed him to rope and work with his cattle, not bend his back to chop weeds and crawl to pick cotton.

NOTES

1. Walter Prescott Webb, *The Great Plains* (Waltham, MA: Blaisdell, 1959), 208.
2. J. Frank Dobie, *The Longhorns* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1941), vii.
3. Joe S. Graham, *El Rancho in South Texas* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1994).
4. William Wittliff, *The Vaquero: Genesis of the Cowboy* (San Antonio: Institute of Texas Cultures, 1972).
5. Terry Jordan, *Trails to Texas: Southern Roots of Western Cattle Ranching* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981).
6. Terry Jordan, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion, and Differentiation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 267.
7. Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: Norton, 1987).
8. Richard White, *"It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own": A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991).
9. Richard W. Slatta, *Comparing Cowboys and Frontiers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 188-189.
10. Jim Bob Tinsley, *He Was Singin' This Song* (Orlando: University of Central Florida Press, 1981), 4.
11. J. Frank Dobie, *A Vaquero of the Brush Country* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1929).
12. Ty Cashion, *A Texas Frontier: The Clear Fork Country and Fort Griffin, 1849-1887* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1996), 59-60.