

Chapter VIII

SOCIAL/CULTURAL ISSUES

... the greatest power of ranchers is not in the West; it's in our minds.

--Candace Crane, "In the Shadow of Livestock" (Crane 1989)

Ranching has discolored the West's social and cultural fabrics. More than a century of powerful rancher influence, rancher/cowboy mythology, ranching management structure, and ranching itself has had an overwhelming impact on people living in ranching areas -- *most* of the rural West -- and, indirectly, on those in urban areas as well. Because ranching has been institutionalized for so long, few people are aware of the extent to which it affects them. Because public ranchlands comprise 41% of the West, and because public lands ranchers tend to be the West's most influential stockmen, the influence of public lands ranching is especially significant.

Nonetheless, the issue's necessarily vague and subjective nature makes it difficult to write about, and nearly impossible to document. This will therefore be a short chapter relative to the importance of the subject matter. While Chapter I examined the establishment of this social hierarchy, this chapter will consider its development, present situation, and repercussions.

Ranching is the basis of a social system that is in many ways deleterious. That we unquestioningly tolerate these malevolent influences -- frequently even becoming unwitting apologists for them -- testifies to the extent to which our culture embraces the myth of The Cowboy.

As a representative of an occupational group, [the cowboy] has received perhaps more attention than any other worker in the world . . .

--William W. Savage, *The Cowboy Hero* (Savage 1979)

At the onset, I must admit to bias -- a *pro-ranching* bias. Like everyone else in this country, I was reared on cowboy/rancher mythology. I dreamed of being a cowboy when I grew up, for cowboys embodied everything real men should be. Hamburgers were my sustenance, and steak the ultimate food. Grass was wasted if not eaten by a cow, and all ranchers were doing their damndest to feed a hungry world. To me, munching cattle were as much a part of the Western landscape as the endless barbed wire fences and the birds in the sky. In other words, I was an American kid. Like every American, my reality is saturated with cowboy romanticism.

The "cow country" furnished in time a wealth of material for the writer of fiction as well as themes for the artist and poet. Stories, pictures, and songs of the range region were produced in great abundance, and given wide circulation, serving to advertise the cattle business and in many cases to give an entirely false conception of the industry and the region in

which it was carried on.

--from *The Range Cattle Industry* by Edward Dale (Dale 1960)

If we believe absurdities, we shall commit atrocities.

--Voltaire

Nearly the antithesis of his fictional counterpart, the real-life, historic average American cowboy was a sad spectacle. He was a scraggly, dirty man with tattered, ill-fitting clothes and an unmistakable smell. His poor sanitary habits, inadequate diet, alcoholic tendencies, and excessive time in the saddle made him weak and sickly. According to Old West authority Joseph McCoy, he was "the picture of malnutrition." He was rootless, shiftless, self-serving, and prone to violent behavior, likely a social outcast, often criminal. When not doing mundane ranching chores, he spent his time drinking and smoking, playing cards, and generally doing little one could call exciting, heroic, or even romantic (here again, there are notable exceptions).

One hundred years ago America was no more impressed by a cowboy than by a railroad employee or shopkeeper. One hundred years ago, America considered cowboying just another profession, a decidedly uninspiring one at that.

Put simply, the cowboy became a hero because he was marketed as one . . . public acceptance of the cowboy increased because entrepreneurs severed his connection with history by making him into what he never was. And he never was interesting.

--William W. Savage, Jr., *The Cowboy Hero* (Savage 1979)

While ranching gained prominence in the West, American society was growing and modernizing rapidly. In developing and defining its national character -- a character influenced largely by westward expansion -- the United States needed a standard model of excellence, a paragon to exemplify its highest-held values, a distinctively American stereotype to embody and represent America, to itself and to the world. In short, America needed a national hero.

In 1884 "Buffalo Bill" Cody, one of the West's great buffalo killers, presented William Levi Taylor, a.k.a. "Buck" Taylor, to the public as a featured attraction in his famous Wild West Show. Cody had already exploited virtually every Western stereotype, and was looking for something different to attract Eastern audiences. He tried a cowboy -- namely Taylor, who had formerly worked on Cody's ranch in Nebraska.

Because cowboys generally were held in such low esteem, Cody would have no easy task selling Taylor to the American public. But Cody was a talented promoter, well-known for his aggressiveness and willingness to take risks. He presented Taylor's past as a mosaic of hard work, privation,

and hardship, laced with danger and adventure. Cody said that the tall, handsome cowboy possessed many remarkable qualities, among them great dexterity, strength, and endurance. All this garnered public interest, but to assuage peoples' negative image of cowboys, Cody also endowed Taylor with honesty, integrity, geniality, humility, sensitivity, and other goodly qualities. By inference, the public was intentionally led to believe that all this was somehow attributable to the Western cowboy lifestyle. Thus was America's cowboy image redefined. With traveling Wild West Shows, carefully staged photographs, books and magazines, Buck Taylor quickly became America's first cowboy hero.

Others followed. As you know, *hundreds* followed. Each came to symbolize certain qualities America wanted to see in itself. The cowboy, as the least European and allegedly most "American" of all American heros, came to represent the essence of America to itself. A new, quintessentially American figure was born -- a nebulous, malleable, composite self-image. The collective American psyche imbued this self-image with whatever qualities it needed to project upon itself. Thus, as never before in a single representative, the cowboy persona came to embody all that was assumed to be great and good about America. In short, cowboyism became America's most popular self-delusion.

Yet the mythic cowboy is shaped out of image, not out of substance. His wonderful adaptability is evidenced by his ability to represent many things to many people, to symbolize whatever our needs require . . . because his image is a very pliable kind of cultural clay.

--from *Cowboy -- The Enduring Myth of the Wild West* by Russel Martin

Many became proficient at exploiting the cowboy image for a buck. "Buck" Taylor himself became an actor, and all subsequent "cowboy" heros have been actors. Even the self-proclaimed sage of the sagebrush, Will Rogers, wasn't really a cowboy but became popular by pretending to be. In fact, extremely few cowboy heros were ever actual cowboys. Most Americans can name many cowboy heros who were *actors*, but not one who was actually a cowboy!

As cowboy mythology developed and expanded solidly upon its own self-delusions, it came to include not only cowboys, but ranchers (especially) and ranches, horses, cows, beef, and anything perceived as "Western." Ever since the birth of Buffalo Bill's cowboy hero a century ago, we Americans have enshrined anything having to do with cowboys or ranching -- *for in doing so we enshrine ourselves and our dreams!* We are all the product of a society that has blind dedication to anything it perceives as "Western," which unfortunately happens to include public lands ranching.

By the 1950's there were few Americans alive who had seen the Old West. It had become a legend -- the Great American Myth. . . . The Saga of the West continues to shape the dreams of a great many Americans.

--from the TV documentary *The West of the Imagination*

Regardless of how many times it is said that the cowboy era was a fraud and a myth, there remains that intangible something that lives on in the hearts of a lot of people.

--Cecil Garland, politician, rancher

Much has been written over the years about our Great Western Fantasy, particularly "the Cowboy Phenomenon." The vast majority of this literature is nothing more than an extension of the fantasy itself. Rather than helping us understand the fantasy, it perpetuates and becomes part of the fantasy to sell itself to the American public.

A few books and articles have done well in explaining the phenomenon. (One of the best is *The Cowboy Hero* by William W. Savage Jr.) They give a variety of reasons for our collective dedication to Western mythology: The myth has simply been passed down through the years; it is an outlet for our collective fantasies; in our modern, humanmade world, we keep the myth to maintain a feeling of closeness to the natural world; we are unable to reject it because we all develop a strong feeling of nostalgia for it as children; in a repressed society, we need the myth to vent our aggressions; the people who benefit from it promote it; and so on. These are all well-grounded explanations. Even so, they have done little to change society's overall perceptions. Even in the late 20th century, few of us understand why or how much we are influenced by The Great Western Fantasy. Because we are so accustomed to it, we cannot see what it really is or how much it affects us.

Today being a "cowboy" is more of an attitude than an occupation.

--Singer Bobby Bare

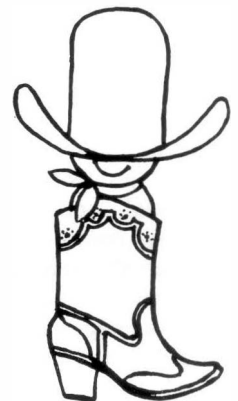
Begin with something as seemingly simple as a cowboy hat. Just another kind of headwear? Like a road worker's hard hat or gardener's straw hat? No way! As we all know, the cowboy hat is different. The man who puts on a cowboy hat suddenly becomes bigger, in more ways than one. In putting on this hat, he identifies himself as part of a select group. He takes on the attributes for which the cowboy hero is famous -- toughness, virility, self-confidence, independence, freedom, unlimited possibility. He expects and usually attracts more attention and respect from those around him.

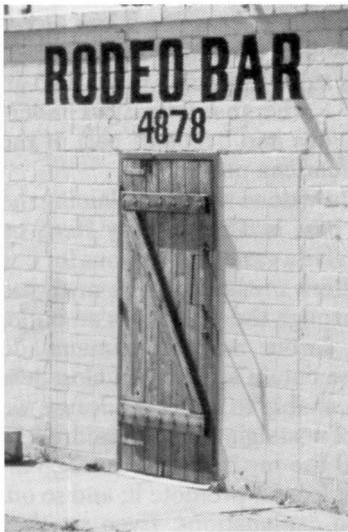
He's all hat and no cattle.

--*Conservative Digest* editor Scott Stanley on 1988 Democratic Vice Presidential candidate Lloyd Bensten

The cowboy hat is a symbol. You've probably noticed that cowboy hats are worn on cloudy days, indoors, in stores, to the cinema, at the dining table, and even (at least in movies and TV commercials) to bed. Those wearing these hats are proclaiming, to themselves and to the world: "I am special. I am a cowboy (or like a cowboy) and all the wonderful things a cowboy is!"

Parents adorn their little boys with oversized cowboy hats because the contrast between the harmless child and *ultimate man* represented by the hat is perceived as cute. Many short men wear cowboy hats to increase their stature in the eyes of society. Some women wear cowboy hats because many men imagine them more sexually alluring that way. Urban cowboys wear them, sometimes as phallic symbols, proclaiming their virility.



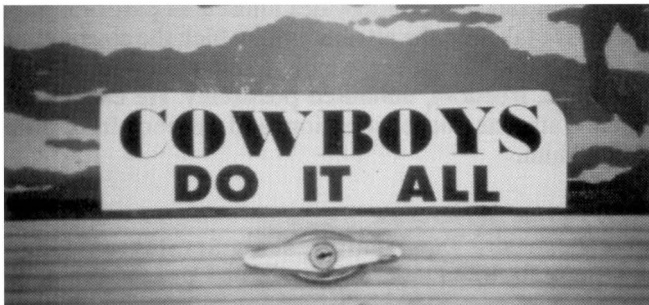


*Cowboys are the last
real men in the world.
--From the movie
"The Misfits"*

In some bars a man can get into a fight simply by wearing a cowboy hat and "not being man enough" to wear one. As a popular bumpersticker reads, "If you ain't a cowboy, you ain't shit!" Don't agree? Well now, them's fightin' words! So we are told.

The cowboy hat is a cowboy hat!

Cowboys are wiser, stronger, faster, better fighters, better drinkers, better lovers, more real, more courageous, and more exciting than other people. In American culture, so pervasive is this inflated cowboy image and self-image that a psycho-scientist might term it a case of "massive, institutionalized delusions of grandeur."



When the last [Marlboro Man] television commercial ran in September, 1970, the narrator could state with some certainty, "Today, the West is everywhere." Indeed it was, for by then the Marlboro landscape conformed perfectly to the convolutions of the viewer's brain, with all that such conformity implied.

--William W. Savage, Jr., The Cowboy Hero (Savage 1979)

If you want to understand what drives a society, study its commercialism. American advertising is dictated by our likes and dislikes, but conversely our likes and dislikes are dictated by advertising. With a deep-rooted, pervasive, and nostalgic cultural phenomenon like the Great Western Fantasy, commercialism and society's dominant paradigm mutually reinforce each other, creating a self-sustaining circle of delusion. Every day of our lives we are bombarded with images and ideas that, by intention or not, reinforce our support of ranching.



Despite the continuing downtrend in cigarette sales in the US, Marlboro in 1990 had its best-selling year ever -- largely because its massive ad campaign features the immensely popular Marlboro Man cowboy-fantasy super-hero.

Take a walk down any American street -- or drive your Bronco, Brahma, Mustang, Lariat, Ranger, Rodeo, or Ranchero. The Marlboro Man's ultramasculine presence radiates. Billboards proclaim that you too can possess the attributes of a cowboy by smoking this brand of cigarette or drinking that brand of beer. Bars and restaurants are The Ranchers' Club, Cattle Company, Brandin' Iron, Golden Spur, Rodeo, Corral, Roundup, Water Hole, Bum Steer, Ragin' Bull . . . Clothing stores promote "Western" clothing that is claimed to make you more of a man or woman. (Now in fashion with wealthy Easterners -- for \$65 a pair -- are "Montana Broke" jeans -- used clothes certified to have been worn by a Montana cowboy.) Steak houses and fast food joints advertise their "Western"-style foods -- 1001 different items to choose from, but all made with 100% real beef, all the best in the West! Grocery stores carry ranch dressing, cowboy-cooked canned beans, and ranch-style potato chips. Doctor, lawyer, and insurance company waiting rooms hang with humorous and rustic paintings and photos portraying likeable cowpokes, rangeland roundups, and nostalgic pastoral scenes. Even banks get into the game, dressing up their employees in cowboy costumes now and then to play up the small town, just-plain-folks angle and to add a little "excitement" to their stuffy atmospheres.

But the greatest thrill about it [starring in the movie "Back to the Future, Part III"] was being a cowboy!

--Actor Michael J. Fox

Turn on a television; it's no different. Fun-lovin' cowboys tear around the Western landscape in Ford Broncos, swilling Coors and Coca Cola. Used car salesmen in cowboy hats and boots try to sell you with their folksy honesty. Rugged, handsome ranchers splash on a certain kind of aftershave and take their pick from hordes of gorgeous, lusty women. Down-home-at-the-ranch realtors want to sell you a taste of "the good life" on your very own Western-style country ranchette. Hard-working, blizzard-bound ranchers in northern Montana recommend Alka Seltzer Plus for the sniffles. Comical cowboys push Pace Picante hot sauce -- an' they'll string ya up if ya don't like it! And rustle up some Fri-tos, paaart-ner! On the other hand, deadly serious,

impeccably straight-shootin' cowboys reveal the "straight facts" about AIDS. Singin' cowboys sell Swanson TV dinners. Miller Lite super cowboys hog-tie 50-ton trucks. Cartoon cowboys peddle sugar-filled cereals to young buckaroos. Talking cowboy toilets hype "the toughest toilet bowl cleaner alive." Talking hamburgers urge you to buy them. The cows themselves talk, relaxing in lounge chairs and promoting their master's product as "pampered beef."

A study of 1000 nationally broadcast TV commercials found that fully 20% featured or included cowboys and/or Western ranching in some form -- an amazing statistic considering that *less than 1/2000th* of the US population is Western cowboys and ranchers!



Cowboy-glorifying prime-time TV series like "Paradise" and "Young Guns" garner huge audiences, as did "Gunsmoke" and "Rawhide" in the past. Others feature fearless cowboy cops who clean up the bad guys single-handedly. Or cosmic cowboys who battle it out (and always win) with space monsters. Or small-time ranchers who work their fingers to the bone in pitiful tear-jerkers. Cowboy cartoons for the kids. And, of course, the standard cowboy-hero TV western movie -- at least 1 per day!; more than 4000 of them have been made by Hollywood in the past 75 years (Zaslowsky 1989). If you can't get enough cowboy stuff on regular TV, consider subscribing to the newly created Cowboy Channel on cable TV.

Last night I was watching a television. A movie ended, and suddenly a stereotypical "Western" scene filled the

screen -- a quintessential saguaro-studded ranching landscape. Then, dramatically, a mounted cowboy entered the scene slowly, deliberately, from stage left. With infinite self-assurance, he rode into and usurped the scene. The camera joined him and panned with him slowly across the landscape. Clip-clop, clip-clop, clip-clop.

Then . . . music. Melodic guitar. A rich female voice, strained with emotion: "Don't . . . you . . . know . . . *pride* . . . comes . . . ea-sy . . ." The lyrics rolled on, the music gradually building, swelling with pride, and, finally, after a minute, virtually exploding with patriotism.

Along the way, various more-common folks were shown doing more-common things. Then, the grand finale: mounted *cowboys* this time and . . . "We're Channel Eleven -- comin' in *prroooooouud* . . . and clear."

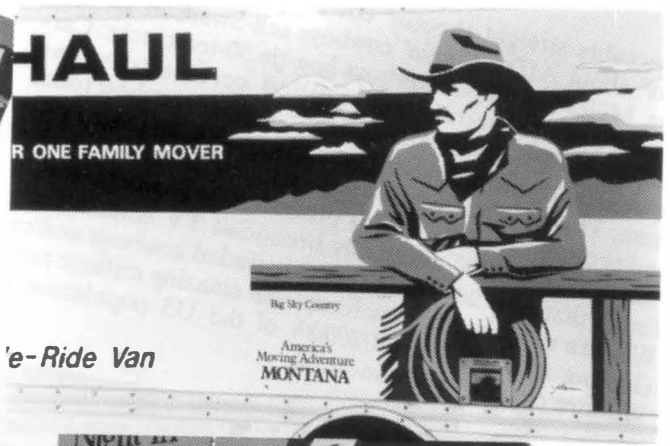
This is the stuff we were raised on, paaarrt-ners. Think about it.



Likewise, the radio waves carry cowboy commercialism and a steady stream of country and western tunes pitying or exalting fictional cowboys and ranchers in a hundred different ways. Interestingly, only an infinitesimally small fraction of "cowboy" singers ever were actual cowboys. In Tucson, even the rock-'n'-roll station is called "The Radio Ranch"; it broadcasts the new rock hit "I'm a Cowboy" (not to be confused with the Steve Miller classic, "I'm a Space Cowboy"). Dimestore novels and Western romances glamorize the Western ranching lifestyle and the people who live it. Children's books portray ranchers and cowboys as mythical heros, role models and paragons.

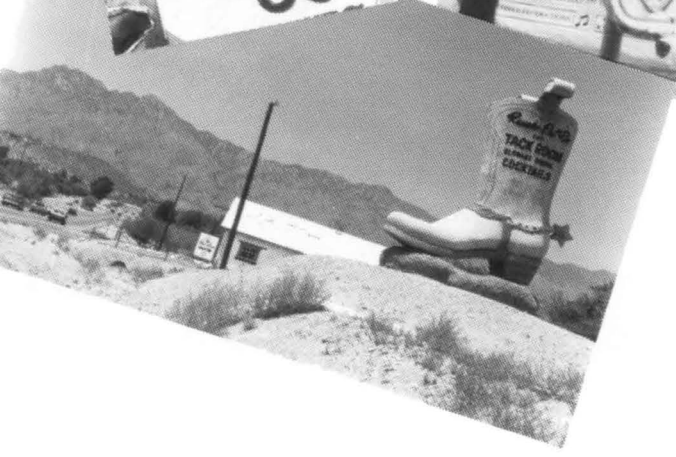
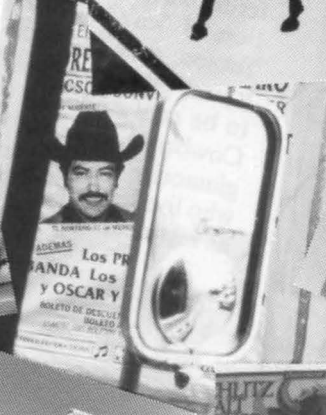


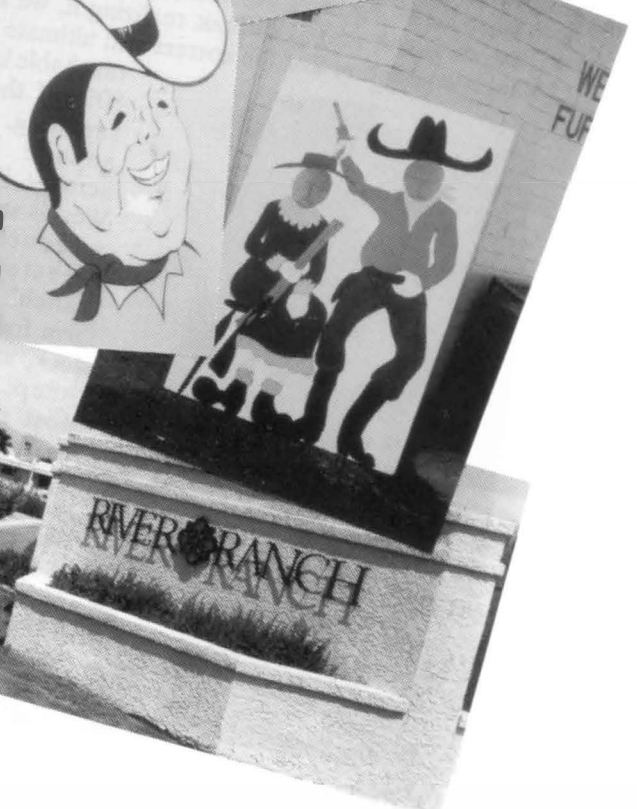
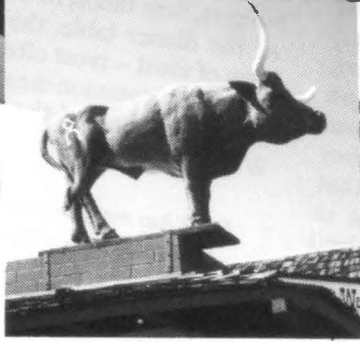
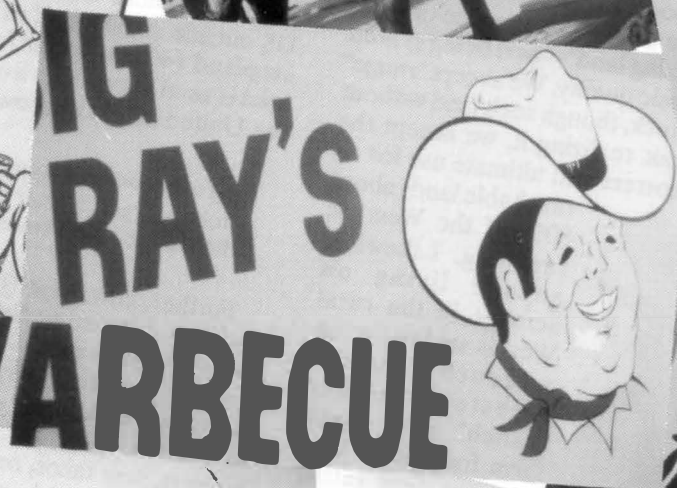
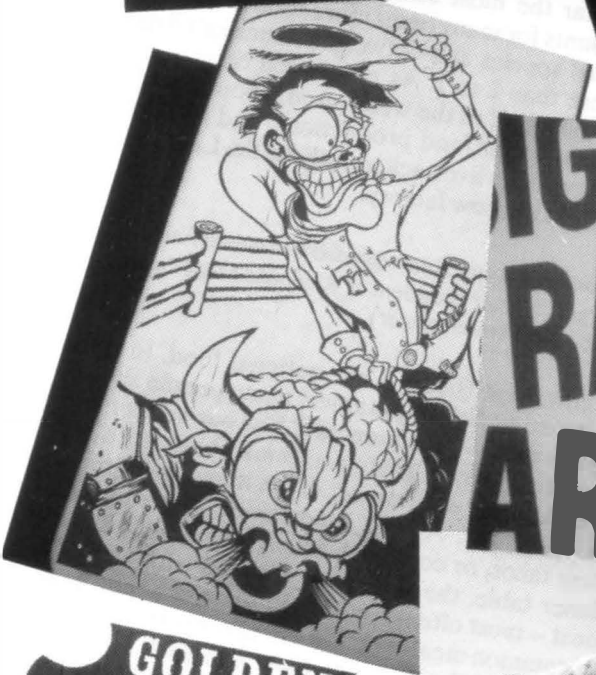
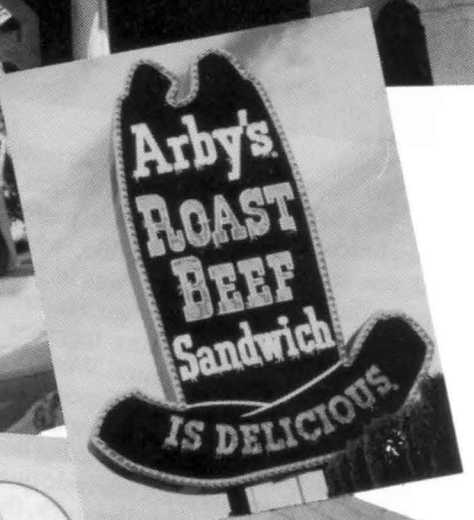
The proud symbol of a small-town high school.



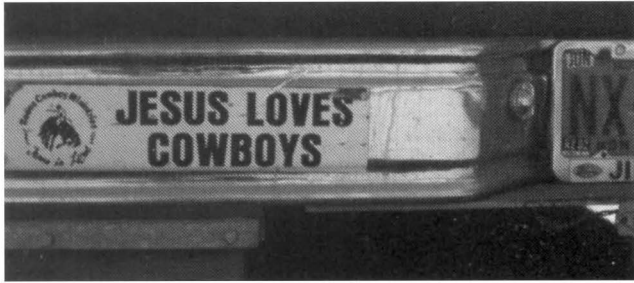
be
Western

'e-Ride Van





Magazine and newspaper ads picture robust cowboys utilizing various commercial products, and their articles detail what a pitifully hard time financially strapped ranchers are having making it on the open range these days. Half-time shows at sports events feature beefy cowboys on large white horses, adrip with gold and silver, along with baton-twirling cowgirls. Hundreds of schools throughout the West proudly display the cowboy (and even the rustler) as their school emblem. And be assured, every parade must have its glittering equestrian cowboys -- symbols of all that is great and good. Last month I even attended a cowboy opera.

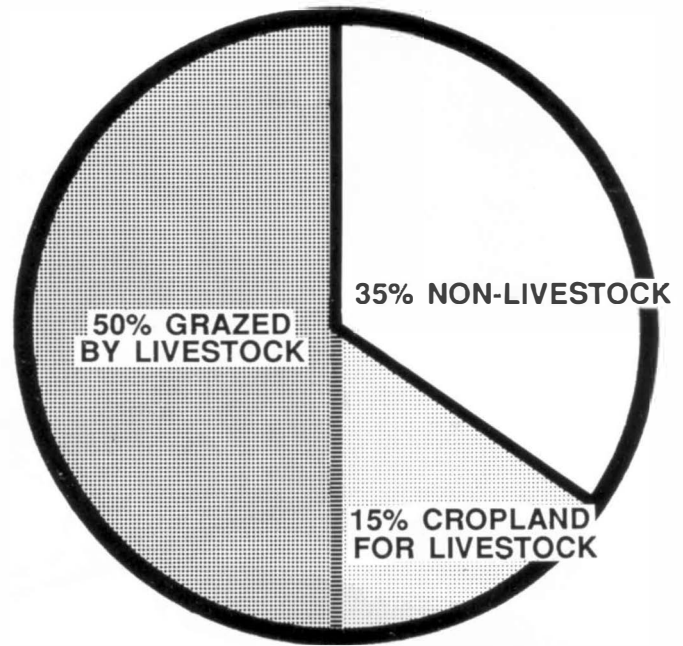


Contemporary religion likewise instills within the cultural psyche a belief in livestock production, with its flocks, sheep, shepherds, mangers, and other pastoral symbolism. Much of this is rooted in the Bible, which was written when nomadic livestock herding was in full-swing in the Middle East more than 2000 years ago. (Interestingly, icons of Jesus, crosses, and cowboys hang together over the mantles of countless homes in the rural West.)

Even our language predisposes us to accept ranching's omnipotence. For example, we call any open piece of rural land with grass or browse "grazing land" -- as if being grazed by livestock was its main intrinsic quality. We accept "range" to mean land for grazing livestock, though such land without livestock is still range. Without realizing it, we accept the blanket contention that the correct and ultimate use for all



ranchable land (about 80% of the West) is ranching. Likewise, anyone living on acreage in the rural West is said to live on a "ranch," though Webster defines "ranch" as "a large farm for raising livestock, as beef cattle, sheep, or horses." Most rural Western residents living on "ranches" don't live on ranches, though they like to pretend that they do. Friends in New Mexico resolved this dilemma by naming their 20-acre spread the "No Cattle Company."



US LAND AREA
(outside Alaska)

Our society's reverence for cowboys and ranchers also extends to the product of their endeavors -- the cow. The bald eagle may be this country's official animal, but a good look around reveals that our real national animal is the cow. The cow is by far the most common large animal in this country. It accounts for many times more total biomass than any other animal species and outweighs America's human population more than 2 to 1. As mentioned earlier, in the US outside Alaska half of the water used, about 2/3 of the cropland (40% of plant food production), and 65% of all land is used to produce livestock, mostly cattle. Look again; the United States is a cow factory!

Beef is the backbone of the American diet and always has been.
--John Morgan, former president of Riverside Meat Packers (died in 1982 from colon cancer)

Further, cow meat (beef) is our national food. In some societies it is rice or fish or potatoes; many people around the world have never even eaten cow. But our society is so cow-oriented that few of us stop to think about it. In restaurants, we naturally expect most of the items on the menu to contain cow meat. At fast food joints, we order cow burgers, cow tacos, or cow sandwiches; what else is there? At the dinner table, the plate seems naked without some form of meat -- most often cow -- in the place of honor. Cow is the most common meat in almost any grocery store, taking up at least half of the space at most meat/fish counters. Why?

Steak has magical properties.
--1989 radio ad by Beef Board

And then, even beyond beef, there is . . . *steak!* -- a food worshipped almost religiously by our culture. Steak is the

ultimate culinary item, the most desirable of all foods. When we want to impress our friends, when price is no object, when we want the very best, we buy the choicest part of the cow -- steak. Movie stars throw them on grills for TV cameras. Young men order them for their lovers to show how much they care. The affluent order them with pomposity in fancy restaurants. The poor only dream about them. Steak is a luxury item, a status symbol. Steak symbolizes the best of the best. Holy cow!

Ah yes, dairy!

The word conjures up pleasant, wholesome images of peacefully grazing milk cows and rosy-cheeked children. From childhood we are taught that (like meat) cow milk is the basis of 1 of the "4 basic food groups," and that it should be ingested in some form at every meal. This, despite the fact that humans are the only animals on Earth besides cows that drink milk from cows, that cow milk is difficult for all humans to digest, and that 20% of Caucasians and up to 90% of black and Asian people lack the lactose enzyme necessary to digest cow milk, causing cramps, bloating, and diarrhea upon drinking it.

Dairy promoters tell us that milk from cows is "the perfect food" for humans. This, despite the fact that cow milk has *no* fiber and is for many reasons the perfect food only for baby cows; physiologically, the most perfect food for adult humans is fruit. For years they drilled us with "Everybody needs milk!" -- until the courts maintained that no human body needs cow milk, and in fact many are allergic to it. Then it was "Milk has something for every body," "Milk is a natural," "Milk does a body good," . . .

For decades our diet has been dictated by the Great Calcium Scare; without cow milk's calcium our teeth might fall out and our bones collapse. In truth most non-animal foods contain abundant calcium; it would be virtually impossible *not* to get enough calcium from a normal plant food diet. Heavy consumption of cow milk (normal for Americans) actually blocks the body's intake of calcium, contributing to this country's rising epidemic of osteoporosis. Without cow milk's "quality" protein, they imply, we will become frail and sickly. Yet, sufficient quality protein is easily obtained from a normal plant-centered diet, and Americans' excessive intake of protein is actually the *cause* of many of their health problems. The dairy industry tells us: "Whole milk is only 3.5% fat." However, by far most of milk's weight is water, and the amount of calories as fat in whole milk is 50%.

Today, professional advertisers tell us to "Get on a health kick!" with cow milk, while our extreme consumption of dairy products has been linked to numerous health problems. Yogurt a health food? What a joke!

(Diamond 1985, Robbins, 1987)

For generations, dairy has been synonymous with "pure," beef with "strong." And cattle have ranged over the soul of America, a symbol of wide-open spaces, broncbuster spirit and the bucolic life on the family farm.

--Molly O'Neill, "Cows in Trouble" (O'Neill 1990)

Finally, not only is the cowboy our national hero, the cow our national animal, cow meat our national food, but cow milk is, debatably, our national drink. A survey by Growers Journal of California in September 1982 explains: "Dairy products have the highest incidence of consumption of any major food category. Only 6% of Americans say they don't consume milk in some form." (Many of these people are *allergic* to it.) Americans consume more cow milk products per capita, and as a percentage of diet, than do people in any other region on Earth (Espenshade 1988). According to the *Los Angeles Times*, the US cow milk industry is directly subsidized with almost 3 billion tax dollars annually (Diamond 1985).

As infants, most of us were suckled on milk from a large bovine ungulate, not from our human mothers! As children, we drank cow milk at meals. As adults, we pour cow milk on cereals and eat it as cheese, ice cream, yogurt, and dozens of other "dairy" products.



[The rodeo bull] *doesn't buck because he is a wild and furious beast, but because an excruciatingly painful strap has been cinched, tightly, in the areas of his genitals and intestines. Sometimes a nail, tack, piece of barbed wire, or other sharp metal object has been placed under the strap, to further infuriate him. And just before the animal is let out of the chute, an electric prod known in the trade as the "hot shot," is applied to his rectum . . .*

--John Robbins, *Diet for a New America* (Robbins 1987)

Like other Western cities and hundreds of small Western towns, the city of Tucson (population 600,000) honors the mythical Cowboy with an annual "Rodeo Day." All city schools are closed so children can join 150,000 other worshipers at the Rodeo Day Parade, which kicks off the 4-day Tucson Rodeo. The pageantry includes hundreds of



cowboy-costumed cow people strutting on horses, cowboy-costumed marching bands, cowboy-costumed famous people and government officials riding in convertibles, all moving slowly along a large horseshoe-shaped route through downtown Tucson. (Interestingly, there are no actual range cows in the parade.) Until a few years ago this ranching extravaganza was sponsored largely by city taxpayers, but now the city "only" provides the grandstands,

special transportation and city busing, 175 police officers, fire engines, ambulances, free parking (the only day of the year), sanitation, and so forth.



A wealthy entrepreneur established the Tucson Rodeo as a tourist attraction in 1925. No other holiday exalts a small segment of American society, and no other holiday but Christmas and the Fourth of July comes close in fanfare and hoopla. Only Labor Day honors another American worker (*all workers combined*), and it is hardly a celebration. In the West there is no celebrated Construction Workers Day or Bank Employees Day or Textile Workers Day or Bartenders Day or Miners Day or Teachers Day or even Farmers Day, or any day so special for any other group of people.


IT'S
R*O*D*E*O
TIME!!!

The original rodeo was a periodic gathering of local cow workers and owners. Its purpose was threefold:

First, it brought an area's stockmen together on a regular basis, giving them a sense of solidarity and a chance to better organize their scattered power bases, as well as buy and trade stock. This was important to an industry so widely dispersed geographically.

Second, it gave working cow people a competitive incentive to practice and perfect their ranching skills.

Third, the rodeo's crowd gave the cow boys a feeling of fun and excitement -- important in an occupation most of them considered lonely and boring.

To a lesser extent, the contemporary rodeo still serves these functions, but its main purposes have become: (1) make money, (2) bolster cowboy's self-image, (3) romanticize and promote the livestock grazing industry.

Many modern rodeo performers have never been livestock raisers, and much of modern rodeo has little practical application to ranching.

Today's rodeo is a carefully produced, self-glorifying exhibition. It is heavily advertised as a festive affair -- *an exciting event!* -- a place where "ordinary" [non-cowboy] folks can get a [fantacized] taste of the excitement of the cow raiser's [supposed] way of life.

Ya-hoo buckaroos!!!



*He wakes at dawn to feed the world.
 He carries nations on his big shoulders . . .
 He holds the range in his hands . . .
 He's America riding a horse . . .
 Democracy wearing a big hat . . .
 He's freedom holding a branding iron . . .
 the future of the world in tough boots . . .
 Armies march on his muscles . . .
 Cities live on his labors . . .
 He fills the market place
 and makes the wheels of commerce whirl . . .
 He's the world's most constant hope . . .
 He's the most useful man in America . . .
He's a rancher.*

--from "What Is a Rancher?" by Dan Valentine

Cowboys are darned sure different.

--Rodeo cowboy, Wrangler Jeans radio ad, 1990

So who, really, is this mythical hero, the contemporary cowboy/rancher? The Hero is presented to the world as a plain-spoken, straight-shootin' man of brutal honesty -- a man so impeccably righteous he need never resort to falsehoods. Yet to those familiar with him, the rancher commonly is known to stretch the truth as tightly as the barbed wire of his fences. The Hero is publicized as extremely self-assured, capable, tough, fearless, quick-witted, and in every way a "real man" -- definitely someone to be reckoned with. The common rancher enjoys the special favor and protection afforded by his fictional counterpart, yet possesses these attributes no more than the mechanic or factory worker. The Hero is advertised as a hunk of masculinity, the ultimate in virility, a rangeland Romeo. But this fable has its roots in romantic days of olde when livestock tenders spent so much time on the range that their sexual imaginings (and inclinations) sometimes ran wild. The Hero is declared to be a very exciting and even mysterious individual. Yet, for all the hype the rancher remains just an ordinary fellow. The Hero is portrayed as a rugged outdoorsman, sweat-stained and caloused from years of strenuous work. Yet the average rancher labors no harder than the average American worker, relying on a variety of modern conveniences to do the bulk of the work; indeed, on the average he probably spends less time outdoors (and less time actually *working*) than the average construction worker. The Hero is described as living an admirably simple and down-to-earth existence -- a life of few material possessions or even desires to own them. Yet, the vast majority of ranchers are no closer to being "natural" than are their cows, and their material possessions would fill the average suburban home and 2-car garage several times over. Sure, some old, leathered cowfolks are interesting and likable characters. But so are many leathered old folks from many other trades, and most ranchers are not leathered.

The Rancher Hero, then, is a paragon, though his living counterpart is quite human. The Hero is everything virtuous and wonderful a hero should be. The Western rancher is . . . what he is.

The cowboy, shaded by a ten-gallon hat, his bowed legs hidden behind leather "chaps," his feet shod with sharp-heeled, quilted boots, is the premier American figure of romance. Herding, breeding, salting, protecting -- such are the homely occupations of the most popular figure in all fiction.

--Ross Calvin, *Sky Determines* (Calvin 1975)

This discussion only scratches the surface, but by looking at our culture from this different perspective, it becomes evident that we all are inundated every day of our lives with pro-ranching ideas and images. We are relentlessly indoctrinated, usually in ways we do not consciously recognize, to support the ranching establishment. Our society treats ranchers as superior and habitually supports them in whatever they do.

But America must have its myths. . . . Thus glorification of the cowboy is necessary. And everything that has been done to the cowboy has been done, consciously or unconsciously, to make him usable as a myth.

--William W. Savage, Jr., *Cowboy Life* (Savage 1979)

Perhaps we need heroes, real heroes. Perhaps not. Maybe we need our Western mythology or something like it. Perhaps not. But surely we don't need public lands ranching to preserve our Western legacy. As much as 86% of Western ranching would survive without it. Hell, by far most of our Western legacy would survive without *any* ranching! Indeed, the most sensible way to preserve the most worthwhile symbols of our Western legacy -- honesty, rugged independence, self-sufficiency, and resourcefulness -- would be to eliminate the wasteful and destructive public lands ranching system.

The most powerful, reactionary, and destructive little group in the Western states are still the public-lands ranchers; and they survive by hiding behind the cheap mythology of the "Cowboy": literally, a boy who looks after cows

--Edward Abbey

My heros have always been cowboys

--Waylon Jennings

In the United States, of course, we have traditionally honored the cowboy. . . . Our tiny planet deserves a new mythic hero.

--Jay D. Hair, Executive Vice-President, National Wildlife Federation

Aristocrats of the Range



Men in the cattle business were often picturesque and resourceful. Political and economic power gave them great self-confidence, spirit, and command. Being held in high regard by others caused them to become assertive, even arrogant. Early on, all this heady power began to be expressed as a distinct class consciousness.

--Denzel & Nancy Ferguson, *Sacred Cows* (Ferguson 1983)

The 26 Bar, once owned by actor John Wayne, Steeple L, H Bar V, Bar Flying V, Y Cross, C J and L A are just a few of the old-time brands that represent names like Brown, Udall, Sipes, and Butler.

--from a rural newspaper article

When you mess with ranching, you're fuckin' with people's identity.

--Anonymous rural resident

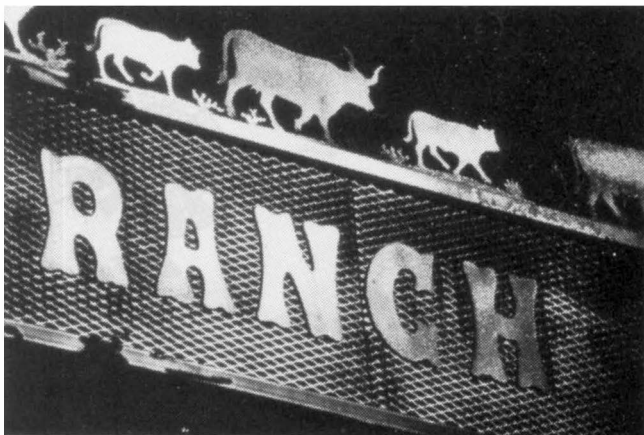
How many of us haven't at some time fantasized being the celebrated big-time rancher? Imagine:

Early one pleasant, sunny morning, you mount your fine steed and ride off into the nearby rugged hills, leaving your sprawling ranch headquarters far behind. You survey the

vast Western landscape, a commanding view. Far below, small groups of cattle graze peacefully on grassy bottoms along a creek. Your eyes follow the creek downstream to where it joins a river and take in the pleasant, dollar-bill green of your large alfalfa field, awaiting harvest. In 4 directions your barbed wire fences and dirt roads melt into the horizon, well-defined symbols of a working ranch. Your allotment extends for miles all around. Though federal land, this is *your* domain -- your land more than anyone's -- and you feel security and stability in this. You ride proud. You *feel* important.

You relish your role. As a large ranch owner, you are respected, admired, envied, and, yes, feared by the local townspeople and other rural folks. They are well-aware of your eminence. They all want to know you and help you when they can. Even strangers, recognizing your clothing, manner, and bearing, cannot help but realize your significance. You command power and prestige. As an officer in half a dozen committees and associations, you are an influential political and social figure. You are a landowner, a personage, an establishment.

Ah, to be a cattle baron!



The ranchers are the landed gentry of the West, our self-proclaimed nobility, and they expect to be treated as such.

--Dave Foreman, "My Heros Have Always Been Cowboys" (Foreman 1986)

Historically, wealthy stockmen have tended to be loud-mouthed, boastful, and arrogant.

--Bernard DeVoto, *The Easy Chair* (DeVoto 1955)

Visiting a rural Western community you may spot the typical public lands ranchman -- the beefy, seemingly self-assured fellow, always in full ranching garb, swaggering down Main Street. He talks like he looks -- that stereotypical slow, deliberate, self-important, resonant bass, that wealthy stock-man drawl common to John Wayne, Rex Allen, Hoss Cartwright, and so many wealthy graziers.

Over at Hank's Coffee Shop as usual, you'll find a group of cowboy hats clustered around a table, caffeine-fired talk comparing ranching operations, envious customers at nearby tables venturing occasional suggestions. Next door at Bill's Barber Shop, patrons hang on Rancher Johnson's every word as he relates how he finally cornered an elusive

mountain lion. Down at the Mustang Tavern, the hats are lined up on bar stools and the bull centers around the new girl in town and the upcoming local rodeo. Up on the hill at the Lutheran Church (the only place *without* cowboy hats), the minister is praying for drought relief for "those of us fallen upon hard times." Out on the edge of town, the owner of Grant's Feed is helping Rancher Maddock load his pickup with rolls of barbed wire, fence posts, salt blocks, and hay.



Due to cowboy mythology and much else discussed in this book, public lands ranchers enjoy what may be termed "institutionalized social supremacy." They are among the most affluent and influential people in the rural West. Their relatives and private stockmen also lend support, and many influential non-ranchers find it advantageous to associate with and administer to these graziers.

Public lands ranchers cultivate relationships designed to heighten their social, economic, and political standing. Friendships with influential government land managers, politicians, businesspeople, community leaders, and other local VIPs ensure that stockmen's interests will be protected, and vice versa -- calculated, reciprocal back-scratching. For instance, would County Supervisor Hays recommend against predator "control" funding for the area including Rancher Jim's allotment? Jim's an old hunting buddy, and he's been losing calves to coyotes. Besides, Jim knows a lot of voters and pulls many strings.

Recently, the editor of a newsletter in a small New Mexico town had the audacity to run an article questioning the wisdom of public lands ranching. His biggest advertiser pulled out.

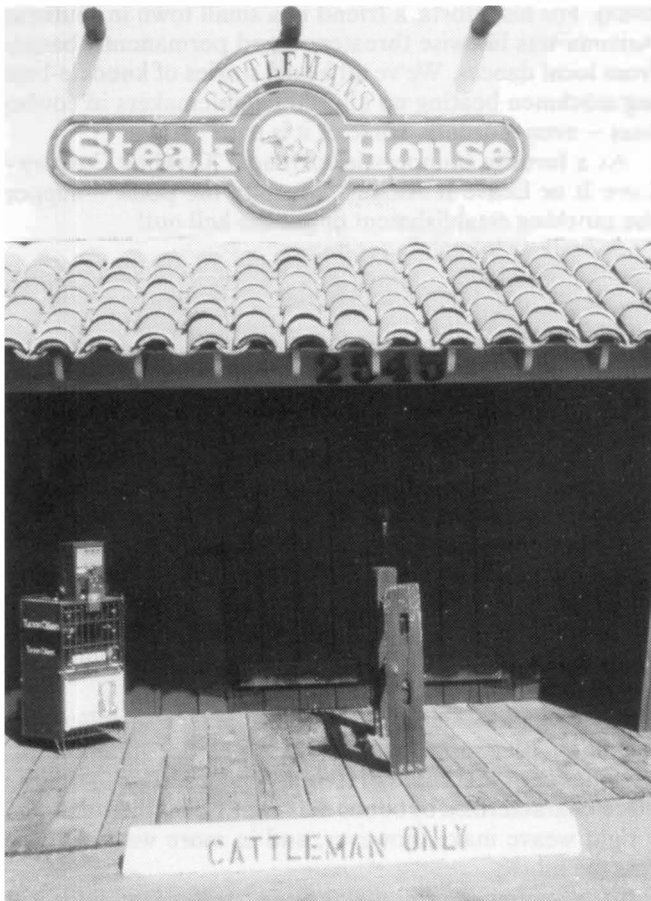
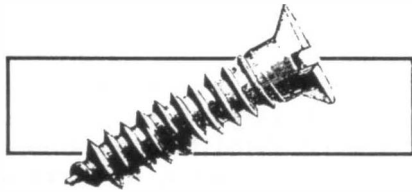
In most rural areas, public lands ranchers are like celebrities. The local populace adores the image of the Bonanza-like Western spread, the prominent ranching family, the noble-yet-sociable ranch owner. They envy all that supercilious prestige and power. They want part of it to rub off on them. They want to know ranchers, and they want other people to know that they know ranchers.

Conversely, stockmen cultivate a sociable image calculated to maintain public support. For most, this is easy because they are long-established locally and respected personages merely by being what they are. They strike up friendships with nearly anyone they so desire. They become community, church, and business leaders, are appointed and elected to boards, commissions, and committees by no other qualification than that they are large ranchers.

After attending Rancher Brad's annual beef bar-be-cue for 15 years, how could we complain about his cattle messing up Thompson Creek? After talking with him regularly at Kathy's Cafe, who would force him to pay for the damage his cattle did to their garden? After swilling beers with him at the Brandin' Iron, who would protest Brad getting drought relief funding for "his" overstocked BLM allotment? We

smile all the while. After all, *he is a rancher.*

People are socially, physically, and psychologically afraid to refute cowboyism. Whether they realize it or not, all rural folks are under unyielding pressure to support the ranching establishment.



Local BLM officials are quite probably strongly affected by adverse social pressures on themselves and their families. Most BLM offices are located in small western towns whose culture and livelihood are largely oriented to the range livestock industry. Public opinion is entirely that of ranching interests. Consequently, a district ranger who strongly antagonizes the local livestock interest will soon find himself and his family largely isolated from the social life of the community. Few managers or staff members experience this social disapproval, because they rarely antagonize the rancher community.

--Wesley Calef, *Private Grazing and Public Lands* (Calef 1960)

Government land managers are especially vulnerable to pressure from stockmen. They work with them often. They have the same friends. They eat at the same restaurants, drink in the same bars, go to the same churches, and attend the same community functions. Their wives are members of the same social clubs, and their kids go to the same schools. Most agency employees are unwilling to go against the grain; indeed, many envy and emulate the ranchers whose operations they are supposed to regulate.

In "Discouraging Words," Jon R. Luoma reports that social pressure from the ranching community has intimidated BLM personnel into backing down on needed grazing reforms. One BLM manager who tried to correct ranching problems "was reportedly forced to move to another district after his children were threatened and even beaten up in school." Bill Meiners, a retired BLM range specialist and now an outspoken critic of federal range policy, was in 1985 warned that his house would be bombed (Luoma 1986), as have been several other ranching reformers. Other tactics include petitions, harassing phone calls, legal persecution, repercussions by the business community, and vandalism.

The livestock industry's finesse at maintaining the status quo is legendary . . .

--Elizabeth Royte, "Showdown in Cattle Country" (Royte 1990)

One of our neighbors in rural central Arizona for 8 years was a transplanted upstate New York small-time politician and construction company owner. "Red" was a short, skinny, sickly man who to heighten his image always wore a cowboy hat and boots. He owned a 4-acre "ranch," the standard late-model, heavy-duty cowboy pickup, and even a couple of horses that left their small compound every few months when Red wanted to impress someone that he was a real cowboy. He completed his character with a deliberate, bow-legged walk, slow drawl, and jus'-a'-good-ol'-boy grin. To make a long story short, Red was corrupt, bigoted, unhappy, lazy, and alcoholic (and never was a cowboy), yet despite all this "Ol' Red" maintained his cowboy image, and thus social acceptance and a surprising political following.



Several years ago, Geraldo Rivera was in town doing a story on farm [farm and ranch] foreclosures. In the course of his research, Rivera became involved in a physical altercation at the Rancher's Bar . . . "Nobody even punched the guy," a hefty fellow told me. "It's just . . . see, he was poking into affairs that was none of his business, and he got his head turned through a wall."

--from "The Big Open" by Tim Cahill (Cahill 1987)

In most rural areas no other group exerts such influence on the local populace as do public lands ranchers. Rural residents are from birth conditioned to embrace the dominant cultural patterns, with ranchers generally at the top of the social pyramid. The situation is not unlike Medieval Europe, with large ranchers as the land-controlling aristocracy; government land managers, politicians, and private supporters as their loyal subjects; and the local citizenry as the unwitting common people.

Newcomers to the rural West soon discover that to "get along" they must conform to prevailing social expectations -- or pressures will be brought to bear. Those who challenge the ranching establishment quickly find themselves on the social shit-list. Suddenly, folks are less friendly to them. People gossip about them. They aren't invited to town meetings. Their kids are hassled at school. Even their scoops down at the ice cream shop get smaller. The local community quietly shuns them as unpatriotic troublemakers.



As a warning to stop our ranching-reform efforts, a local stockman shot our dog, skinned it, and dumped it near our house.

Ostracization increases. Nonconformists begin to feel lonely, outcast, troubled. Gradually, relentlessly, their will to resist is broken down. They find it easier to go with the flow, the status quo. Why make enemies? Why beat one's head against a wall? It may take years, but sooner or later they submit to the ranching imperative.

Those few who continue to contest "the way things are" face ridicule, harassment, threats, and physical assault. Historically, ranchers were well-known for using violence to get their way. To a lesser degree they still are. For example, soon after we circulated the stop-grazing petition mentioned in the previous chapter, local ranchers began packing holstered pistols as a show of force. Our dog was killed, skinned, and dumped along the road near our house. Vague threats hit the rumor circuit.

In response to their ranching-reform position, Denzel and Nancy Ferguson were physically ejected by 5 cowmen from a public dance in a small Oregon town and told they would be killed if they didn't leave the county (see Ferguson 1983). For his efforts, a friend in a small town in southeast Arizona was likewise threatened and permanently banned from local dances. We've all heard stories of knuckle-busting stockmen beating up alleged troublemakers in cowboy bars -- even murders. Some of it is true.

As a favorite bumpersticker reads, "Cowboy Country -- Love It or Leave It Alone!". More to the point -- support the ranching establishment or get the hell out!



(George Wuerthner)

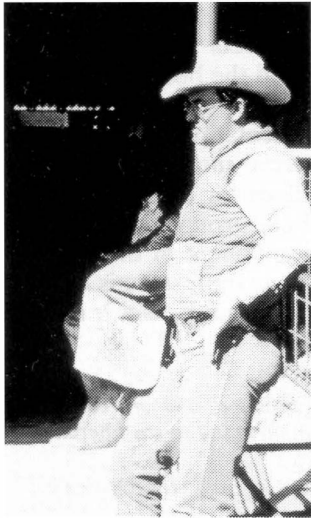
Ranching's influence on the rural West's social/cultural fabric is, of course, not all negative. Its omnipresence provides certain threads of stability and tradition to a region often characterized by boom-and-bust. Scant threads do not a tight weave make, however, and in more ways ranching rots the fabric.

In Wyoming, "The Cowboy State," transplanted Californian writer Gretel Ehrlich, now reborn a rancher, champions the ranching cause like no other, making cowboy glorification an art form. To her, the ranching lifestyle is the ultimate in realism. Bobbi Birleffi, a native Wyoming filmmaker, offers this sensitive reaction to one of Ehrlich's cassette tapes:

Admitting newcomers who won't accept the official ranchers' version of things would amount to admitting that there is something wrong with Wyoming, something wrong with the way we treat each other and the land. That admission is inconceivable. So we continue to avenge ourselves on this terrible place and anyone who suggests otherwise.

People will tell you with pride that Wyoming is hard on women and horses. How plain do you need it said?

The Western ranching establishment is indeed hard on women and horses -- and anyone or anything that doesn't "fit in." Due to prejudice largely spearheaded by ranchers, many people find that they cannot live comfortably in rural Western communities. Thus, through upbringing and cultural tradition, stockmen banish opposition.



(Dave Foreman)

Western ranching (including government and private range programs), on public land especially, is dominated by male WASPs. Aside from Hispanic sheep herders in their north-central and a few smaller New Mexico enclaves, and several hundred scattered Basque sheep herders, non-WASP public lands ranchers are rare. In most areas a black man at a stockmen's association meeting would be like a parrot on the Arctic tundra. Stockmen argue that minorities are not well-represented in the ranching community because they

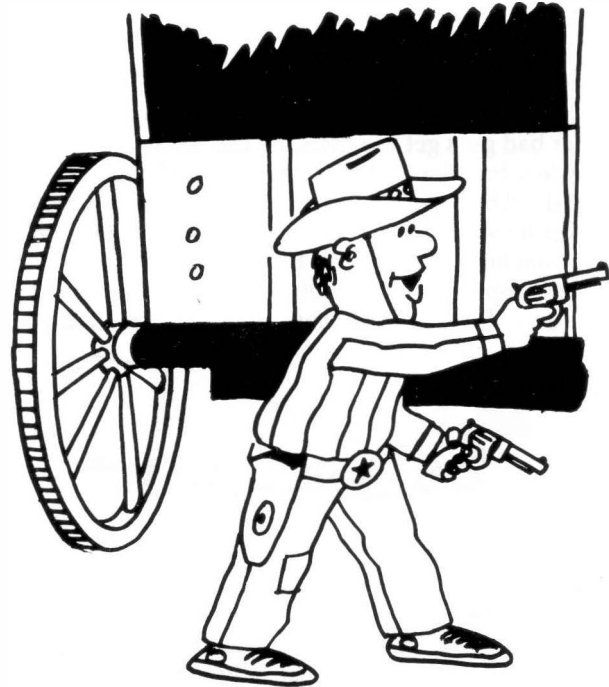
don't have a ranching history. They weren't allowed to develop one, and for good reason they didn't want to. Put plainly, the Western ranching community generally rejects ethnic minorities and stains the social fabric of the rural West with its influence.

It likewise disfavors anyone who doesn't *believe* in ranching. For example, rural folks who propose removing cattle from sensitive natural areas are branded radical *envarmint*lists. Those who propose revoking Rodeo Day as an official town holiday are openly scorned as unpatriotic. Those who denounce branding as cruel become laughingstock under the dominant ranching mentality.

And it disdains those who would subvert the dominant paradigm. This includes everyone who doesn't measure up to the cowboy standard. For example, in small Western towns, few homosexuals dare come out of the closet, even those who are cowboys. Racial and religious minorities, atheists, social and political reformers, nonconformists, anarchists, hippies, greenies, pagans, back-to-the-landers, feminists, and an overwhelming diversity of other peoples are made to feel most unwelcome.

In a movie, book, or magazine, when a cowboy rides into town we all expect there's a'gonna be trouble, yes siree, and we'd be sadly disappointed if there wasn't. In our culture no figure so personifies the

glorification of violence. Perhaps ranching's most harmful social/cultural impact is its perpetuation of machismo and all it entails -- might is right, man over Nature and woman, egocentrism, an attitude that eating huge amounts of beef is patriotic and manly, brutality towards animals, and a generally wasteful, over-exploitive attitude.



"Big Cowboy Western knows just about everything," said Billy. --from a children's book. (Greg Pentkowski)

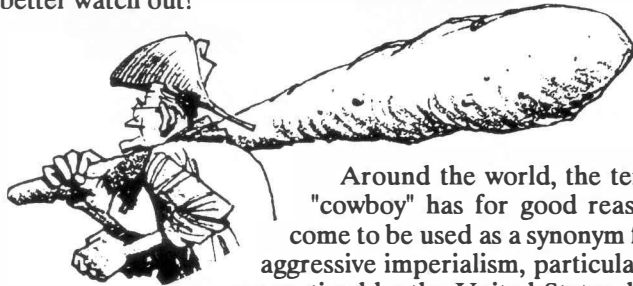
In the rural West, the macho cowboy is the ultimate in rugged masculinity, the yardstick by which all other men are measured. This is of course a ridiculous myth, even by macho standards. For example, who is tougher -- the cowboy sitting on a horse trotting across the range or the backpacker hauling 70 pounds for miles across rugged mountainsides? We all know the cowboy is, even if he spends half of his time sitting in a pickup or Cessna.



I could be anything. I mean, I could be a jet pilot, or a policeman, or the President of the United States. I could even be a cowboy.

--Chris Elliott, TV sitcom "Get a Life"

The cowboy/rancher is every male American child's role model, particularly in the rural West. When a boy puts a cowboy hat on his head and straps on his toy 6-shooter, he tastes the excitement of being in command -- *just like a real cowboy!* He fantasizes. By simply pointing his gun, he can make anyone do anything, or make them dead. If the Injuns or other bad guys get too thick, he can always gang up with his cowboy buddies and wipe them out. He can make any animal dead by pulling a trigger. He can make his horse do whatever he wants by spurring it hard enough. He controls a vast ranching territory as far as he can imagine, and whoever trespasses is in trouble. He knows what's right and makes everyone else do what's right. If they don't, they better watch out!



Around the world, the term "cowboy" has for good reason come to be used as a synonym for aggressive imperialism, particularly as practiced by the United States, but also by the Soviet Union, Great Britain, Japan, and other super-powers. Appropriately, US Secretary of State Jim Baker is a Wyoming rancher from a public lands ranching family, and Defense Secretary Dick Cheney also is a ranching-enamored resident of "The Cowboy State."

Fathers encourage their sons to grow into men based on the cowboy paragon. For example, older boys receive BB and pellet guns, then graduate to .22 caliber rifles. Emulating cowboys, they shoot bottles, cans, trees, cacti, birds, lizards, frogs, rabbits, and whatever moves or doesn't. When adults, they buy fancy pistols and rifles and become akin to real cowboys. The childhood desire to play cowboy is one of the principal inducements for American men to buy guns, worship them, and to use them indiscriminately.

Thousands of rural boys are taught to hate predators, competitors, pests, and no-goods -- *most* wild animals. They learn to mistreat domestic animals, that animals don't have feelings, and that they are here only for our use. They learn to exploit their surroundings however they see fit, that Nature has no real purpose beyond serving "mankind." They learn that ranching is inherently superior to other land uses, that ranching takes priority, and that ranchers are somehow better than common people.

They learn disrespect toward women, that females have their place. Little girls quickly learn their place. Consequently, there are 2 kinds of "ladies" in cowboyland. The "good woman" is the dedicated housewife who stands by her man, regardless of his possible indiscretions. She raises the kids, keeps house, has dinner ready on time, and has herself ready on time. She is a good advisor, but knows when to keep her mouth shut. The man "man"ages the family like he does the ranch.

The "bad girl" is the woman who has forsaken her conventional place in the established order. She cannot seem to learn proper dedication to a man. She may find her place on the bar stool.

Few ranchers are women, and most who are, are ranchers' widows or daughters. Most wives of stockmen describe themselves as "rancher's wife," and that indeed seems to be their main function. Aside from providing their husbands morale assistance and domestic servitude, most are members of the Cow Belles. Each Western county has a branch of the Cow Belles that meets regularly to plan projects that promote ranching and the beef industry. Activities include fund raisers; input at public hearings; displays at state and county fairs; presentations at schools; and production of "educational" material such as beef posters, brochures, slide shows, and recipes for distribution from local stores. Each county Cow Belle group is a branch of a state organization, which is a component of the National Organization of Cattle Women. Social pressure is heavy to become a member and act like a member, as a "rancher's wife" should.

Women were put on earth to reproduce, and are close to animals. Women's liberation is on an equal to gay liberation -- they are both ridiculous.

--Wyoming steer wrestler, *Animals' Agenda* (March 1990)

Many individual ranchers, of course, do not ascribe to the social/cultural circumstances described herein. To this day, however, causative influences do perhaps remain most common among Western stockmen, particularly public lands ranchers, who are on the whole the most reactionary and powerful faction of the Western ranching subculture. Because stockmen exert far more social/cultural power over the rural West than any comparable group, they are both the spearhead and a main driving force behind these influences.

In sum, though the ranching establishment is a traditional, stable Western institution, overall it has highly negative consequences for rural Western society. It creates a constant undercurrent of fear, even in those who support ranching. It demands acquiescence from all non-ranching factions and creates disunity among those factions. It largely controls the social structure, and tolerates little deviation. It promotes the cowboy paragon and consequent social injustice.

Perhaps our biggest obstacle to ending public lands ranching is social/cultural -- our unconditional worship and support for The Cowboy.

