

WHY DON'T COWBOYS EVER RIDE INTO THE SUNSET?

INTRODUCTION

History From 1865 until 1890, raising cattle on the northern plains was a big business. America's rapidly growing eastern cities provided expanding markets for beef. Men like Charles Goodnight delivered cattle by the thousands to the Union Pacific Railroad to feed the construction crews. Cattle were driven on long drives to towns that grew up along the railroads — Abilene, Dodge City, and Wichita. Steers from Texas were driven north and sold in cattle towns for higher prices than in Texas.

Cattle were allowed to graze on open range, where they grew fat on the short but nutritious grass. But the tough winter of 1885 ended open-range grazing, and homesteaders increasingly fenced off pieces of what had been the open range. By the 1890s many ranchers owned grazing land of their own and fenced it in with barbed wire.

Economic Reasoning The Western historian William W. Savage Jr. observed that “historically, the cowboy was of little or no significance.” The days of the cowboy — the long cattle drives from Texas to the cattle towns of Abilene and Dodge City — lasted only for 25 years. Yet, cowboy culture continues to exercise tremendous influence on television, movies, music, clothing, art, literature, and poetry, even in urban America. Why would a brief period of activity in a highly specialized market continue to influence people, years later, in environments far removed from the purple sage?

CONTENT STANDARDS

- ← All decisions involve opportunity costs; weighing the costs and the benefits associated with alternative choices constitutes effective economic decision making.
- ← Economic incentives, including the desire to achieve financial or material gain and to avoid loss, are powerful motivating forces.

CONCEPTS

Choice
Benefits
Costs
Incentives
Property rights

OBJECTIVES

1. Contrast the historical image of the West with the popular images.
2. Examine how popular images of the West provide incentives to producers and consumers.

LESSON DESCRIPTION

Students listen to an old Western tune and participate in a class discussion about cowboy life. They read a primary-source description about cowboy life. They work in small groups to examine why cowboys are still popular.

TIME REQUIRED

← One class period

MATERIALS

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Visual 1 | Back in the Saddle Again |
| Visual 2 | Why Don't Cowboys Ever Ride into the Sunset? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Activity 1 | What Was Cowboy Life Like? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Activity 2 | Why Cowboys Will Never Die |

PROCEDURE

1. Explain that the purpose of this lesson is to help students learn why Americans, as well as people in Europe and Asia, are so attracted to the concept of the American West.

LESSON SIX

2. Display Visual 1, “Back in the Saddle Again.” (If you can play guitar, you might want to sing the song for the class.) Explain that this song was made popular in the 1940s and 1950s by Gene Autry—the singing cowboy. Written by Autry and Ray Whitley, it was featured in the 1941 movie, *Back in the Saddle*, starring Autry. After the class has examined the lyrics to the song, ask:

What images of the West and the cowboy were presented in “Back in the Saddle Again”? (The cowboy enjoys life under the stars, is a good friend, packs a gun, does the right thing, and believes in individual freedom.)

How accurate do you think this image of the cowboy and the West really is? (Accept a variety of responses.)

3. Display Visual 2, Why Don’t Cowboys Ever Ride into the Sunset? Invite the class to speculate on a variety of reasons why cowboys survive as important figures in American popular culture.

4. Distribute Activity 1, What Was Cowboy Life Like? Explain that the students are about to read a firsthand account of cowboy life written in 1882. Some of the language may seem unusual, but the students should be able to grasp the main ideas. Divide the class into groups and ask them to respond to the questions for discussion. When they have completed their work, ask:

What was cowboy life like, according to this account by Richard Irving Dodge? (Wages were low. Working conditions included long hours in the saddle and very difficult work controlling the herd when grass and water were scarce; stampedes were difficult to control. Recreation in towns included drinking, fighting, and scaring the townspeople. Property rights were often violated—for example, sometimes cowboys stole the herd of cattle they were guarding when the owner was away.)

5. Distribute Activity 2, Why Cowboys Will Never Die. Divide the class into groups and ask them to respond to the Questions for Discussion. Ask:

What was the early image of the cowboy? (Cowboys had low-wage, low-skill jobs. They were often thought of as drunken rowdies who cheated and robbed.)

What was the image of the West in the Buffalo Bill’s Wild West shows? (Accept a variety of responses. Answers might include cowboys portrayed as strong heroes defending the rights of others, highly skilled workers, rugged individuals, and independent individuals.)

What is the evidence that the image of the West remains popular in the 1990s? (Cowboy images are present in books, movies, television, clothing, music, dancing, and collectibles.)

Why do people in the 1990s continue to purchase things associated with the West when we know that cowboys were people who did not amount to much historically? (People are making choices. Producers and consumers believe that the benefits are worth the costs.) (People’s decisions involve costs. Consumers and producers have alternative uses for their income. Resources used to produce and consume Western goods and services can not be used for other purposes.) (People respond to incentives. The goods and services consumers purchase may provide them with a sense of independence, adventure, strength, heroism, and intimacy with nature. Producers hope to increase sales revenues and make a profit by giving people what they want.) (The rules of our economy encourage providing people with what they want by permitting producers to keep income derived from their activity.)

CLOSURE

Review the key points of the lesson. Ask:

What image of the cowboy emerges from historical accounts? (A low-skill, low-wage worker who was known for being drunk and rowdy.)

What image of the cowboy did Buffalo Bill portray? (The West represents a sense of independence, adventure, strength, heroism, and intimacy with nature.)

Why do people today continue to purchase things associated with cowboys who were little more than low-wage, low-skill workers, known to be drunken rowdies who cheated and robbed? (Powerful incentives encourage producers and consumers to make and purchase goods and services associated with the West.)

Visual 1

BACK IN THE SADDLE AGAIN

Gene Autry and Ray Whitley

I'm back in the saddle again,
Out where a friend is a friend,
Where the long-horned cattle feed,
On the lowly jimson weed;
I'm back in the saddle again.

Ridin' the range once more,
Totin' my old forty-four,
Where you sleep out every night,
Where the only law is right;
Back in the saddle again.

Whoopi ti yi yo,
Rockin to and fro,
Back in the saddle again.

Whoopi ti yi ya,
I go my way,
Back in the saddle again.

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QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What images of the West and the cowboy were presented in "Back in the Saddle Again"?
2. How accurate do you think this image of the cowboy and the West really is?

Visual 2

WHY DON'T COWBOYS EVER RIDE INTO THE SUNSET?

The western historian William W. Savage Jr. observed that, “historically, the cowboy was of little or no significance.”

The days of the cowboy — the long cattle drives from Texas to the cattle towns of Abilene and Dodge City — lasted only about 25 years.

Yet, cowboy culture has tremendous influence on television, movies, music, clothing, art, literature, and poetry.

What accounts for people’s continuing interest in cowboys when they made such a small contribution to our history?

Why is it that cowboys never really ride off into the sunset?

LESSON SIX

Name _____

Activity 1

WHAT WAS COWBOY LIFE LIKE?

Directions: Read the following passage. It is taken from a book by Richard Irving Dodge, published in 1882. Dodge was in the military and once served as an aide to William Tecumseh Sherman.

YEARS AGO, WHILE YET A CHERISHED PORTION OF MEXICO, TEXAS was famous for its cattle. Individuals owned thousands, even tens of thousands, which roamed almost at will, over the vast and fertile plains. The care of these was left to a few men and a crowd of Mexican boys from eight to twenty years of age; for not much money could be paid in wages, when the finest cow or fattest ox was worth but two or three dollars. . . .

The daily life of the cow-boy is so replete with privation, hardship and danger, that it is a marvel how any sane man can voluntarily assume it, yet thousands of men not only do assume it, but actually like it to infatuation. . . .

A large herd of cattle will be guarded by a number of men, who have a common place for eating and sleeping, but they are never there together. Day and night, in good weather and bad weather, some of them must be with the herd. The men are divided up into reliefs, each relief being on duty in the saddle not less than eight hours of the twenty-four, and each individual having a specified beat sometimes eight or ten miles long. Each relief must go around the whole herd, see that all are quiet and unmolested. The outside limits are carefully watched, and if any animals have strayed beyond them, their trail must be followed up, and the fugitives driven back to their proper grazing ground. Under ordinary circumstances, and when the herd is simply being held on certain good grazing ground, with an abundance of water, these duties are comparatively easy; but when the grass is poor, and the water scarce, the animals stray continually, and great watchfulness and labor are required for their care.

Especially is this the case in winter, when grass is covered with snow. Cattle in large herds are easily stampeded, becoming panic-stricken on very slight, and frequently without, provocation. Nothing so starts them as Plains "Norther," and they will fly before a severe storm of wind and snow sometimes for incredible distances. These are the trying times for the cow-boys. When a stampede occurs from any cause, every man must be in the saddle, follow the fleeing animals day and night, to get control of the herd and bring it back to ground. . . .

But there is something in this life which develops not only the highest virtues, but the most ignoble of vices. It is not solitude, for the shepherds of the Plains lead lives quite as solitary and they are generally quiet, inoffensive persons. The cow-boy, on the contrary, is usually the most reckless of all the reckless desperadoes developed on the frontier. Disregarding equally the rights and the lives of others, and utterly reckless of his own life; always ready with his weapons and spoiling for a fight, he is the terror of all who come near him, his visits to the frontier towns of Kansas and Nebraska being regarded as a calamity second only to a western tornado. His idea of enjoyment is to fill himself full of bad whiskey, mount his mustang, tear through the streets, whooping, yelling, flourishing and firing his pistols until the streets are deserted and every house is closed. . . .

Cattle-stealing is a mania not confined solely to our Scottish ancestors. The frontier has many "cow-boys" out of employ, many impecunious gentlemen who long yearningly for a herd of cattle. The "waifs and strays" of large herds, or even a considerable herd, carelessly guarded, will suddenly disappear. Sometimes the herdsman and the cattle disappear together, and should the owner be absent, are likely to disappear for him all the time.

In 1872 the owner of a considerable herd returned to his ranch in southeastern Kansas after a short absence, to find his herd and herders gone. Taking the trail alone, he plodded west for more than one hundred miles, when he found about half his herd in the possession of a notorious desperado near where Larned City now stands. On inquiry he found they had recently been purchased of a man who had gone still further west with the other half. Following on, he found his herd in charge of its reputed owner on the Arkansas River near Fort Dodge. The thief was the most notoriously blood-thirsty ruffian on the frontier. After a terrible combat the thief was killed, and the owner, collecting his cattle, returned with them eastward. Arriving at the ranch of the robber who had his others, he went to him and said quietly, "I have taken the scalp of your partner and got half my cattle. I want to know if I'll have to take your scalp to get the other half." The terrified ruffian gave them up without a contest.

QUESTION FOR DISCUSSION

What was cowboy life like, according to this account by Richard Irving Dodge? Consider each of the following:

- Wages
- Working conditions
- Recreation
- Regard for property rights

From R. I. Dodge, *Our Wild Indians: Thirty-three Years of Personal Experience among the Red Men of the Great West* (Hartford: A. D. Worthington & Co., 1882), pp. 609-18.

Name _____

Activity 2

WHY COWBOYS WILL NEVER DIE

Directions: Read the following information and respond to the questions for discussion.

IMAGE OF THE WEST: 1869

History tells us that the early image of the cowboy was unsavory. A cowboy was a hired hand who tended cattle. The job was low-wage and low-skill, calling for long, hard, and dirty work. Moreover, cowboys were often thought of as drunken rowdies who cheated and robbed.

William F. Cody (or Buffalo Bill) played an important role in changing the image of the American West. Cody was a colorful personality. He rode for the Pony Express in 1860–61. He was a scout in campaigns against the Kiowa and Comanche. After fighting in the Civil War from 1861 to 1865, he hunted buffalo for the Union Pacific Railroad, slaughtering 4,280 head of buffalo in eight months. Well known for his total recall of vast terrain, he became a scout and guide for the U.S. Fifth Cavalry.

In 1869, Buffalo Bill was known as a Western hero. He was portrayed in 1,700 dime novels — some of which he wrote himself. In 1883, Cody organized Buffalo Bill's Wild West. This was an outdoor exhibition featuring reenactment of events from the American West. Stars included Buck Taylor, "King of the Cowboys," Annie Oakley, "Little Sure Shot," Johnny Baker, "the Cowboy Kid," and, for one season, Sitting Bull. Acts included the Pony Express, an attack on a wagon train, and an attack on the Deadwood stagecoach. A strong hero, warlike Native Americans, the loathsome villains, and women in distress were common stereotyped representations. Other features included action with rough-riding, roping, and sharpshooting.

Buffalo Bill's Wild West was an attraction for 30 years. In 1887, it was performed for Queen Victoria's Jubilee, and Cody next took the show to continental Europe.

IMAGE OF THE WEST: 1990s

The image of the cowboy continues to be popular. Western novels are widely read. *Lonesome Dove*, by Larry McMurtry — the story of a troop of cowboys led by a former Texas Ranger who uproot themselves from the sleepy town of Lonesome Dove to drive a herd of cattle to Montana — was recently a best-selling novel. McMurtry's sequel, *Streets of Laredo*, also proved to be highly popular. Other recent books set in the West include *Dancing at the Rascal Fair*, by Ivan Doig, and *All the Pretty Horses*, by Cormac McCarthy.

Westerns were very popular on television and in the movies in the 1950s and 1970s. Programs such as "Gunsmoke," "Rawhide," "Bonanza," "Big Valley," "High Chaparral," "Cheyenne," "Bronco," "Sugarfoot," and "Wyatt Earp" were very popular. More recently, Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* was the basis for a highly successful television mini-series. And Westerns periodically do return to the silver screen. The National Society of Film Critics selected the Western film *Unforgiven*, starring Clint Eastwood, as the best motion picture for 1992.

Americans' interest in anything Western continues to find new avenues of expression. Consider how the West is worn. Americans can't seem to get enough of pointed-toe boots and big hats. Jeans, standard equipment for rodeo cowboys, are worn by Americans of all ages and by other people worldwide. For example, Wild Bill Weaver, who works in a log cabin in Washington, runs a highly successful business making authentic-looking custom Western clothing.

Country western dancing and music are increasingly popular in many cities today. Denim & Diamonds, a country music club in Los Angeles, is a friendly place for those who wear Western wear and enjoy country dancing. Dance lessons are free and new dances are invented regularly.

Cowboy collectibles are very popular. Between 1988 and 1993, sales of cowboy collectibles have increased 40 percent per year. The most commonly sought items are clothing, saddles, other leathercraft, and metal items. Finally, cowboy artists are riding the success trail. Portrayals of scenes from western states, featuring Native Americans and cowboys, are selling like hotcakes.

LESSON SIX

WHY DON'T COWBOYS RIDE INTO THE SUNSET?

Why would people continue to purchase things associated with the West when we know that cowboys were people who worked for low wages, at low-skill jobs, and that they often were drunken rowdies who cheated and robbed? Why is it that cowboys never really ride off into the sunset? Let's examine the choices, costs, incentives, and rules of the system to establish an answer.

People are making choices. Clearly, people who purchase Western books, music, and clothing consider the benefits of associating themselves with the Old West to be worth the costs. Similarly, the people who produce these products consider it to be in their interest to do so.

People's decisions involve costs. People have alternative uses for their income. Income spent on a new pair of cowboy boots is income not spent on something else. Writers, musicians, and movie producers also face costs. Resources used to produce a Western movie, for example, cannot be used to produce a new comedy.

People respond to incentives. What do people gain when they purchase products associated with the West? Items associated with cowboys and the West represent a sense of independence, adventure, strength, heroism, and intimacy with nature. These images are part of what consumers are buying. What do the producers gain when they produce such products? They hope to increase sales revenues and make a profit by giving people what they want.

The rules of our economy encourage providing people with what they want. Our Constitution provides strict guarantees of protection for private property rights. This means, in part, that producers are able to keep income derived from their property. The protection of private property provides an incentive which encourages producers to offer consumers the products they would most like to have. Apparently, consumers are interested in continuing to buy many new products associated with the West.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What was the early image of the cowboy?
2. What was the image of the West in the Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows?
3. What is the evidence that the image of the West remains popular in the 1990s?
4. Why do people in the 1990s continue to purchase things associated with the West when we know that cowboys were people who did not amount to much historically? Consider each of the following points in your response.

Choices:

Costs:

Incentives:

Rules of the system: