

**Final Paper:**

*Homosexuality and the American Cowboy*

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History 419: The American West

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April 29, 2015

### **Introduction and Thesis:**

In 2005, Americans met Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* with adoration and heartbreak, experiencing the tragic tale of Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist, two Wyoming ranchers engaged in a homosexual love affair during the 1960s. Adapted from Annie Proulx's 1997 short story, Lee's film brought nationwide attention not only to Proulx's narrative, but also to the secret sexuality of the American West that challenged established ideals of a manly, rugged, and coarse American frontiersman. Homosexual ranchers debunk the myth of the American cowboy, created long before the twentieth century and maintained by the political, social, and popular culture of the 1900s. Literature historian Chris Packard summarizes this cowboy's unique situation stating, "The cowboy is queer: he is odd; he doesn't fit in; he resists community; he eschews lasting ties with women but embraces rock-solid bonds with same-sex partners; he practices same-sex desire."<sup>1</sup>

**The predominantly hidden homoerotic practices and affairs among male cowboys, ranchers, and miners in the American West reshape the definition of western masculinity. Unfolding in the recently settled landscape of western America, staunch lines of sexuality were not as established as in the East, and many men found companionship, lust, and even love among fellow frontiersmen. Recent historical inquiry and published literature on homosexual cowboys has drastically challenged the persona of the rugged cowboy portrayed in media, literature, and the eyes of the country for decades, reinforcing the complex nature of sexual identity.**

### **The Sexual Cowboy**

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Packard, *Queer Cowboys* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 3.

In his 1976 article, “The Cowboy and Sex”, historian Clifford P. Westermeier shed light on the unexamined sexuality of the American cowboy. Westermeier observed that within western stories, cowboys are classified in conflicting ways. He states on one hand that “One seldom...finds an incident or a single work suggestive of indecency or sexual impropriety.”<sup>2</sup> In this way, cowboys appear to be cast as the epitome of upstanding citizenship. At the same time however, rancher descriptions can be uncouth, violent, “sensual and at times suspect.”<sup>3</sup> These “suspect” definitions often align with sexual innuendos. The sexuality of the “uncivilized West”, and the American cowboy, is often associated with virility, strength and aggression, equating a rancher’s manliness to his ability to ride, shoot, and survive independently. Similarly, cowboys were often depicted in stark terms, all good or all evil, as were most characters in the West, based upon gender, race, or morals.<sup>4</sup> A similar idea can be applied to sexuality; either a rancher was fertile, virile, and sexual, or feminine and sexually improper.

Westermeier explains that in contrast to the vigorous and sexual cowboy described above, “The same cowboy may be classed as a sexual puritan, for he shows little desire for women and seldom if ever, kisses one.”<sup>5</sup> This claim ignores the many prostitutes and barmaids awaiting weary customers at the trail’s end. In Westermeier’s description, his cowboy possesses the acceptable image of sexuality, but is possibly asexual. Westermeier asserts that this neutrality towards women could stem from a sadistic dislike, or less severely, the desire for a life that doesn’t take women into account.<sup>6</sup> Rather than immediately pointing to homosexuality, cowboys may have taken part in homosexual acts as a means to experience sexual pleasure without

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<sup>2</sup> Clifford P. Westermeier, “The Cowboy and Sex,” in *The Cowboy: Six-Shooters, Songs, and Sex*, ed. Charles W. Harris and Buck Rainey (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press), 85.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 97.

committing to a life revolving around domesticity. The desire to engage in homoerotic behaviors may have been prompted by a desire to retain an independent lifestyle, offering an alternative to social expectations.

Following the 1970s, pornography surrounding cowboys exploded, with titles such as “Gay on the Range” in 1967 and “Lonesome Cowboys” in 1968 reinventing the partnerships between men seen across the frontier for decades.<sup>7</sup> Adult films, dime novels, and sensationalized campfire songs enhanced the sexualized image of the American West in an extremely graphic way. “The Cowboy and Sex” includes an anonymous limerick to demonstrate the sexual prowess intimately tied to the cowboy. It rhymes Hooter with “big six shooter” and “stock” with “hard as a rock”. The poem ends with “Young cowboys had a great fear,/ That old studs once filled with beer,/ Completely addle/ They’d throw on a saddle,/ And ride them on the rear.”<sup>8</sup> Not only does this suggest homosexual relations, but it also hints at the age differences in many homoerotic relationships across the frontier, to be discussed further on. Touching on homosexuality, Westermeier recognizes “The cowboy shared with the sailor a public image based on escapades after long periods of privation.”<sup>9</sup> This privation could be a driving force behind homosexual partnerships. There is also an assumed stereotype that many sailors are gay, or in the least practice same-sex desires. This creates a correlation previously unconsidered between men of the sea and frontiersmen, with extreme isolation prompting homosexual tendencies.

### **Male Companionship in the West**

Prior to 1900, American Western literature openly idolized male companionship. The label “homosexual” was still developing, and close relationships between men were not immediately cast in a romantic light. This, however, does not mean these relationships did not

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 87.

contain elements of romance or physical intimacy, but neither does it prove they did. *Queer Cowboys* by Chris Packard states that many frontier authors recognized “male-male friendship preserves privilege and ensures survival in hostile wilderness” areas.<sup>10</sup> Male comradery and affection did not hinder the spontaneity of the cowboy lifestyle; sex was available without familial ties, and without the risk of children tying one down.<sup>11</sup> As part of the New Western History movement, Packard emphasizes that 19<sup>th</sup> century literature “[expresses] affection in wilderness contexts”, as seen in the works of James Fenimore Cooper, Owen Wister, Walt Whitman, and Mark Twain.<sup>12</sup> This continued through the twentieth century with the later works of Louis Lamour and Zane Grey.

In his 1948 report *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey roots these fictional male companionships in the realities of many Western Americans. Kinsey found that many farm boys have few options for friendship other than male companions working the fields, and the majority of their time was spent with men, as opposed to courting women. Farm labor required active, virile, and fit men, building on the physical stereotypes of idealized cowboys.<sup>13</sup> In his commentary on Kinsey’s work, historian Jonathan Katz analyzes, “[Ranchers] live on realities and on a minimum of theory. Such a background breeds the attitude that sex is sex”, partner aside.<sup>14</sup> Kinsey’s extensive sexual survey of 5,300 males in 1948 found “considerable homosexual activity among...miners, hunters, and others engaged in out-of-door occupations. The homosexual activity rarely conflicts with the heterosexual relations.”<sup>15</sup> This observation states that although homosexual practices may have been taking place, a cowboy may have also

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<sup>10</sup> Packard, *Queer Cowboys*, 5.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Alfred C. Kinsey, Wardell Baxter Pomeroy, and Clyde E. Martin. *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Company, 1948).

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A* (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell Company, 1976), 512.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 512.

led a heterosexual life, with the desire for males being contained within the specific outdoorsman context. The American cowboy may or may not be a homosexual, but rather practices homosexual or bisexual tendencies. Kinsey believes this grey area in regards to sexual orientation is the “type of homosexual experience which the explorer and pioneer may have had in their histories.”<sup>16</sup>

Written between 1915 and 1919, “The Lost Pardner”, by Badger Clark reveals the friendship and possible sexual undertones of frontier affection. Published in his *Sun and Saddle Leather* poem collection, he writes “We loved each other in the way men do/And never spoke about it, Al and me, /But we both knowed, and knowin’ it so true/was more than any woman’s kiss could be...And he’d miss me, the same as I do him...I wait to hear him ridin’ up behind/And feel his knee rub mine the good old way.”<sup>17</sup> Read as written, this poem could be about friends, or potential lovers. The italics placed on “know” bring special emphasis to the word, and the potential intercourse connotations it holds in literature. To know someone can be to have had sex with them. In a similar way, the knee rubbing described could denote physical affection. Packard explains sexual history is moving towards the reading of such documents with potential romantic and physical undertones. It is critical to note that because these stories have not been exposed in the past, does not mean they do not exist in the American West.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Dilemma of the Homosexual Label**

United States literature and cultural specialist Peter Stoneley links sexual “transformations in male behavior” to the “the scarcity of women” in Gold Rush narratives.<sup>19</sup> In

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 512.

<sup>17</sup> Badger Clark, “The Lost Pardner,” in *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.*, by Jonathan Katz (New York: Thomas Y. Cromwell Company, 1976), 510.

<sup>18</sup> Packard, *Queer Cowboys*, 17.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Stoneley, “Rewriting the Gold Rush: Twain, Harte and Homosexuality,” *Journal of American Studies*, vol. 39, no. 2, part 2 (August 1996): 189.

“Rewriting the Gold Rush”, he states, “Figuratively, they were free to become once more their ‘real’ and unadulterated selves, far from the confines of domesticity and the feminine milieu.”<sup>20</sup> The undomesticated lifestyle of the cowboy functioned outside of traditional feminine influence, where the wilderness became a setting for adapting practices not entirely male, like cross-dressing and nakedness.<sup>21</sup> Stoneley details the rise of “California Widows”, women whose husbands who chose to not return from wilderness activities to their duties as a husband and father. There exist “numerous descriptions of fervent and seemingly romantic partnerships between men. Close and lasting male-male relationships were not invented with the Gold Rush, but they became newly conspicuous against the otherwise grim background of a struggle for wealth.”<sup>22</sup> In the exclusively male towns and camps that dominated the mining industry, manly love flourished away from females.

Examining the partnerships created between men, “Rewriting the Gold Rush” recognizes the dilemma in labeling these men as homosexuals. “Representations of same-sex relationships are often enigmatic, and cannot be translated into an approximation of modern homosexuality, or...heterosexual marriage. There is extreme intensity and exclusivity of interest on the part of one or both...partners.”<sup>23</sup> In addition, the “precise nature of the relationship often remains unarticulated.”<sup>24</sup> These quotes are both exemplified in Proulx’s popular *Brokeback Mountain*.

Homosexual relationships are also a direct threat on male dominance and power. With no female to be traditionally dominated as seen throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in gender relations, is a dominant male unnecessary? It appears not. “If [partnership] betokens

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 199.

equality, then it also imperils masculinity.”<sup>25</sup> Examined in one way, historian Gregory Woods describes “The one sexual act which defines him, anal intercourse, inevitably unmans him.”<sup>26</sup> The penetrative role is crucial in sexual dominance, creating masculinity for homosexuals, while simultaneously undoing society’s expectations of sexual relations, even if this entire act is performed in private rather than public spheres. In order for one’s masculinity to not be challenged or usurped, new types of power dynamics and masculine roles evolved in transient laborers practicing homosexual desires in the American West, as discussed in Peter Boag’s *Same Sex Affairs*.

### **Sexual Power Dynamics and Homosexual Prejudices**

Published in 2003, Peter Boag’s *Same Sex Affairs* claims sexual pairings are most often seen between an older man and a young man, labeled a “jocker” and a “punk” respectively. Though an intimate detail, this is chronicled through arrest records, mainly for sodomy, or attempted sodomy. In order to preserve the idea of a dominant male, jockers wanted an imbalance of power, even though both participants were men.<sup>27</sup> The older man would also teach, look after, and offer protection to the young man, in return for sexual services, care, and companionship. These relationships most often developed in canneries, logging camps, mining towns, and industrial work camps, in addition to traditional farm labor occupations. This could be due to the close quarters in which men lived, sometimes even sharing beds, a lack of women, the desire for sexual “relief”, and the little social ostracism faced in wild areas.<sup>28</sup> Boag reduced the male homosexual impulse into three categories: the first being a strong sexual desire for men,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 206.

<sup>26</sup> Gregory Woods, *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 275.

<sup>27</sup> Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 35.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 36-37.



the second, self-identification as a “queen” or transgender, and the third as purely circumstantial, relating to the transient lifestyle described above, or the need for money, protection, or both.<sup>29</sup>

When examined, these impulses are not very different from those governing a person’s choice to enter into a heterosexual relationship.

In addition to men living in established all male communities, transient laborers would create their own designated sexual spaces on the road. Information on these communities were passed word of mouth, and touted as safe areas for mostly illegal sexual activities, like oral and anal intercourse. *The Western Forum* article “Another Frontier in Law and Sexuality in the American West” by John R. Wunder explains that to this day, “The west as a region includes more states that do not have sodomy laws than any other region in the United States.”<sup>30</sup> It could be argued that this lack of law was due to the heavy practice of sodomy, with some law enforcement agencies deciding to turn a blind eye against the practices; in another way, the practice could be seen as of no business to the state. This was not universal, however, and many arrest records still indicate this as a crime in some Western states; many men were convicted without concrete evidence. Current debates concerning gay marriage have also pioneered in Western states like California, making it a breeding ground for homosexual rights today. Urban locales and townspeople did not like hobos hanging around; society often perceived unemployed, loitering men as a threat. This could have been due to their vagabond appearance or perhaps knowledge of and prejudice towards their sexual tendencies.<sup>31</sup> This potential prejudice aside,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>30</sup> John R. Wunder, “Another Frontier: Law and Sexuality in the American West,” *Journal of the West*, vol. 41, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 4.

<sup>31</sup> Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*, 44.

traveling on the road was better for an established male partnership. City living was expensive, and better for a single man looking for hook-ups, rather than companionship.<sup>32</sup>

American prejudice against men engaging in homosexual practices revealed nativist tendencies of the early twentieth century. Racial prejudice can be seen in many arrest records, with a disproportionate amount of Greeks and Italians arrested for homosexual acts. This set the stage for homosexuality to be seen as an attack on Americans, although about 50% of documented arrests were still American white men.<sup>33</sup> It also generated an enormous amount of fear in regards to youth culture, and the influence homosexual men could have on emerging young adults. Homosexual and racial prejudices combined in the first half of the 1900s as a way to “other” immigrants during high nativist sentiments in the US.

### **Brokeback Mountain and Recent Attention**

In *A History of Gay Literature*, Gregory Woods claims that in writing “Man’s homosexuality amounts to a tragic flaw.”<sup>34</sup> Annie Proulx’s *Brokeback Mountain* is a tragic love story, one that negotiates power, expectations, and self-identity. Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist are not tragic because they are gay, as Woods might claim, but rather the tragedy lies in the way their love is forced to be repressed. Woods recognizes “miracles [in] homosexual representations in the twentieth century [have] been the production of great (and positive) gay fiction.”<sup>35</sup> In this way, society receives exposure to very real and true histories, through creative representations. With this film, Hollywood produced a refreshing alternative to the one-dimensional western masculine image.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>34</sup> Woods, *A History of Gay Literature*, 275.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 275.

Writer Annie Proulx was not from the West, and writing as an outsider, published *Brokeback Mountain* in *The New Yorker*, later compiling it in a short story collection entitled *Wyoming Stories*. Written in just under 30 pages, *Brokeback Mountain* is clean, succinct, and filled with stark but vivid language.<sup>36</sup> This short work was elaborated and written as a screenplay by Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana. Analyzed as a short story, screenplay, and eventual film, the story is bolstered through the various mediums, though all convey the same narrative. McMurtry and Ossana immediately bought the screen play rights, but the project floated around Hollywood as the “gay cowboy movie” for years before Ang Lee committed to the project.<sup>37</sup> In the John Ford western film tradition, the movie contains wide, expansive shots of the “American West”, though actually filmed in Canada, and cast attractive men and women for the leading roles. Heath Ledger as Ennis and Jake Gyllenhaal as Jack represent the tragic, compelling, and complicated sexuality of American cowboys for the twenty-first century audience.

Ennis Del Mar and Jack Twist meet during a summer of herding sheep in the mountains of Wyoming, developing a friendship and physical affair lasting during their season. At the close, the two go their separate ways, marry, and have children, all while harboring feelings for one another. When reunited years later, the two begin yearly camping and fishing trips, working to keep their love alive on the side, until Jack’s eventual death. The narrative explores the desire for commitment to their relationship, power dynamics between the couple, heterosexual interactions with the men’s wives, and stigmas associated with homosexuality in the latter half of the twentieth century. After their first sexual encounter, Jack and Ennis dialogue, “It’s a one-shot

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<sup>36</sup> Annie Proulx, “Brokeback Mountain,” in *Brokeback Mountain: Story to Screenplay*, ed. Annie Proulx, Larry McMurtry, and Diana Ossana (New York: Scribner, 2005), 1-28.

<sup>37</sup> Anna Banks, “Brokeback Mountain,” (lecture, University of Idaho, Moscow, September, 2014).

thing we got goin' here./ Nobody's business but ours./ You know I ain't queer./ Me neither.”<sup>38</sup> In this way, even the participants themselves were unable to define the attraction that had taken hold of them during their time in the wilderness, echoing Stoneley's analysis of many same sex partnerships.

The two men emulate an appearance of normality, functioning as husbands and fathers to the best of their abilities, but always drawn back to their same-sex relationship developed on *Brokeback*. It is also interesting to note that their meetings throughout their lives take place in the wilderness, away from society and the stigmas associated with homosexuality. It is debatable whether these characters were actual homosexuals, much like the larger expanse of real-life cowboys they represent during the twentieth century; The attitude taken that “sex is sex” and love is love has greater functionality on the open range, where men are free to be free in the wilderness.

In 2009, the Autry National Center for history of the American West in Los Angeles, California, displayed an exhibit building on the homosexual identities of twentieth century cowboys, propelled by the success of *Brokeback Mountain* and sudden public interest. *LA Times* writer David Ny details in “Out West” that the story of Del Mar and Twist offered “an exclamation point to [gay western] history.”<sup>39</sup> He continues, “If *Brokeback Mountain* helped to open the frontier's closet door, the Autry is taking the next step by rummaging through the closet's contents and sharing what it finds with the public”<sup>40</sup> In a similar way, the photography of

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<sup>38</sup> Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana, “Brokeback Mountain: A Screenplay,” in *Brokeback Mountain: Story to Screenplay*, ed. Annie Proulx, Larry McMurtry, and Diana Ossana (New York: Scribner, 2005), 20.

<sup>39</sup> Ng, David, “‘Out West’ at the Autry Examines the History of Homosexuals and Transgender People in the Old West,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 15, 2009, <http://articles.latimes.com/2009/dec/15/entertainment/la-et-out-west15-2009dec15>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Blake Little at gay rodeos across the West offers the public images of homosexual cowboys, much like characters in Lee's film.

Taken between 1988 and 1992, images like *Victory Kiss* reveal the love and affection between men engaged in rough, outdoorsman activities. *Behind the Chutes* reveals the revelry, horseplay, and comraderies established of men working in tight-knit communities, much like those described by historian Peter Boag. The photograph *Bull Riders from Behind* is particularly interesting; viewed without knowledge of the context in which it was taken, would audiences be able to tell the men were gay? The two men on the left stand quite close to each other, but this could be indicative of either a friendship bond, or one of lovers.

In the way westerns and cowboys are difficult to read as homosexual or heterosexual, this image traverses the fine line between gay and straight. It is interesting that this line is so often ambiguous; this could stem from remaining societal expectations for male sexuality, even into the twenty-first century, particularly in such an iconic character as the frontier's cowboy. To recognize this cultural icon as a homosexual, or even hint at homosexual tendencies, shatters the conservative and staunch gender roles employed in Western America's founding. At the same time, their manly activity, bull riding, feeds into established notions of male sexual dominance, virility, and prowess, not often associated with homosexuality because of challenges to traditional power dynamics.<sup>41</sup>

### **Conclusion**

As a part of the New Western History Movement, historians and Western literature specialists alike draw new attention to the close male-male companionships between American cowboys, ranchers, and transient laborers. These relationships are beginning to be seen in a new,

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<sup>41</sup> Blake Little, Blake Little: Photography from the Gay Rodeo, Blake Little Photography, last modified January 2014, <http://blakelittle.com/gayrodeo/>.

sexual light, one unfiltered by societal expectations of masculinity. Working from this new contemporary lens, audiences need to be cautious of potential dangers of misrepresentations. It can be easy to “read into” a primary source or piece of literature if one approaches it determined to find a particular bias, in this case, an overt or hidden sexual undertone. With this, misrepresentations can be founded based on an historian’s preconceived notion of a piece. In a similar way however, this same idea could be what has kept many homosexual or homoerotic histories in the American West unstudied for decades. The ultimate goal is to examine old records and literature being aware of possible homoerotic threads, without allowing them to overpower a piece’s intended meaning.

The release of the award-winning *Brokeback Mountain* into the Hollywood mainstream in 2009 offered a presentation to the American public of historical revisions beginning in the 1970s regarding the sexual tendencies of the American cowboy. The cowboy and other predominantly male occupations in the West, like mining, canning, and farming prove to be potential hotspots for homoerotic activity and contemporary homoerotic interests, influenced by many factors, including same-sex desire, a thirst for independence, a lifestyle free of domestic influence, and circumstantial factors of protection and survival.

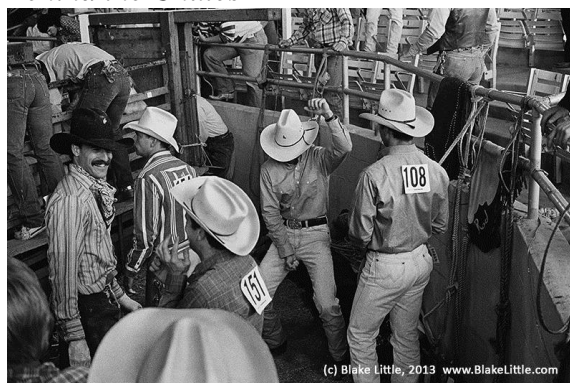
Looking at the American cowboy in terms of his sexuality reinvents the established notion of Western, and American, masculinity. Historians, politicians, and popular culture tout the West as the epitome of American manliness, fostered by rugged, hardworking, and fiercely independent men. The recent suggestion through historical analysis that these iconic American trailblazers may have been homosexual complicates assumed stereotypes of both parties, cowboys and gays, in the best way possible.

## Appendix Images

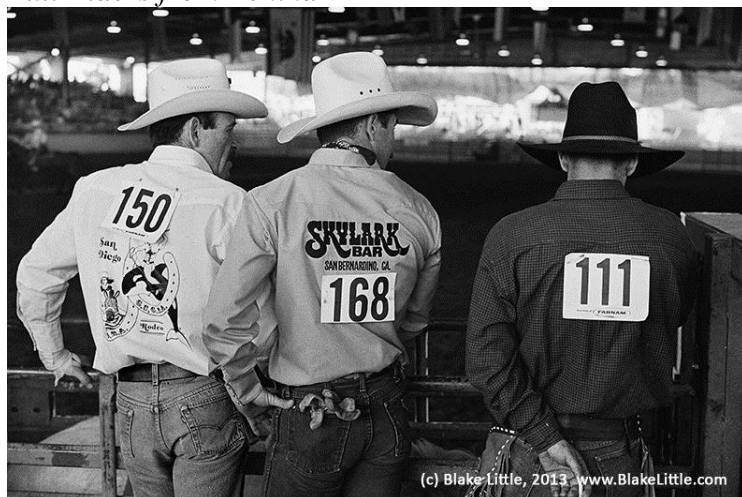
*Victory Kiss*



*Behind the Chutes*



*Bull Riders from Behind*



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