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# Freedom and the American Cowboy

NEAL E. LAMBERT\*

From the time of "Dead-Eye Dick" and the early editions of the *Police Gazette* to our own era of "Rawhide" and *Ranch Romance* the cowboy as symbol and myth has been very much with us. We in our day are no less caught up in the psychology and shooting of the adult western than were the readers of the 1880's and 1890's who devoured *Beadle's* pocket library editions of cowboy stories. Many have tried to puncture the myth by pointing to the historical cowboy as a figure whose world "was corrupt and rotten. Its heroes, vaunted for their courage, in fact showed only the rashness of the alcoholic or the desperation of the cornered rat."<sup>1</sup> But most Americans still see in the cowboy, as did Owen Wister, the embodiment of "the best thing the Declaration of Independence ever turned out . . . the same creature who was the volunteer on both sides in the Civil War—the son of the soil, whose passion and intelligence and character made him able to fight battles almost without need of captains, . . . that is the fellow . . . and the plains brought him again to perfections only latent in civilization."<sup>2</sup> Thus it is that the mythical cowboy still rides as the personification of the American dream of self-reliance, individualism, and freedom.

But myth is not history, and for the sake of history we need to ask certain questions about the historical cowboy. In reality how free was he? How independent? How much of an individualist was the man who actually rode the horse and worked the herd? Was he free of all social limitations, or was he bound by a code of conduct? Was the cowboy's life really "free and wild" or did its dangers merely make him reckless in the face of death? And if he did feel free, what was he free from, what was he free to do?

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<sup>1</sup>Peter Lyon, "The Wild, Wild West," *American Heritage*, XI (August, 1960), 48.

<sup>2</sup>Unpublished letter, Owen Wister to Hamilton Wright Mabie, June 4, 1902, *Papers of Hamilton Wright Mabie* in the Library of Congress.

These are the questions that need to be explored, but the answers do not come easily. In the first place, primary accounts of the cowboy's life are few, and many of those that we do have were written with some knowledge of the myth that was already growing, even before the era of the cowboy had ended.<sup>3</sup> In the second place, the cowboy was not much given either to philosophical speculation or to putting his thoughts on paper. Intangible, philosophical subjects were too vague and impractical to interest him. As one old cowboy tells us:

Such things, they don't bring no facts to nobody. The feller that's a-goin' to do all the talkin', he just natcherally begins by pickin' out a startin' p'int that really ain't nowhars at all. He brands that startin' p'int "Asoomin' that," so he can know it if he runs acrost it agin. Then he cuts his thinkin' picket-ropes and drifts all over the hull mental prairie until he gits plumb tuckered out. And when he gets so doggone tired that he can't think up no more idees to wave around and look purty in the wind, he just winds up with "wherefore, it follows." Follows. Hell! It don't follow nothin'. It just comes in last.<sup>4</sup>

### THE FREE AND INDEPENDENT LIFE

But in spite of the fact that the cowboy was not prone to put his feelings in sophisticated philosophical terms, there can be little doubt that he felt and believed that his was a free and independent life. Teddy Blue, for instance, considered cow-punchers "the most independent class of people on Earth."<sup>5</sup> And when one of his freedom-loving colleagues got jailed, Teddy wrote, "He was just like a caged lion fit to tear himself to pieces. When he had been in there a year, maybe two, they let him out on a writ of error and he went free after that. But

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<sup>3</sup>It is plain that Teddy Blue, for instance, was well aware of much that is attached to the myth of the cowboy. While visiting a professional lady friend he heard a commotion in the room downstairs and rushed out, gun in hand, to defend the screaming lady. After almost shooting the lady's sweetheart, Teddy finally got the story: "'I don't care for the black eye, 'Teddy,' she whimpered, 'but he called me a whore.' Can you beat that?" Teddy said, "It was what she was. I was never so disgusted in my life. I was such a damn fool. I might have killed that man and got into a peck of trouble. Knight of the plains. Had to protect all females. Lord!"

<sup>4</sup>Douglas Branch, *The Cowboy and His Interpreters* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, Inc., 1961), pp. 159-160.

<sup>5</sup>E. C. ("Teddy Blue") Abbott and Helena Huntington Smith, *We Pointed Them North* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), p. 13.

it broke him."<sup>6</sup> It seemed that anything that might restrict his freedom of movement was distasteful to the cowboy. Civilization itself, as it pushed westward, caused the cowboy to move further out on the frontier where he could find things a little less restricted, a little more free. Thus, Teddy Blue went with one herd "because they was going three hundred miles further up north, and that was what appealed to me. It was all new country up there and I wanted to see it, and anyway this other, in Wyoming and southern Montana, was getting settled up. There was ranches every few miles."<sup>7</sup> Charlie Siringo, another "literate" cowboy, felt much the same way. After a few days in town, he tells us, "I then headed southwest across the hills not having any destination in view; I wanted to go somewhere but didn't care where."<sup>8</sup>

This propensity to "move on" was more than just *wanderlust*. It was a part of what the cowboy called his "open-air life" and his "freedom from restraint." Joe McCoy, who knew the cowboy as well as, if not better than, anyone, told us that the cowboy's life is "hard and full of exposure, but [it] is wild and free, and the young man who has long been a cowboy has but little taste for any other occupation."<sup>9</sup> And another old cowhand, thinking of earlier years, recalled, "From the Canadian Rockies to the Platte, from the Platte to Dodge on the Arkansas, from Dodge to the Gulf of Mexico, the land was free and open and it belonged to the cowboy. I was free too and therefore, I was happy."<sup>10</sup>

If ever man was free it was in the era of the cowboy. He was an inhabitant of the free "land beyond." He lived and worked hundreds of miles beyond settled civilization. He was beyond any law except for that of his own making. He was beyond society except for the few fellow cowboys that he might choose to ride with. If the trail he was following forked, he could go either way. If the outfit he worked for did not suit him, he could quit or stay. His was a land empty of society, law, and fences.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>8</sup>Charles A. Siringo, *A Texas Cowboy* (New York: William Sloane Associates, Inc., 1950), p. 83.

<sup>9</sup>Joseph G. McCoy, *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade* (Kansas City, Missouri: Ramsey, Millett and Hudson, 1874), p. 10.

<sup>10</sup>As quoted by Don D. Walker in "Freedom and Destiny in the Myth of the American West," *New Mexico Quarterly*, XXXIII (Winter, 1963-64), 382.

But was the cowboy free simply because there were no fences or one-way streets? Where did his freedom ultimately come from? Those who have considered this question do not always agree on just *why* the cowboy was free. Many have suggested that the freedom, the independence and self-reliance of the cowboy are a direct result of the work he did. This is the well-argued conclusion of Edward Everett Dale. In detailing the work of the cowboy, he tells us:

The work of the range rider was of infinite variety, yet at times was characterized by a deadly monotony. In its larger aspects it included driving trail herds, joining in the round-up, branding calves or selecting beef animals and "riding a line," though there were also many other duties. Sometimes his work included breaking horses, hunting wolves, defense against cattle thieves, red or white, and the building of corrals or line camps. Naturally he must do his own personal work, or those tasks necessary to enable him to live in reasonable comfort. For weeks at a time he must take care of his own camp, chop firewood, bring water from the spring, cook his meals, wash his clothing, bedding, and saddle blankets, and do the dozens of other little things that fall to the lot of one who lives alone. It is not strange that in time he developed a surprising degree of resourcefulness and the ability to take care of himself at all times and under all circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

But other writers, with a different approach to historical problems, suggest that this paragon of freedom was a "product of conditions in the East. He was lured westward by the hazards which the country offered him. . . . There was common then a certain well-known spirit, hard to describe, which makes boys rowdies when they stay at home and men of action when they go away. The West called and the East stood ready with a few thousand lean, hard-boned young men."<sup>12</sup> If those few thousand, hard-boned young rowdies did bring their freedom with them from the East, they must have felt some rather forceful and sudden restrictions to that freedom when their own raucous individualism hampered the free life of someone bigger than they were.

This violence has suggested to some that the cowboy's way of living, and consequently his freedom, was the product

<sup>11</sup>Edward Everett Dale, *Cow Country* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1943), p. 117.

<sup>12</sup>Clifford P. Westermeier, *Trailing the Cowboy* (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1955), p. 25.

of a sort of Darwinian process of natural selection that weeded out those who might have surrendered or sacrificed this freedom. "The primitive law of nature known as self-preservation was very evident in August of '82 at Frenchman's Ford," says Andy Adams; "It reminded me of the early cowboy days at home in Texas."<sup>13</sup> And an anonymous but evidently accurate commentator wrote that:

Perhaps in no other occupation of men was the theory of the "survival of the fittest" more plainly demonstrated in practice than in the quick weeding out of the weaklings, of the visionary, and of the inherently depraved, among those who understood the cowboy life. . . . In the close communion of cowboy life on the trail and the range, where trust, faithfulness, and the spirit of brotherhood and mutual confidence had to be, a man inherently depraved was out of place.<sup>14</sup>

Some even suggest that the economics of the situation, the employment of so few men in proportion to the amount of capital invested, were the main source of the self-reliance and individualism of the cowboy.<sup>15</sup> But whether or not it was economics, geography, environment, heredity, or a combination of all of these that gave him independence and self-reliance, both the cowboy and most of those who have written about him believed that he was free, more free than most men before or since.

### LIMITATIONS AND RESTRICTIONS OF FREEDOM

But at the same time that the cowboy and his interpreters loudly proclaim his freedom and discuss its origins, they also acknowledge that he was limited, that he was in a very real way restricted and to that extent, he was not free. For instance, the open expansiveness of the geography may have given the cowboy a feeling of freedom, but at the same time its unmarked sameness and its lack of water were real limitations to the cowboy's movements and even to his own life. We gain some sense of how this hostile geography impinged on the mind of the cowboy from the following account of cowboy life:

On the great open ranges the whole outlook soon became one vast, featureless, confusing impression, like that derived from

<sup>13</sup>Andy Adams, *The Log of a Cowboy* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1931), p. 335.

<sup>14</sup>Ramon F. Adams, *The Best of the American Cowboy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1957), p. 6.

<sup>15</sup>Dale, p. 114.

the ocean. Moreover, the general aspect of the plains was, as it still is where the works of men have not disturbed, one of sadness—even of melancholy. . . . No one unfamiliar with them can understand what these effects are. They bore down upon the mind as would a heavy weight upon the body; and a torturing heartache then kept company with a sense of exile. It is doubtful if ever there was a cowboy who did not, at times at least, feel the burden of these influences; and the cattle not uncommonly showed that even they were not immune.<sup>16</sup>

While this may not be thoroughgoing geographical determinism, there is little shouting about the joys of the free life.

At the same time, being outside civilization did not mean that the cowboy had none of the limitations of a society. Primitive as his relationship to his fellow frontiersmen may have been, it was nevertheless characterized by both social strata and a strict code of social conduct. For instance, while the cowboy may have been very democratic in his relationships with other cowhands, he recognized and observed a distinct social gap between the hands and the foreman, which could be crossed only at the proper place and time, and in the proper manner. This is why Teddy Blue was so surprised when a new foreman asked him, "Ted, you are an old trail man, what is the best way to get the herd across?" Teddy's response was, "Think of a boss asking one of the hands that question!"<sup>17</sup> The cowboy also recognized a social gap between himself and other frontier figures. The trapper, buffalo hunter, and freighter were all below his own station and were expected to give him plenty of room when he came to town.<sup>18</sup>

But so far as their social relationships with each other were concerned, the life that cowboys led brought them close together, or as one commentator puts it, "they were clannish, just as soldiers who have been under fire appear clannish to troops who have never been blooded."<sup>19</sup> Our anonymous writer makes the same point, "They were strongly disposed to be clannish, and, while there were occasional feuds between individuals that usually ended in the death of one or the other, some-times of both, as a body of men they would fight for each

<sup>16</sup>Ramon Adams, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup>Abbott, pp. 194-5.

<sup>18</sup>See, for instance, Abbott, pp. 102, 211-212.

<sup>19</sup>Mark H. Brown and W. R. Felton, *Before Barbed Wire* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1956), p. 128.

other to the last."<sup>20</sup> Thus, while the cowboy may ride in our imagination as a "loner" free from the obligations of civilization, there can be little doubt that in reality he was very much a part of a society, albeit a small and violent one.

### LIMITATIONS OF THE CODE

If he was limited by a kind of frontier social strata, the cowboy was even more limited by the stringent requirements of the code that was a very real part of his society. Many might want to discount the idea of a cowboy code as the invention of modern mass media or else a mythical holdover from the medieval romance. But in reality there can be little doubt that there were certain fundamental rules of conduct under which the cowboy had to operate. For instance, though he may have technically been free to come and go, to work or quit as he felt he wanted to do, the cowboy's code required an almost medieval fealty to his outfit and to his work. Thus, after an extremely long and hard ride after lost stock, the protagonist in Andy Adams' account of cowboying is ordered out with the herd. There was no hesitation from the trail-weary cowboy, "With a hungry look in the direction of our chuck wagon, I obeyed."<sup>21</sup> Sleep, food, rest, even the possibility of death were secondary to the requirements of duty. "A man was a three sevens man, a CK man or whatever the brand happened to be and they were trustworthy even when faced with death trying to guard stock drifting in a blizzard or riding full speed to turn a stampeding herd in the inky blackness of night." So writes one who has carefully studied the cowboy.<sup>22</sup> Cowboys themselves give us the same impression. Andy Adams' cowboy, for instance, without hesitation swims with a part of the herd across the flooding Platte. Then finding himself on the opposite bank from the chuck wagon he tells us, "As far as dinner was concerned,—well, I'd much rather miss it than swim the Platte twice in its then stage o' water. There is a difference in daring in one's duty and in daring out of pure venturesomeness."<sup>23</sup>

After considering the demanding restrictions of duty, we can see that the so-called "free" cowboy might well long for the

<sup>20</sup>Ramon Adams, p. 23.

<sup>21</sup>Andy Adams, p. 51.

<sup>22</sup>Brown, p. 128.

<sup>23</sup>Andy Adams, p. 293.



time when he would be free of the cowboy's life; and well he did. "The cowboy longs to see the theatre," Emerson Hough assures us, "to have a trip to the city, to eat an oyster stew and all the green 'garden truck' he can hold. To him it seems that all the great pleasures of life must lie beyond the range, in the 'settlements.'"<sup>24</sup> And turning again to Andy Adams' account of cowboying we read that cowboys "were glad to be free from herd duty and looked forward eagerly to the journey home."<sup>25</sup>

While the cowboy code involved certain broad generalities about duty, it was in some aspects surprisingly detailed and specific. For instance, a cowboy always had to pay his bills and the one who forgot even a small debt, if honestly incurred, would find it hard to get a job. A now famous story tells of a Bar N cowboy who rode out of Miles City without paying his bill to a prostitute. When the foreman heard what had happened he fired the cowboy and the other hands chipped in to pay the bill to uphold the reputation of the outfit.<sup>26</sup> Another detail of the code forbade anyone's using a horse from another cowboy's string. Once the horses had been turned over to the cowboy, no one, not even the boss, could ride one of them without the cowboy's permission, even though they still technically belonged to the outfit and not to the cowboy.<sup>27</sup> The detail of the code that concerned hospitality was just as strict. "You had to feed and shelter your worst enemy if he came to your house in a storm," one old cowboy tells us, "and if you refused him shelter, you had better leave that country."<sup>28</sup>

To list every aspect of the cowboy's code would take up too much space. We can see well enough from these few examples that the code was specific and detailed, that it loomed large in the cowboy's life, and—most important of all for this study—that it was stringent. The point is, that while the cowboy and his interpreters have talked a great deal about freedom, it was not an unlimited freedom that the cowboy enjoyed. His land, his society, his code all set restrictions on him. His existence was at once free and not free.

<sup>24</sup>As quoted by Ramon Adams, p. 74.

<sup>25</sup>Andy Adams, p. 381.

<sup>26</sup>Brown, p. 127.

<sup>27</sup>Abbott, p. 212.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 126.

## FREEDOM IN THE UNIVERSE

But to talk of the cowboy's freedom in terms of geography, laws, social mores, etc., though important in its own right, really does not get us to the heart of the matter. We need to probe deeper into the nature of the man himself; we need to ask what it was that the cowboy was free from. We need to ask not simply what was his attitude toward fences, but what was the cowboy's attitude toward the universe? Did the constant dangers of his daily existence give him any preoccupation with death and his own contingency? Did he have any sense of ultimate universal freedom to act; or did he feel that somewhere a calf was growing that would one day crush his bones as a stampeding steer? The answers to these questions are not easy to ferret out, for, as we said in the beginning, the cowboy was not given to philosophical speculation. Still there is enough evidence that we can at least suggest a few generalizations about his attitude toward these universal questions.

The cowboy did express, though sometimes unconsciously, something like a philosophy in the verses and songs he composed to fill the loneliness that was a part of his trade. One "real cowboy of the old school," wrote:

Just let me live my life as I've begun!  
And give me work that's open to the sky;  
Make me a partner of the wind and sun,  
And I won't ask a life that's soft and high.

Make me as big and open as the plains;  
As honest as the horse between my knees;  
Clean as the wind that blows behind the rains;  
Free as the hawk that circles down the breeze.

Just keep an eye on all that's done and said;  
Just right me sometime when I turn aside;  
And guide me on the long, dim trail ahead—  
That stretches upward towards the Great Divide.<sup>29</sup>

Such musings may not be profound but they do suggest a fundamental commitment to individualism and a responsibility for one's own acts. In the cowboy's mind there may have been a controlling force in the universe, but its interference with his own life was minimal. Thus, with the everyday press of hard work, the cowboy went ahead doing what he "figured was

<sup>29</sup>Dale, p. 133.

best," neither worrying about ultimate causes or final consequences. "I have been too busy to heed her last advice," Charlie Siringo wrote of his mother's dying counsel, "being a just God, I feel he will overlook my neglect. If not, I will have to take my medicine, with Satan holding the spoon."<sup>30</sup> With Charlie as with many others, a man's actions were the result of his own initiative, not the result of a compelling universe. Just how independent of fate and destiny the cowboy could become is revealed in the following statement of Teddy Blue's:

That family stuffed me full of all that religious bull when I was a kid, but I never had any more use for it after I was grown, and in that I was like the rest of the cowpunchers. Ninety percent of them was infidels. The life they led had a lot to do with that. After you come in contact with nature, you get all that stuff knocked out of you—praying to God for aid, Divine Providence, and so on—because it wouldn't work. You could pray all you damned pleased, but it wouldn't get you water where there wasn't water. Talk about trusting in Providence, hell, if I'd trusted in Providence I'd have starved to death.<sup>31</sup>

Teddy certainly didn't feel determined by a providential decree.

And yet however free Teddy Blue, Charlie Siringo, Andy Adams and their colleagues may have felt themselves to be, it must be remembered that death—something ultimate, uncontrollable, and final—was constantly with them. Says Teddy Blue:

If I had been twenty feet further into the herd that night, I and my horse both would have been trampled just like that fellow in '76. Well, it was all in the game and all cowpunchers knew it when they were riding like that; *they all knew that might be their fate with the next jump the horse took.*<sup>32</sup>

It was a strange dilemma that the cowboy lived with. He may have been free in his universe, but it was a freedom that only lasted from moment to moment. Death—ultimate, irresistible, irrevocable—was always there. And it may well be that it was because of, rather than in spite of, this dilemma that we see the cowboy as an individualist, as the ideal of freedom.

<sup>30</sup>Branch, pp. 160-161.

<sup>31</sup>Abbott, p. 28-29.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 200. Italics supplied.

## ULTIMATE FREEDOM

Is it possible that the progress of society away from the dangers that lead to death has been at the expense of individual freedom? Perhaps our modern fascination with danger, with speeding, skydiving, mountain climbing is closely linked to our continuing fascination with the cowboy. Perhaps some universal meanings for all men can be discovered here in the close proximity of a sense of freedom and the possibility of death. One astute analyst of the West suggests as much relative to myth of the West,<sup>33</sup> and it seems to me that we could draw similar conclusions relative to the history of the West. Certainly few if any other historical episodes offer such an opportunity to study the problem of man's sense of ultimate freedom and ultimate fate. Here, stripped of the accumulated social veneer of many centuries, man finds himself almost daily in the limit situation. It may well be that because of his situation, because of the almost daily prospect of violent death, man here developed what finally amounts to a genuine existential sense of his own freedom. While discovering his freedom by thrusting himself into this ultimate situation, he was also proving and flaunting it in the face of the irresistible forces that impinged upon him. Thus when he confronted death it was more with relish and fierceness than reluctance and fear. Not that he hoped for death, but rather that the situation of the confrontation with it gave him, finally, his ultimate sense of freedom.

This whole idea is vividly illustrated by Teddy Blue as he recalls the effects of a particularly nerve-rending thunderstorm on one old cowboy. With the lightning ripping the sky and the thunder banging the ground, in imminent danger of being struck down by the cosmic forces crashing all around him, old Matt Winter yanked off his hat, hurled his blasphemies at the sky, and with the rain pouring in his face yelled, "If you want to kill me, come on, do it!"<sup>34</sup>

Like Matt Winter in the thunderstorm, the cowboy discovered in the dangers of his daily life, even in the presence of death, that he could strike out at destiny. In the very teeth of contingency, the cowboy found his ultimate freedom.

<sup>33</sup>Don D. Walker, "Freedom and Destiny in the Myth of the American West."

<sup>34</sup>Abbott, p. 66.