

Today's Riders of the Purple Sage: Symbols, Values, and the Cowboy Myth

Thomas L. Grigsby

There are a number of things that are unique about the range livestock industry. One of the most obvious is that a large percentage of range livestock operators are not realizing the business goal of any producing firm—ranchers are not making a profit. As a result, the range livestock industry has been characterized as a backward, conservative, or fundamentalist sector of agribusiness. Ranchers don't seem to be "profit maximizing."

The problem of explaining why ranchers act the way they do is tailor-made for the anthropologist. As another anthropologist puts it "...Wherever livestock is herded in large units, whether the animals be cattle, horses, camels, or reindeer, the attitude of the owners to the value of the animals cannot be expressed merely in terms of utilization or exchange." For example I once asked an old-time rancher if he planned to ever start cross-breeding. He said that he would but he planned to cross Herefords with Brown Swiss. He wanted to keep the "color." Conformation and a herd that "looks" good are goals not readily measured by dollars and cents. Formal economic theory often will not explain many of the decisions made by ranchers.

As an anthropologist, my interest is to study society—why it works and what makes it change. Too often anthropologists study "natives." I thought it might be more interesting to study the people in a cattle ranching community in the Pacific Northwest.

To do this, a questionnaire was developed to get biographical, economic, and attitudinal data, in order to adequately understand the ranching subculture and individual management strategies. Individual profiles were developed which related biographical information to economic data with respect to each livestock operation. These were then correlated with each individual's responses to specific attitude questions.

The questionnaire was designed with two other functions in mind. First, on the basis of recurring responses from the total population, it allowed insights as to whether a ranching subculture exists. Second, it was designed to discriminate between "progressive" and "traditional" ranchers.

The questionnaire was administered to nearly 300 livestock operators in selected counties in Oregon and Washington. The findings herein are limited, however, to those (about 100) ranchers who reside in a single county of southeastern Oregon.

A ranch operator selected, received more than 50 percent of his ranch income from the sale of range beef. Operators who were headquartered outside of the county operating a dairy farm, feed-lot, or other non-range beef operations were deleted.

The study divided the ranchers into two groups according to the amount of money returned on each brood cow over the past several years. The two divided groups were related to personality tests, biographical data such as years of education and ranching experience, and economic data such as whether or not the rancher cross-bred or how much tonnage was produced per acre on hay lands. The findings are, I think, intriguing.

There are at least two groups out there in the sage brush; one group makes money and is business oriented. The other, and more populous groups of ranchers, values independence over dollars, puts little value on leadership, and sees ranching primarily as a way of life. With respect to this last group, the ranch appears to be a unit of consumption rather than production.

What this means is that many, probably most, of the ranchers in that county are ranching for some reason that can't be measured solely by dollars.

It seemed to me that a deeper understanding of this "way of life" of the ranchers might shed some light on their business-decision-making behavior.

Symbols

Images, words, and paraphernalia become symbolic when something more than their obvious and immediate meaning is implied. Like sponges, symbols soak up meaning.

The symbolic significance of ranching as a way of life has been commented on by various writers. Perhaps John Bennett best summarizes this significance and concern with the Western life style in the following statement: "The North American West was one of the world's last frontiers, and one of such color and energy that it has shaped an entire literature and dominates selections of the mass media in the Great Society of North America, and even of Europe" (1969: 172). James Downs makes the same point and also delineates the "Cowboy Culture Area" for us when he writes,

This area begins in Texas and Oklahoma and includes all of the west, save perhaps the coastal areas of Washington, Oregon, and northern California. This area is, of course, the great grazing and range cattle zone of American animal husbandry. However, the number of people involved in these activities is relatively few. . . (it

is) the figure of the cowboy, not as he exists on ranches today with a jeep, helicopter, horse trailer, and butane-heated branding iron, but as he has been immortalized in American mythology, that is of overriding cultural importance (1963: 285-286).

The "overriding cultural importance" that Downs alludes to is evident in the study area. Approximately 70% of the agricultural units in the county are devoted exclusively to the production of livestock, but of these only 20% of the county's population are ranchers. Nevertheless, the ranching subculture dominates the area. In the county courthouse, a vast panorama of the county's idealized past is dominant: stetsoned, stern-faced men astride cow-ponies appear against a backdrop of herds of white-faced cattle and majestic mountains, all painted larger than life. Along the main street there are bars and cafes with names like "The Stockman," "The Elkhorn," and "The Silver Dollar," where on Saturday nights denimed men with red cheeks and pale foreheads relax and talk cows and horses and listen to country music. Local mill workers put on western shirts with pearl buttons on Saturday night; barbeques and rodeos are important county social events attended by bank presidents, hardware salesmen, gas station attendants, and school teachers dressed in boots and wide-brimmed hats.

The ranchers perpetuate the differences between themselves and "city folks". Their term "buckaroo" demonstrates the pride of belonging to an elite group and at the same time serves as a form of self identification. Social scientists recognize that societies draw attention to their uniqueness through the institutionalization of self-naming. The ranchers of the county use the term "buckaroo" to this end. For example, when asked to differentiate between "cowboys" and "buckaroos" I was often given a list of traits which, according to the informant, characterized the differences. More often than not, these attributes bore little relation to the reality of the situation. For example, buckaroos were supposed to use a rawhide *riata* while in fact the nylon rope is used almost universally. The spade bit, *tapaderos*, and the ability to do all of the work connected with cattle from horseback were said to characterize the true buckaroo. A cowboy to the county rancher is someone who is slightly *ersatz*, a pretender, a "drugstore cowboy." To be a buckaroo is to be genuine and set apart from all others. The ranchers of the county think of themselves as buckaroos.

The persistence of the symbols of the "great American West" involves an inquiry into the nature of the myth, or perhaps it is, as John Bennett suggests, a matter of chronology; the rapid development of North American society with its stress on self-sufficiency and the lone individual has great appeal to a society which has become more industrialized and dehumanized with every passing year. Whatever the reason, the image of the cowboy has persisted whether it be in a southeastern Oregon county or a bar in the San Fernando Valley of southern California. The difference between these caricatures is that in the county the rancher is actually involved in the business of ranching; he wears chaps because he needs them to protect his legs from brush; horses are indispensable to his business; and through the spatial isolation of his ranch, self-sufficiency is a condition of survival. He must be able to doctor sick cows, repair a tractor, or figure a complicated tax form.

Values

Values are emotionally charged directives to action. Certain "focal" values provide central and powerful motivations

of behavior. These "focal" values give guidance to a cultural system.

While probably not a literary masterpiece, the following poem carved on juniper-wood and found hanging in a number of ranch houses introduces, and at the same time summarizes, some of the important values of the ranching population.

Code of the Cow Country

*It don't take a lot of laws to keep the rangeland straight
Nor books to write 'em in, 'cause there are only six or eight.
The first one is the Welcome Sign, written deep in Western hearts;
My camp is yours and yours is mine in all cow country parts.
Treat with respect all womankind, same as you would your sister.
Care for neighbors' strays you find, and don't call Cowboys
"mister."
Shut the pasture gates when passin' through; and takin' all in all
Be just as tough as pleases you, but never mean nor small.
Talk straight, shoot straight; never break your word to man nor boss.
Plumb always kill a rattlesnake; don't ride a sore-backed hoss.
It don't take law nor pedigree to live the best you can—
These few is all it takes to be a cowboy—an' a man.*

Hospitality is an important value. The "Welcome Sign" made my fieldwork with the ranchers enjoyable, even if a little fattening: I was expected to eat at almost every ranch I visited. This pattern of hospitality has been commented on by researchers of other pastoral peoples whether in a Bedouin tent in the Arabian desert or a yurt in Central Asia.

I had little opportunity to directly observe the rancher's actions toward women and their feelings of chivalry. However, I did collect data which point to an attitude of pride in what the ranchers felt was the "superior" quality of ranch women as opposed to their "citified" counterparts. While very few of the ranches in the county were actually operated by women (only three of the 100 studied), it was constantly emphasized that ranching wives: could ride and rope as well as many men, were resilient and independent, and were partners in the ranch's operation. I often found that the rancher's wife was the bookkeeper for the ranch. Certainly, more research should be done in looking at the role of the ranching wife as a partner in the ranching operation.

The rancher's isolation and the existence of physical hardships are a matter of fact and a necessary condition of ranching in the county. Widely dispersed resources mean that distances between households may be as far as five to ten miles. He accentuates his isolation with its often inhospitable environment through stories of blizzards of the past when thousands of cattle died; he brags that the coldest spot in Oregon is on his ranch (60 degrees below zero for six days); he tells of wind storms so fierce "a chicken laid the same egg six times." The rancher takes pride in his isolation and counts the inconvenience of the often impassable roads and great distances as a fair price to pay for the freedom to "do as he wants."

Robert Edgerton's comment concerning the pastoralists of East Africa is also appropriate for the county; "the more pastoral the economy the more that society will maximize and value independence of action for its male members" (Edgerton, 1965: 444). My study revealed that "to be one's own boss and to decide when and how to do the various jobs or ranching" was most often cited as the reason for the appeal of ranching. Furthermore, the ranchers express pride at being among the only agriculturalists in America who have not accepted "subsidies."

The Myth

Downs says that it is the cowboy as he has been immortalized in American mythology that is of overriding cultural importance. Just what is the cowboy myth and what does it do?

As an anthropologist I would say that myths are usually an account of events that occur in a culture's formative years. Myths tell us something about the origins of peoples, they often justify and validate the *status quo*, and they give a people a feeling of belonging or participating in a common dream. Myths elucidate values.

Much of the Cowboy Myth was created by popular writers such as Owen Wister and Andy Adams around the turn of the last century. In Wister's *The Virginian*, the hero is a member of an occupational group and the last free man in the rapidly industrializing society. Listen to Wister as he talks about the cowboy:

What is become of the horseman, the cowpuncher, the last romantic figure upon our soil? For he was romantic. Whatever he did, he did with his might. The bread that he earned was earned hard, the wages that he squandered were squandered hard—half a year's pay sometimes gone in a night, "blown in", as he expressed it, or "blowed in", to be perfectly accurate. Well, he will be here among us always, invisible, waiting his chance to live and play as he would like. His wild kind has been among us always, since the beginning: a young man with his temptations, a hero without wings.

Yet nowhere in the pages of *The Virginian* do we find the Virginian, Trampas, Dollar Bill, Chalkeye or any of the cowboys on the Sunk Creek Ranch doing a lick of work. This is the stuff from which myths are made.

Conclusions

Associated with the raising of cattle are certain values and attitudes which form the ranching sub-culture. Central to the western sub-culture are ideals of which independence and individualism appear to be paramount. Independence in the rancher's usage of the term means self-sufficiency, to do a job according to the dictates of one's conscience, and to be one's own boss.

Given the physical and technological limitations, some ranchers (a minority) are realizing monetary profits in their operations. In this way the ranchers are perhaps also typical of the ranch livestock operations of the western United States. A majority of the cattlemen are not realizing success as measured in dollars returned for their investment.

My study examined some of the cultural factors which differentiate the progressive ranchers and the ranchers who are breaking even or losing money. Much of the disparity between these two groups of ranchers may involve the nebulous realm of values. Ranchers who "make it" financially are also the individuals who exhibit less of the traditional values associated with the ranching sub-culture. For example, the high return per production unit rancher is, in about eight cases out of ten, the rancher who also produces a large amount of hay. In this sense he is in reality a *farmer-rancher* with, as Bennett (1969:310) points out, a "cultural style" which de-emphasizes the traditional rangeland orientation. Furthermore, these same individuals also differ from the traditional rancher in their orientation to the external society. The farmer-rancher joins organizations which enable him to skim the top off the informational cream. In this way he is dependent. He is also in closer contact with the principal agents of change, the extension agents. He is, therefore, in

general more sophisticated, if sophisticated means the awareness of alternatives. This rancher also uses organizations for political ends. The membership of various cooperative extension committees such as the Land Use Committee, Livestock Committee, and Weed Control Committee, is composed almost entirely of ranchers who are cooperative minded, a value advocated by the National Farm Organization. This, perhaps, represents a break with the traditional values. Furthermore, the members of the Farm Loan Commission which makes recommendations to federal and local lending institutions is composed of these ranchers. It is also enlightening to see how the successful rancher manipulates the ranching code for political reasons. I have suggested that there is a strong value to being hospitable but it does not hurt to be selective in this value. The first day of deer season provides an example. One rancher opened up his pasture land and innumerable bottles of beer to the chief and staff members of the local federal leasing agency, their wives, and the local bank president. I had the distinct feeling that more than deer were being stalked.

Conversely, the less productive cattleman has rejected cooperative efforts at stock-raising or marketing. An anecdote current in the county is perhaps suggestive of this attitude. I was told that if twelve ranchers were at a meeting, there would be twelve different opinions; if their wives were there, twenty-four. Furthermore, the traditional cattleman has historically rejected cooperative efforts at stock-raising and/or marketing as well as government intervention in the cattle industry. He prides himself on his individualism and independence.

An examination of the data concerned with the rancher's money returned to the firm's investment suggests that a significant proportion of the livestock operators would be better off financially if they sold their ranch and put the money into a secure investment at 6 percent. Yet the rancher holds on to his ranch and wants to have it kept in the family.

As economist, Clifton Wharton, (1971:152) suggests, "All developers love to play the game of 'key factors.'" Possible explanations for the lack of profit motives in understanding the western livestock producer are as follows: (a) through the introduction of new technologies, particularly concerning hay production, the rancher could build his operation into an economically profitable unit. He does not do this because he is not aware of the technologies involved. I would suggest that this kind of explanation fits only a small percentage of the county ranchers. The relative advantages of cross-breeding, more irrigation, seeding more productive grasses, and weed control are well known; (b) a second approach to the explanation of the lack of economic responsiveness for the ranching population entails an inquiry into the motivations, attitudes, and goals of the informants. This position holds, in part, that the rancher knows about new technologies but eschews their adoption and hence economic progress because adoption would in some way be antithetical to his existing life-style. He is in fact trading profits for life-style maintenance.

This position has some currency in agricultural economics and is usually part of the "folk explanation" given by the ranchers themselves. Indeed, there is some evidence to support this position. Following this line of reasoning, ranchers do not modernize because to do so would be to give up cherished values which must be protected at all costs. These values such as independence, self-sufficiency, and individualism, in turn militate against productivity; (c) the last reason

for the lack of responsiveness of the ranchers is concerned with the balance of profit weighed against the risk involved. The traditionalist is less predisposed toward risk than the business-oriented rancher. This is understandable when the conditions surrounding the nature of the cow-calf as opposed to the yearling operation are examined. The rancher and the economic specialist both see the yearling operation as carrying above-average risk (Newmann and Snapp, 1968:254). Conversely, the cow-calf operator has the advantages of having a program which is less speculative; that is, there is less risk of losing large amounts of money because of rapidly declining prices (Newmann and Snapp, 1968:159).

Although his margin of profit is small, the new elements of risk and uncertainty connected with the introduction of new technologies do not appear. The traditional ranchers tend to hold to the methods of ranching and breeds of cattle which have stood the test of time and, thus, minimize that risk. In this sense these ranchers have a great deal in common with the subsistence farmer elsewhere who, as defined by Warton (1971:153) consumes most of what he produces, uses very little (if any) non-farm labor, employs a level of technology which is usually described as traditional or primitive and changes little if at all, tolerates a level of living which, while not close to the biological minimum, is still judged meager by most standards, and operates within a decision-making context where his primary goal of production is for home consumption rather than for the market. With modification, this model is applicable for the traditional rancher of the county.

The ranchers of the county are, as a group, well into middle age. The average age is in the late 50's. Given a life span of

70 years this means that there are going to be a number of ranches sold in the last quarter of this century. While almost all of the ranchers want to have their ranches inherited by their children, there is little evidence to suggest that the generally better educated younger generation wants to continue in ranching. Air-conditioned offices, higher wages for fewer hours work, have great appeal and I suspect that a great many of the ranches of the county will eventually wind up in the hands of a modern version of the old Texas cattle baron: the corporate executive whose concern will not be to turn a profit, but rather to use the ranch as a tax-shelter and as a refuge from the pressures of big-city life. In the meantime, the rancher of the 1980s struggles to survive cost-price squeezes and increased taxes and to maintain a vanishing way of life, for he sees in himself the last repository of the values which are the foundation of this country.

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