

# The Cowboy & Buckaroo in American Ranch Hand Styles

by Paul F. Starrs and Lynn Huntsinger

Most of us are well aware of the importance of understanding cultural norms and values when working with pastoralists abroad, but we neglect cultural nuances of ranching in the United States. As the predominant users of our rangelands, ranchers enjoy a rich and diverse cultural heritage that affects everything from the way they dress to their handling of stock. Unfortunately, the public and perhaps even public lands agencies tend to treat ranching as a monolithic, economics-driven industry that for all intents and purposes is homogenous across the West.

Cattle-tending ranch workers in particular, cowboys or ranch hands, preserve patterns of behavior that harken to the beginnings of open-range cattle ranching. Since a time when nearly all European voices in the settled West carried a Spanish lilt, tenders of western livestock in the 18th and 19th century were not cowboys but *vaqueros*. We better know them today as buckaroos. A cultural curtain—porous but real—should be draped between different ranch hand styles. The resulting divide might be dubbed the cowboy-buckaroo line (Fig. 1). Cowboy styles reflect origins in Texas, the southeast, and Mexico, while buckaroos have adopted, quite remarkably intact, techniques from Spanish and Mexican California. Ranch hands are themselves well-aware of these differences, and take

pride in holding to a regional tradition — reinforcing it by their self-consciousness. An experienced hand on any cow outfit in the western United States (and probably across either international border) can offer a good guess as to where a newcomer hails from (Slatta 1990, Jordan 1993).

Defining the cowboy-buckaroo line involves tracing traditions, but is more than antiquarianism. Cowboy and buckaroo styles embody in shorthand contrasts of land ownership, apparel, law, and water-use, just as they readily reveal favored techniques in equitation, roping, and cow-working methods. The look of a cowhand, whether historical or modern, should instantly raise questions about origins and practice (Fig. 2). The unwritten language of cowboy and buckaroo appearance, behavior, tactic, and equipment is everywhere lucid. Both varieties of ranch hand—the cowboy and the buckaroo—are still much among us, particularly in the western U.S., plains of Canada, and northern Mexico (Machado 1981, Breen 1983, Jordan 1993). In part, their domain is a few large private ranches, like the King Ranch of Texas (and Argentina and Brazil). But a much larger number of cattle operations run on a combination of private and leased government acreage: federal and state public lands, in the United States, Crown land in Canada, and today Baja

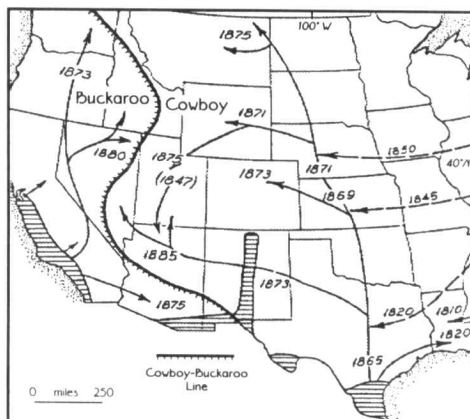
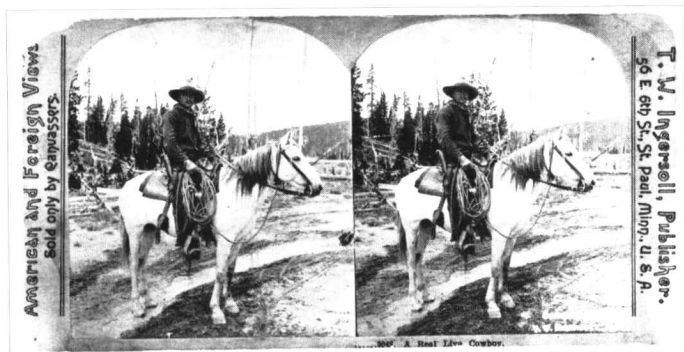


Fig. 1. The cowboy-buckaroo line, running through New Mexico, Arizona, Nevada, and more approximately through Idaho and Washington, reflects a broad difference in cowhand styles. The boundary is at its firmest through Arizona and Nevada, but suggests the strong distinctions of the California style, deriving from vaquero practice, and the Texas cowboy tradition, hailing from what Walter Prescott Webb called the Nueces Diamond of south Texas. The arrowed lines track the movement of different ranching traditions from their areas of origin into different parts of the West. Modified from Kniffen 1953; reprinted by permission of the California Folklore Society.



**Fig. 2** - The cowboy was a subject of considerable national adulation in the late nineteenth century, and photographic stereo pairs were given to commemorating figures like this "A Real Live Cowboy." The 1890s look was authentic enough — the long rope (before the introduction of nylon), the full-double rigged roping saddle, the simple curb bit, each announce the presence of the Texas-derived cowhand. Source: T. W. Ingersoll, "A Real Live Cowboy," approx. 1890, Library of Congress, Print and Photographs Division. In the public domain; reprinted by permission.

California and Sonora remain strongholds of *vaquero* work (Crosby 1981). No more than a few thousand active and large cattle ranches with more than 400 head and a cadre of working full-time cowhands persist in North America; certainly no more than 10,000. Precise figures have long been difficult to exhume, given a predilection of *norteamericanos* for adopting the ranchette and other uneconomical, if nostalgic, exurban versions of the "ranch," which mask already error-prone Census of Agriculture figures.

Working ranches continue today. Livestock work—and especially the migratory cowboy life—has accumulated tradition and romance in the American West . . . and justly so. Western historical geography is rich with ranches and cowboys, who are intimately bound up with the settlement of the continent's arid regions. As environmental historian Donald Worster has remarked, "All the world knows that the American West is fundamentally a land of cowboys. It is not a myth, however much the fact may have been mythologized in fiction and movies" (Worster 1987, 150). And, it might be added, the historic effects and attachments of ranching culture permeate even the most provincial reaches of the United States (Simpson 1987, Houle 1995).

## Origins

The initial, and most important, distinction between cowboys and buckaroos is drawn simply between two heritages. Geographers have been far more adept than historians at understanding the distinctive hearth regions that gave rise of modern cattle ranching, and helped produce differences between buckaroos and cowboys. Livestock ranching in the present-day West started in northern New Mexico, where small-scale cattle and sheep raising in the Rio Arriba country began in the early 1600s. Today, on residual land grants, fenced communal pastures, and a smattering of highly contested Forest Service allotments, Hispanic ranching persists in New Mexico and southern Colorado (DeBuys 1985). There, ranching culture is pronounced, if well worn and a bit faded by long-continued struggles with the Forest Service and federal government

over land grants, use rights, and a strong past rooted in cultural byways that receive little attention from an Anglo-dominated official world (Starrs 1998). Its strongest character is insularity—the small-holder ranchers of the upper Rio Grande reserve slim patience for Anglo society.

Part of a continent away, Walter Prescott Webb located the hearth of cowboy culture south of San Antonio, Texas, in an area he called the Nueces Diamond, which stretched to the Mexican border at Brownsville (Webb 1981). Spanish surname settlers—many from the Canary Islands—had received land grants and communal pastures well before the nineteenth century *empresario* grants, although the numbers of livestock grazing what Conrad Richter called "the sea of grass" remained relatively small (Richter 1984). Cattle numbers, especially, increased with Anglo arrivals and the stunning genetic triumph of the longhorn, as Southern Texas cattle provided a vast reservoir of animals later tapped and moved north along a series of great trails during the 1870s (Fig. 3). And barely a hundred years ago, in Palo Duro Canyon of the Texas Panhandle, arose the first formal, enclosed ranches in southern Plains history, much commemorated at the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum (Haley 1949, Webb 1981).



**Fig. 3.** A famous photograph by Erwin E. Smith of a trail drive, well-known to members of the Society for Range Management, raises its own elementary question: cowboy or buckaroo? The answer is provided at least as much from the cowboy and horse as by the revealing features of the surrounding country. This view, from the Matador Ranch in Texas, is pure cowboy: the hat, the curb bit, the saddle style, the headstall, are all of cowboy heritage. Source: Erwin E. Smith Collection, "The Herd Strung Out to Move," 1910, Library of Congress, Print and Photographs Division. In public domain; reprinted by permission.

The cowboy-buckaroo line is a divide between two evolving strains of livestock ranching. With main hearths in Texas and California, the styles of ranching and ranch hands spin outward from their areas of origin. The history of Texas cattle raising, as Terry Jordan has pointed out (1981), is indissoluble from migrations out of the Carolinas into the vast coastal savanna empire of the southern Piney Woodlands, which formed a broad-backed hearth of cattle raising. Livestock raising was fueled by a magnificent intersection of Anglo-Scots-Black-Caribbean-Virginian-and

Carolinian culture, blending effectively in a polyglot southeastern ferment. Jordan's *Trails to Texas* (1981) remains a partisan account of the southern roots of Texas ranching, overstating its case, but not too much. The Texas cowboy was almost as likely black as Anglo or Hispanic, and many institutions of Texas ranching were from eastern adoptions and adaptations (Weston 1985, Iverson 1994).

While Texas provided a proving ground for cowboy culture, the *vaquero* life of the Californios of Alta and Baja California predated the Texas ranches. California livestock raising was in many respects different. In cultural provenance, it was thoroughly Hispanic, imbued with the Code of the *Mesta*, the peninsular Spanish livestock association dating from the fifteenth century, and it carried on the landholding values of California's Spanish-Mexican gentry (Klein 1920). San Francisco's Mission Dolores, in an Edward Vischer rendering, actually hosted bullfights through the early 1840s (Vischer 1982). The *matanza*, or slaughter, the rodeo, the corral, the roping (whether of cattle, or of more energetic game like grizzly bear), was part and parcel of the Spanish-speaking Californian's existence. The *vaquero* of California represented an elite aspect of New World society, a figure with both substance and romance. While life in the hide-and-tallow industry of the nineteenth century Californios was less than romance-laden, it was fecund and produced offspring and ways of work that diffused through much of the Intermountain West.

### Distinctions

Ranch hands effortlessly recognize the distinctions between cowboys and buckaroos. They look to a variety of physical, material, and behavioral clues;

subtleties, sometimes, but neatly tied to distinct origins and modern techniques. Cowboys and buckaroos are far from ignorant about their heritage. If more practical than academic students of cowboy and buckaroo ways, they recognize the signal traits.

The rope is a classic focal point of stylistic difference. Ranch hands of Texas cowboy extraction carry short and heavy ropes. When used from horseback, the rope is se-

cured to the saddle horn—tied hard and fast, that is—so once an animal is roped, it is anchored to horse and rider. A heavy rope absorbs the shock of 800 pounds of animal tightening a line, the short length reduces to a minimum the likelihood of getting tangled up. That said, Texas riders were never particularly enamored of the art of roping; it was a practice picked up, of necessity, from the Mexican *vaqueros* who came to South Texas. Southerners more typically worked cattle on foot with dogs; almost none used ropes (Jordan 1981). In the brush country of central Texas, roping was a necessary skill, but not one Texas cowboys developed to an art form.

The *vaqueros* of California handled ropes in different ways. Their ropes were longer—sometimes sixty or seventy feet—and much less stout. While Texas hands relied on strong horses, tough brush, and a heavy rope to stop animals, buckaroos preferred finesse, if at somewhat greater risk. In an era before nylon, buckaroo lassos—a word taken from the Spanish *lazoga*—were slender and made of hair, hemp, maguey, grass, or rawhide. No rope was secured to a saddle horn; instead, riders caught an animal, jerked any slack from the line, and coiled several turns of rope around a quite large saddle horn (Fig. 4). Friction—including trade-

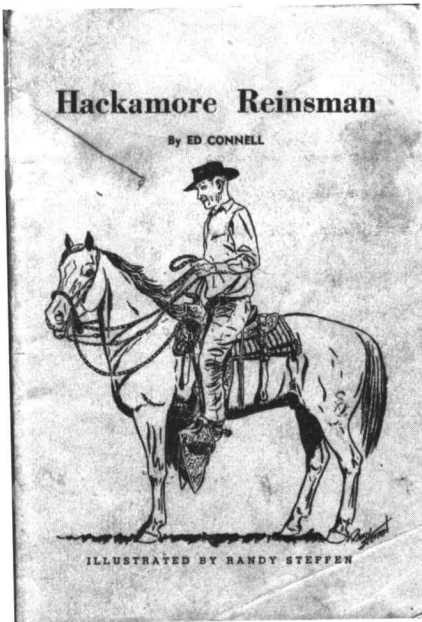
mark blue smoke from a rawhide rope—eased the animal to a stop. The wraps are dallying—from *dar la vuelta*—and Texas-heritage cowboys consistently refer to buckaroos huffily, if perhaps enviously, as dally ropers. Much the same techniques are used still today in the Llanos and Pampas, in northern Mexico, and in Brazil. A good buckaroo with a rope is an artist. The risks are also pronounced: rope burns, lost ropes, lost animals, lost fingers.

Other distinctions follow equipment variations—attributable sometimes to constraints of terrain, or to a hand's preference. Gear shows variation between cowboy and buckaroo. Buckaroos gravitate, budget permitting, to fancy spurs, and bridle their animals with elaborate bits, often of inlaid or mounted silver. A buckaroo's horse usually starts training in a hackamore, from the Spanish *jaquima*, a braided rawhide head-



**Fig. 4.** The California-style buckaroo was a figure of grace and elegance, including dress and overall presentation. The horse, festooned in silver (bit, conchas, and along the rider's chaps, rein chains, and tapaderos), was highly trained, in keeping with the styles of the quick handling hackamore reinsman, who would spend years training a horse to fine reining. And the roping technique, itself, evokes the *vaquero's* art—the steer is thrown by catching the neck, and tossing a loop around the forelegs. If the practice was not especially humane, the skill involved is notable. Source: Joseph Walker, *The California Vaquero*, The Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California, reprinted by permission.





**Fig. 5.** *The Californian vaquero lives on in buckaroo country, and in carefully crafted manuals like Ed Connell's Hackamore Reinsman, 1st published in 1952, but reprinted time and again. Randy Steffen's cover portrait for the book shows the classic hallmarks of the buckaroo: the single-cinch rigged saddle, the horsehair mecate and the tapaderos, the light bosal and hackamore helping along a horse learning to respond instantaneously to a spade bit. Source: Connell 1952.*

stall and nosepiece that requires considerable specialization and training to use to advantage. Cowboys are more given to snaffle bits, or smooth curb bits. Ornamentation is for them ostentation. Chaps—from *chaparejos*—show marked regional style: providing warmth and protection from the elements and brush, they vary according to climate and a hand's point of origin. But the crucial attributes of the buckaroo are a beautiful rider's balance and a style of horse-handling that has been captured and passed on to another two generations of hands in volumes like Ed Connell's 1952 *Hackamore Reinsman* (Fig. 5).

A capital of cowboy culture could be almost anywhere on the Plains: once it was Olathe, Kansas, or perhaps Miles City, Montana, or even, in its way, Denver. The buckaroo capital, once Visalia, California, is unhinted at in geographer Fred Kniffen's simple rendering (Fig. 1). Kniffen sketched a divergence of traditions according to the presence or absence of the *tariabi* or *tarabilla*, a horse-hair spinner used to make the soft horsehair mecates, or reins, adopted by buckaroos — but used not at all by cowboys (Kniffen 1953). Today's buckaroo capital is unmistakably Elko, Nevada. That metropolis has made much of its buckaroo heritage of late, institutionalizing the Cowboy Poetry Gathering as an annual event begun in 1985, and hosting splendid buckaroo exhibits in the Western Folklife Center. Capriola's in Elko sells distinctive saddles and silver-mounted Garcia bits to a clientele of buckaroos, who order by mail what they cannot pick up in person. So Kniffen's line, based on modest evidence but great instinct, holds up today.

These differences in trappings are matched by variations in working styles. Some jobs are pandemic. Branding, ear notching and castration, and moving cattle, are jobs ranch hands perform throughout the West. Work style varies according to the cows, locales, and owners involved. Social institutions display regional variation and strong historical ties. Everything associated with cowboy and buckaroo life has a geographical specialization, its distinctiveness tied to tradition and heritage (Bowden 1980, Jordan 1993).

### Significance

And what of this, you might ask. Does it matter? It does. One of Frederick Remington's more memorable paintings is entitled simply "the fall of the cowboy." Showing a ranch hand stepping off his horse to open a gate, the painting purports to chronicle the demise of the cowboy life. It was sold in 1895, and in spite of this "fall" of the cowhand, ranching is still much among us. A huge welter of distractions have, it is true, impinged on the realities of ranching in the western United States: the dude ranch, the cowboy novel, western movies, and that absurd, hokey, almost parodying version of cowboy life, the rodeo, which most ranch hands still like (Okrant and Starrs 1995).

Yet ranching persists. As photographer and essayist Jay Dusard (1983) notes,

The vanishing breed has been busily vanishing for the past three-quarters of a century, but they haven't finished the job yet. Each succeeding generation of grizzled veterans has lamented into the record the passing of the true cowboy. Yet these same crusty-handed waddies have invariably undermined their own stand by passing on to the next group of aspiring cowpunchers the old skills, nuances, and survival tricks.



**Fig 6.** *The persistence of ranching in the American far West is intimately tied to the availability of large—extensive—rangelands. In a few cases, that may be available privately, but rarely so west of the Rockies. From the continental divide to the Pacific, most of ranching is tied to public lands use. Whether traditions and the longer practice of using that land will continue, as has the evident divergence of cowboy and buckaroo, remains yet to be seen. Certainly evidence of ranching, as in the Bar Double Nine Ranch of Fish Lake Valley, Nevada, continues—but with trouble; the sign disappeared in 1997. Source: Paul F. Starrs.*

Adaptation is an essential trait in any society, any culture. Western ranching has changed over the last hundred years, and traditionalists — particularly those with an overly specific image of what cowhands and cowboy life should be — have been quick to assert that what is around now isn't really "the cowboy," or real "ranching." Instead, ranching has simply recalibrated, and remains (Fig. 6).

Ranching—and the cowboy employee—persists because the essence of extensive, or "western," ranching is an economy bound up with a way of life. Much evidence is in: Ranchers ranch because they like doing so, not because they intend to make a fortune. Few, in fact, are the fortunes to be made. Instead, many ranches and ranchers are tradition-bound, sewn into the old ways. Because ranches are tradition-bound, they tend also to act as repositories of older and historic ways of doing business.

Ranches and their cowboy-buckaroo employees hold together more than physical features; more historic preservation is afoot than mere maintenance of buildings, fences, altered vegetation. Controversies follow extensive ranching operations in the American West, and they will continue. But from the Sandhills to the Pacific (and as SRM members shall soon enough see, also among the outfits of the hard-riding *paniolas* of Hawaii), ranches preserve specific ways of life, traditions, behavior, dress, and speech. They safeguard the details. In accurately preserving an important past, some ranches are examples of what might be called unofficial cultural parks—repositories of traditional ways of living and working—truly authentic, rather than recreated, Colonial Williamsburgs.

The cowboy-buckaroo line is more than a curiosity. In preserving the two ranching cultures—that of buckaroo and cowboy—western ranching has sustained important ways of living that give color, texture, substance, and life to a diverse American culture, and enduring energy to the work of conserving and managing North American rangelands.

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