"Good whiskey and bad women will be the ruin of you varmints yet."

*The Log of a Cowboy* by Andy Adams

Four cowboys on the 101 Ranch, known today as the Whitney Ranch, in Chase County, Kansas. Photo courtesy of the Whitney family.
THE COWBOY:  
SOME VIEWS ON THE AREA OF HIS ORIGIN

by Lawrence Clayton

The cowboy has become an American folk hero, an icon of the American West. This figure, dressed in traditional regalia and mounted on a horse, is recognized around the world. His emergence onto the public scene came with dime novels and later B-Westerns. He took over prime time on television in the 1950s and 1960s before losing mass appeal in the face of a more sophisticated public entertainment.

The origin of the cowboy has been obscure. This uniquely American figure did not begin in America. Instead he drew his origin from Old World influences. The principal one was certainly the vaquero, who had seen centuries of development in North America before Anglos and their black slaves moved into the eastern United States and developed a cattle trade. Two schools of thought dominate the discussion about the area of origin of the cowboy.

The first stems from the work of Walter Prescott Webb, renowned historian, who places the birth of the cowboy and ranching as we know it in the United States in a diamond-shaped area of Texas with San Antonio on the north, Laredo on the west, Indianola on the east, and Brownsville on the south. He says, "In this region and on its borders were to be found all the elements essential to the ranch and range cattle industry." The Nueces River, once the border between Mexico and Texas, runs through this region.

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The theory is an interesting one, because this area is now the Brasada, the Brush Country that J. Frank Dobie, an equally famous Texas folklorist and friend of Webb, called home. Dobie doted on this region's unique Spanish-influenced culture and inhabitants. Both Webb and Dobie agreed that the most important influence was this culture with its Spanish roots. This area is, without doubt, that in which the vaquero influence grew out of Mexico to shape the cattle business in Texas.

To the influence of the vaquero on this ranching culture, Dobie, in his *The Longhorns*, adds a second factor, the herd-owning caballero, a Spanish gentleman. Since the first Texas cattlemen both owned and saw after cattle, Dobie seems justified in his view. Later some of these men established large ranches and hired cowboys to do the work, just as the Spanish priests and Conquistadors had done in Mexico and Mexican Texas.

These cattle raisers maintained an open range attitude, one in which large numbers of cattle roamed much at will and survived as best they could with a minimum of care, even in the winter months. The men held periodic roundups to brand and gather cattle for slaughter or market. From this cattle-rich area much of the stock for the trail herds later came.

Two other scholars offer support for Webb's and Dobie's basic theory of the area of origin. The first is Joe Graham, a folklorist with a special interest in south Texas ranching and the product of a family ranch in the Big Bend area. He places the main area of influence on Texas ranching further to the west and south, thus acknowledging only part of the diamond-shaped area Webb describes. In his *El Rancho in South Texas*, Graham cites as support for his vaquero theory, among other notions, the more than two dozen Spanish terms used to describe items and techniques essential to cowboy life. The second is Bill Wittliff, a talented photographer, film director, and writer, who holds that the vaquero is the source of the cowboy and has excellent photographs to support the theory in his *Vaquero: Genesis of the Cowboy*. A traveling exhibit from the Institute of Texan Cultures carries these photographs to a large audience.

The second school of thought is a revisionist view denying the
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a revisionist view denying the
predominance of the vaquero influence. It is espoused strongly by Terry
Jordan in his Trails to Texas and to a lesser degree in North American
Cattle-Raising Frontiers. Jordan, a cultural geographer, holds that the
impetus for an early cattle-raising culture in Texas came especially from
the South as elements of mostly British culture were transferred to Texas
by newly arrived immigrants from Georgia, Florida, and the Carolinas by
way of Louisiana, where many of the people had settled temporarily
before being allowed by Mexican authorities to move into Texas around
mid-1800s. While it is true that these people had a long history of cattle
raising in woodlands with some open areas, it is also true that they did not
have experience raising cattle on the vast, open, mostly treeless plains
found in Texas. Southerners referred to these open areas as "prairie," not
by the Spanish term "llano" or even by the word "plain" found in the term
"Great Plains" used to describe the flat, rich, one-time grassland now
given largely to farming stretching from the Texas Panhandle into
Canada. These newcomers from the South made extensive use of dogs
to do this work, and identified the activity with the English
term "cowpens" instead of "ranch" from Spanish "rancho." They used
whips to drive their cattle and did not rely upon the "lazo" or lariat used
by the vaqueros and later the cowboys. There was little need for the
Southerners to rope their cattle if the men had pens in which to catch the
animals in order to work them. These Southerners also used salt licks,
which cattle regularly visit, as a means to manage stock. These ranchers
had what Jordan describes as a "greater attention to the welfare and
quality of livestock" than was common in the open-range culture further
west. Their cattle were better bred than the Longhorn cattle that formed
the basis for open-range ranching in Mexico, Texas, and California. The
slender conformation of Longhorn cattle was not a negative factor at this
time because the main market for cattle was in hides and tallow, not beef.
The Anglos, according to Jordan, established themselves and the basis for
ranching culture in an area in southern Louisiana, some four hundred
miles east of Webb's diamond in south Texas, and later moved their way
of stock raising to Texas. He discusses at some length the tradition of
trailing herds of cattle to market by these people.
There is, however, doubt as to the validity of some of Jordan’s conclusions, and in some cases he is just wrong. Historian Richard Slatta in his Comparing Cowboys and Frontiers criticizes Jordan’s errors as stemming from “overrevisionism.” This practice in the 1980s and 1990s characterized the role of some historians who offered alternative views of several phases of settlement in the West. In this camp are the likes of Patricia Limerick’s The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West, Richard White’s It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West, and an exhibit entitled “The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier,” held at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American Art in 1991. Slatta correctly links this drive for revisionism to the Deconstruction movement that has dominated the arts, especially literature, during the same period and admits that some correcting of the image is overdue. These historians have revised the notions that Anglo males were the prime movers in the Westward movement and emphasized the roles of other ethnic groups and women. A general feeling that some revisionism resulted in overcorrection is gaining followers, just as Deconstruction seems to be losing ground.

Slatta notes that Jordan “ignores” both linguistic and material culture evidence to draw some “feeble” conclusions. Among the errors of Jordan’s early thesis is the claim that buckaroo and corral, both of Spanish origin, derived from African terms buckra and kraal and came west with the slaves accompanying new Anglo settlers from the South. Another is that the Africans “shaped” the ranching culture and strongly influenced the development of the cowboy. The most specious of Jordan’s claims is that the role Texas culture played in the development of ranching techniques and institutions has been greatly exaggerated. In these matters, Webb and Dobie were closer to being on target than is Jordan. The corrective that Slatta has brought to Jordan’s notions is encouraging and may lead to further correction of the notion that the cowboy is dead and gone.

On the positive side of Jordan’s extensive work, however, is his discussion of the fact that there were—and are—Cajun cowboys, some of
validity of some of Jordan's wrong. Historian Richard Slatta criticizes Jordan's errors as practice in the 1980s and 1990s who offered alternative views of. In this camp are the likes of quest: The Unbroken Past of the Four Misfortune and None of My est, and an exhibit entitled "The returns of the Frontier," held at the American Art in 1991. Slatta to the Deconstruction movement matter, during the same period age is overdue. These historians were the prime movers in the roles of other ethnic groups and revisionism resulted in over reconstruction seems to be losing th linguistic and material culture fusions. Among the errors of buckaroo and corral, both of ms buckra and kraal and came v Anglo settlers from the South. e ranching culture and strongly owboy. The most specious of iture played in the development as been greatly exaggerated. In closer to being on target than is brought to Jordan's notions is orrection of the notion that the extensive work, however, is his are–Cajun cowboys, some of them black descendants of slaves who worked cattle on horseback and drove herds of cattle to various markets, mostly to the east. Jim Bob Tinsley, an authority on cowboy songs and cowboy life, notes that the black mounted herdsmen were called "cattle hunters or graziers" and the white ones "cow keepers," not "cowboys" and certainly not "vaqueros." This Southern terminology was carried to Texas where early settlers from the South went on "cow hunts," not "roundups." When these people came to Texas, however, vaqueros had been ranching in south Texas for centuries. My personal preference in terminology for this largely Southern culture, which formed my youthful experience in East Texas, is "stock farming" rather than "ranching." A journal that serves the industry has the notion captured in its title Farmer-Stockman Magazine. The practices of stock farming serve better in areas where water and timber are plentiful, population dense, and private parcels of land smaller than in less populous areas. These are regions where rainfall is ample and the soil is suitable for farming. Here stock farmers raise cattle, row crows such as small grains, and hay that help feed the stock during the winter. In some areas in which these activities developed, early stockmen have to pay greater attention to the cattle than in areas where cold weather does not deplete the nutritional value of the forage.

Open range ranching could not have developed in areas where this kind of care is required for cattle to survive. In southern Texas around Victoria, for example, once cold weather (not cold by Northern standards but with low temperatures in the thirties and forties) hits the grass, it loses its nutritional value. In this region frost is uncommon, and ice and snow are almost unheard of. The cattle in these areas are dependent upon supplementary feed until the return of consistently warm temperatures and rains in the spring. Here cattle will starve to death while standing in useless grass. Even during the growing season, cattle must consume these grasses in huge portions to maintain themselves.

This difference in nutritional value accounts for the fact that a cow brought into this region from far west Texas or northwest Texas will lose weight or even starve in ample pasture for cattle native to the region just because she is not conditioned to eat enough of the grasses to maintain
herself. By contrast, however, in the Davis Mountains of far west Texas, a cow from east Texas will gain weight on what to an inexperienced stockman looks like inadequate pasture. The forage maintains its nutritional value even in the cold of winter. There will, however, be an adjustment period, often one year, during which the animal must learn what to eat from the grasses and browse available. No sea of waving grasses belly deep on the cow will be found here, even in the best of years.

In Webb’s diamond, cattle survive on the browse and the nutrient-rich prickly pear, which ranchers encourage the cattle to eat by burning off the spines with propane torches. Therefore, the cattle can survive in the brush year round without intervention from the rancher, except in time of severe drought. Here the cattle brought by the Spanish multiplied to huge herds that survived without any human intervention whatever. This condition fosters the concept of open range ranching in which the owner sees the cattle only irregularly at times of roundup for working and selling. The brush is now so thick that the animals are penned these days by using trap pens around watering sites or by using helicopters with horses and dogs to drive the cattle from the brush. J. Frank Dobie’s *A Vaquero of the Brush Country* is a good touchstone to remember here and offers examples of men who ride horseback in this brush and bring the cattle out. In view of this information, it seems apparent that Jordan’s Louisiana incubator theory for the origin of open-range ranching as an institution in the United States and for the cowboy lacks validity.

Analysis of development of ranching in northwest Texas serves to illustrate how various influences merged to form a variant culture. Along the rich lands of the Clear Fork of the Brazos River in Shackelford, Stephens, and Jones counties and further cast in Palo Pinto and Parker counties, cattle barons such as Oliver Loving, Jesse Hittson, and others established ranching kingdoms and spread them all over the West. Men like John G. Irwin, Joseph Beck Matthews, and Barber Watkins Reynolds, all of Scottish descent, established significant and long-standing ranching operations and later trailed cattle to distant points on both sides of the Rocky Mountains. They were followed in the trade by
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George and W.D. Reynolds, John A. Matthews, John Chadbourne Irwin,
and others, whose descendants have continued their ranching interests
into the present. The early practices were open range ones, but over time,
other practices suited to the region have evolved. Pastures have been
fenced and cross-fenced, some land has been put into cultivation mainly
for growing wheat in the winter, and cattle suited to the land selected,
especially Herefords and Black Angus, often crossbred. In fact, Albany
is called "Home of the Hereford" because of the early introduction of this
British breed into the region. Other regions have similar development
histories that make them unique while varying only slightly from the
orm. For example, at the National Finals for Ranch Rodeo in Glen Rose
in 1996, I asked a young cowboy friend what the gear of the various
teams looked like. His response was that all of the clothing, gear, and
looked just like what he was accustomed to seeing in west Texas.
ese men eame from Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Nebraska, and
Arizona.

In A Texas Frontier, Cashion credits Scottish roots for the kind of
operation found along the Clear Fork and cites two paths of entry. One,
he ways, spread "through the Piedmont and Appalachians into the Ohio
Valley and the Midwest" and on "through Missouri" en route to North
Texas. The other strand eame "through Georgia, the Florida Panhandle,
Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana before reaching deep East Texas"
and eoming to the ranges of Texas.12

A cowboy culture still thrives in this area, especially along the Clear
Fork where the soil is shallow and rainfall scant in most seasons. Despite
this reality, however, the area is one of the best cattle-raising areas in the
world. There is little doubt, however, that the cowboy originated further
south.

Whatever theory of the genesis of the cowboy that one accepts, it is
sufficient to say that in the southern part of Texas developed a ranching
culture that spread along with its cattle over the western part of Texas and
hence on to other areas, especially the Northern Plains, where free grass
beckoned to hardy souls that found ranching a promising way of life. It
was carried on the heads of Longhorn cattle brought in by the Spanish
and allowed to multiply on the open ranges of south Texas. Here a man
on horseback could look at the horizon and make a living at least as good
as the man following a mule with a hand on the plow and eye on the
mule’s posterior, a way of life that allowed him to rope and work with his
cattle, not bend his back to chop weeds and crawl to pick cotton.

NOTES

3. Joe S. Graham, El Rancho in South Texas (Denton: University of North Texas Press,
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5. Terry Jordan, Trails to Texas: Southern Roots of Western Cattle Ranching (Lincoln:
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6. Terry Jordan, North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion, and
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9. Richard W. Slatta, Comparing Cowboys and Frontiers (Norman: University of
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