Introduction

The West, the Man, and the Myth

We paint the history of the West, particularly Texas, in traditionally masculine terms. Men tamed the frontier, broke horses, subdued Indians, and dominated the landscape, forcing it to yield to their needs. The Old West made men. In the 1920s and 1930s, old-time cowboys looked back fondly to a time when “men were men and women weren’t governors,” and argued that the movie cowboys had been over “prettified.” One chronicler from the 1940s went as far as to proclaim, “The history of West Texas is essentially the history of men.” The cowboy has become an icon of Anglo masculinity to generations of Americans. From John Wayne to the Marlboro Man, Teddy Roosevelt to George W. Bush, men have been “cowboying up” to tame both literal and figurative frontiers, and to prove their manhood and that of their country.

The masculine cowboy hero depicted in film and literature is usually a figure straddling the frontier between civilization and the wilderness, sometimes siding with the townspeople against the wilderness and sometimes with the equally mythical noble Indian savage against civilization. Whether he accepts or rejects white society, his manhood is clear, and often superior to those of the so-called respectable men around him. In real life, the historical cowboys in the early cattle industry did not conform to movie cowboy masculinity, nor did their employers and the surrounding townspeople share this image of the manly cowboy.

To examine the ways in which cowboys and cattlemen themselves defined their masculinity, we must look at the Texas cattle frontier in the late nineteenth century. Texas was the birthplace of the modern cattle industry as well as the birthplace of the cowboy. While large-scale cattle ranching spread across the Great Plains in the thirty-five years following the Civil War, it was Texans who first adapted Mexican techniques of caring for cattle from horseback, and who were some of the most prominent cattle
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barons. Texas cowboys moved around the country working on ranches in Colorado, Montana, and the Dakotas, and many took cattle—and cowboy culture—up the trail through Oklahoma, Kansas, and Nebraska. Thus, Texas is a good arena in which to examine ideals. The period from 1865 to 1900 is particularly interesting. The end of the Civil War and the opening of the railheads in Kansas and the meatpacking plants in Chicago made cattle raising a profitable investment, leading to the rise of long cattle drives north. Although there were always a few absentee owners, many of the early cattlemen worked the ranches themselves, often operating on a small scale. As the industry attracted more investors in the early 1880s, however, many of the smaller ranches sold out to neighboring larger landholders or corporate syndicates. The cattle industry, like other industries in this period, turned to mass production and systematic approaches to earning profit. These changes significantly affected the men who worked on the ranches.

What complicates any analysis of Western history is the tradition of American exceptionalism based on the “taming of the frontier,” that both popular and scholarly sentiment have perpetuated, which has contributed to many myths about the West. This exceptionalism is perhaps even stronger in Texas, which has the historical distinction of being an independent republic. The Texas cowboy is surrounded by mythic images (knight of the prairie, symbol of freedom, masculine icon, or sentimental poet). The iconic cowboy is independent, unaffected by society’s suffocating rules and etiquette; free to go where he wants, when he wants; and answers to no man but himself. His is a life of high adventure on the trail, fighting off Indians and desperadoes, performing physically daring feats on a daily basis, and protecting women and children from harm. The early Texas cattlemen, particularly the so-called Cattle Kings, have also earned a somewhat iconic status as the down-to-earth builders of Texas in contrast with the later foreign corporate investors who allegedly cared little for frontier hospitality and were mainly concerned with the bottom line.

Dime novelists and Wild West show promoters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries created romanticized images of the cowboys and cattlemen. Anxious about their own masculinity in the face of new immigration and women’s encroachment into the workplace and voting booth, late nineteenth-century Anglo-American men from the middle and upper classes exalted these images. As sociologist Michael Kimmel describes it, “the vast prairie [was] the domain of male liberation from
workplace humiliation, cultural feminization, and domestic emasculation.”3 The historical truth is less romantic. Most historians now recognize that at base, cowboys were essentially working-class men who, far from being free, were subject to the same restraints that late nineteenth-century workers faced across the country. They defined masculinity as their ability to perform their work, to control their own lives, and to respect other men who did the same. Cowboys did physically demanding work and experienced their share of stampedes and bucking horses, but most of the time they were simply hard-working hired hands. They lived outside of “civilized” society because of the nature of their work. Theirs was an all-male fraternity and they prized male camaraderie and friendships above most else, but it is also true that their economic and social circumstances often prevented them from pursuing other paths. They relished their freedom, but they also read the Montgomery Ward and Sears & Roebuck “Wish Books” in their free time while dreaming of settling down.4

The large ranch owners and cattlemen, who employed the majority of cowboys after the mid-1880s, often came from similar middle-class backgrounds as the later corporate investors, and had different ideas about what was masculine. They saw themselves first and foremost as businessmen, tamers of the frontier. Moreover, as the business world as a whole became more corporate in the late nineteenth century, many cattlemen adjusted to the new style of business themselves and adopted the methods of the corporations. The cattlemen’s goal was to bring civilization to the West and to profit from it. Civilization meant steady economic growth and the foundation of stable community institutions. While cattlemen may have disliked settlers filing claims on open land within their range, they still wanted to build up towns and realized that a larger population raised the value of the land they did own. They enjoyed their interaction with civilized society and believed that the true mark of manliness was exercising moderation, which was essential to maintaining social order. Their brand of masculinity emphasized responsibility, and restrained behavior within proper boundaries.5 Their concept of civilization was also based in part on a female presence. They hoped to create an environment for a stable family life and all the social niceties that came with what they referred to as the feminine touch. The usual prerequisite for the presence of respectable women was law and order, something which the cowboys often resisted.

Thus, there was a clear class distinction between cowboy and cattlem. A cowboy was a hired hand who worked cattle on horseback on the
ranch and/or up the trail, but who occasionally did other work on foot for the ranch such as repairing fences. Conversely, a cattlemaster was simply a ranch owner or manager who employed cowboys. While some early cattlemen certainly started life working on ranches as cowboys, they were usually the ranches that their family owned and they could later inherit. Samuel Burk Burnett of the 6666 Ranch, for example, however much he identified himself as a cowboy in later life, was the son of a rancher who learned his trade on his father’s small but successful ranch. Moreover, those cattlemen who continued to behave like cowboys, such as Burnett and Will Hale, were exceptions; as a rule, cattlemen adopted a more genteel lifestyle. Most ranch owners sent their sons to work beside their men to teach them the business and to learn the importance of hard work. The sons might even go off to other ranches to see some of the country and to gain new experiences. But they always knew they were training to run their own business, whereas the hired hands could seldom aspire to own the ranch without independent financial resources.

In truth, while there were certain conditions unique to the frontier, social and economic relations differed little from those elsewhere in the country. Scholars have challenged historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s view of the frontier as an incubator of democracy. Settlers imported class and social hierarchies wholesale into the region along with gender and racial biases, and social conflict. Attitudes about masculinity on the frontier did not differ substantially from the rest of the United States, either. Starting in the decades after the Civil War, as the Texas frontier became more settled and the open range disappeared, the real cowboys faced increasing demands from the people around them to rein in the very traits that many Americans considered the most masculine.

The term “manhood” has several meanings, but two main connotations exist. The first is a distinction between manhood and boyhood; in other words, manhood equates with those qualities that distinguish a male adult. The second sense of the word refers to distinctions between men and how one defines the qualities of being a man, that is, his manliness. I use the term “manhood” in this book to refer to both senses of the word, based on the understanding that standards for manhood are fluid and that even within certain groups, individual standards may vary. I use the terms “manliness” and “masculinity” to refer to the second sense of manhood, that is, the qualities of being a man, with the same understanding.

Both concepts of manhood rely on subjective qualifications that vary according to historic, social, cultural, and economic circumstances. Some
cultures require formal rites of passage such as circumcision rituals or bar mitzvahs to mark when a boy becomes a man, for example. But since many boys undergo these rituals at the onset of puberty, and maturity levels vary among boys, few would argue that boys literally become men through such a ritual. There are usually other subjective considerations that allow others to recognize when a boy has “grown up.” Manhood, in this sense, is not necessarily age-dependent. Similarly, there are subjective considerations as to what makes a man masculine. Some may believe certain character traits such as self-reliance or self-control denote masculinity, others believe physical strength or achieving material success are signs of manhood. A long-haired surfer dude from San Diego, California would likely have different ideas of masculinity than a high school football player in San Diego, Texas. What a metrosexual professional New Yorker sees as enlightened manly behavior, a New York cabbie might see as ridiculous.

In the same way, what people thought was masculine behavior in 1870 is not necessarily the same as what we think it is today. My purpose is not to judge or rank different ideals of manhood, or even to contrast them with contemporary standards. Instead, I hope, first, to identify what cowboys and cattlemen themselves thought was manly; second, to use manhood as a new prism through which to illuminate the history of the cattle industry; and third, to determine how differing standards of manhood reinforced social hierarchies.

Historians recognize that there has been more than one model of masculinity operating at any given time, and the efforts of cattlemen to control cowboys in Texas in the late nineteenth century clearly illustrate this point. Between 1865 and 1900, ranchers and cowboys and the people around them expressed the hierarchy between owners and employees in terms of manhood. No one would call a cowboy a cattleman unless he owned the ranch. Men have used the term “boy” in both positive and negative contexts with a variety of meanings attached to it. Calling a man a “boy” can deny him his status as an adult or imply immaturity. Former trail driver Jeff M. White recalled a trip to California during the Gold Rush: “I was the youngest in the outfit, being only 20 years old, and was called a 20-year-old-boy.” In the nineteenth century, whites referred to black males as “boys” regardless of their age, expressing both a belief that they were a “childlike race” and an understanding that they were not the social equals of white men. But “boy” can also be a term of endearment, implying camaraderie. Walter Smith attended an Old Trail Drivers Reunion in the 1920s and met a lot of his cowboy friends, “many of them
I had not seen in forty-five years, boys that I had been associated with during the early days of the frontier.” Men also referred to each other as boys out of habit. “One peculiarity about the cowboy . . . was that he was always called a ‘boy,’ no matter how many years he had lived.”

Some cowboys resented the term. Jim Shaw objected that cowhands were always described as cow boys on cow ponies when “they were horses and men.” Other men embraced it as a way of creating fraternity. For many working-class men, “boy” was a preferred choice of terms as it invoked the solidarity of boyhood friends when they were free of responsibility, and it also had an air of anti-authoritarianism about it. Some cowboys preferred the term “cowpuncher,” and in the northern ranges, they used this term almost exclusively. Others believed the term, which came from the cattle prods the cowboys used to get the cattle to stand up on train cars during shipping, belittled cowboy skills, reducing them to manual laborers. But all agreed that the term “cattleman” or “cowman” was reserved for the ranchers. A visitor to the XIT Ranch in the 1890s observed the distinction within a few days: “‘Cow’ is the name for all kinds of cattle, and every man is a ‘boy’ in Texas until he is an old man. Sometimes men are spoken of as ‘cowmen’ but they are dignified owners of cattle, not their care-takers.” When future cowboy Hubert Collins first came to the frontier, his brother defined a cattleman as “an owner of a herd on any given range or trail. . . . Generally they are the older men of any outfit which passes here. The cow-boys call them the bosses.” Thus, ownership implied a greater sense of manhood, at least linguistically.

The cattle industry is an integral part of the history of American expansion in the nineteenth century. On the edges of the frontier, cattlemen were the forerunners of Anglo civilization, and were responsible for building new towns and ensuring economic growth. They were useful citizens. But the cowboy was a nostalgic figure from the start. In the nineteenth-century view of the inevitable March of Progress, his job was to tame the frontier for the next wave of productive farmers, and then fade away into history. He was a man outside of time. Teddy Roosevelt described his ranch in the Dakotas as one where “Civilization seems as remote as if we were living in an age long past.” Novelist Owen Wister called the cowboys “a queer episode in the history of this country. Purely nomadic and leaving no race or posterity, for they don’t marry.” But in Texas in the late nineteenth century, when the settlers came, the cowboys did not fade away, a fact that made them out of place and inconvenient. Even twentieth-century historians could not understand why they had not faded
sooner and asked incredulously: “How and why did this cattleman’s frontier last so long?” Unable to ignore the cowboys, the townspeople tried to rein them in and make them invisible, and by the turn of the century they had largely succeeded. The cattlemen, always businessmen, adapted to new conditions, and joined in the efforts to regulate the cowboys.

Much of this regulation of employees was economic in nature and reflected larger trends in the rise of corporate industry elsewhere in the United States. Nonetheless, the language that cowboys, cattlemen, and townspeople used makes it clear that they saw the differences between them partly in terms of manhood. A cowboy was always a boy; a cattleman was always a man. Real men restrained themselves, boys acted without restraint. These contrasting ideas of proper manly behavior correspond with the differing ideals of manliness that middle- and working-class men have historically described for themselves. In general, middle-class men have placed value on the ability to provide for their families and restraint of baser appetites. With fewer resources and opportunities to support their families, working-class men have often turned to public rituals of manhood such as drinking, fighting, and swearing to demonstrate their manliness, behavior which shows a decided lack of restraint.

Cowboys’ ideals of manly behavior matched those of working-class men elsewhere in America, and cattlemen regularly counseled and enforced middle-class values of restraint as the manly ideal. Like other working-class men, cowboys found that greater regulation of their work and leisure activities restricted their opportunities to demonstrate their manhood, and that increasingly, society defined true manhood by economic success and social restraint, two options they either could not, or would not, embrace. Cowboys, for the most part, resisted attempts to restrain them, but just as the cowboy himself was supposed to fade away, so his ideas of manly behavior came to seem old-fashioned and out of step with modern society to the people around them.

The primary sources I have used for this book are not all new ones as far as cowboys go; indeed, in most cases they are part of the established canon. However, I have asked new questions of these sources and examined them for different types of evidence that has allowed me to draw new conclusions. I have relied extensively on firsthand accounts for my research, both from cowboys and cattlemen. The majority of the accounts come from two main sources. The Trail Drivers of Texas (1925) is editor J. Marvin Hunter’s collection of 325 anecdotes and memoirs from the members of the Old Time Trail Drivers’ Association, established in 1915. These
accounts range in length from one to twenty-eight pages and come from a variety of perspectives. The other main source is the Works Progress Administration’s Life Histories, 445 of which are available online through the Library of Congress’s American Memory Project. Most historians are familiar with the interviews that the WPA did with former slaves in the 1930s. In Texas, they also interviewed old-time cowboys and other pioneers. In addition to these main sources, there are numerous published and unpublished memoirs of cowboys available in libraries and manuscript collections around Texas. The two most useful and best-known of the published cowboy memoirs are Charlie Siringo’s *A Texas Cowboy*, and E. C. “Teddy Blue” Abbott’s *We Pointed Them North.* While Abbott was mostly a cowboy in the northern ranges and Nebraska, he worked extensively with Texas cowboys and did brief stints in Texas himself. Moreover, in later years, many Texas cowboys worked the northern ranges too; therefore, his experiences were ones they shared.

As with all firsthand accounts, however, it is necessary to take many of them with a grain of salt. The date of the Old Time Trail Drivers’ accounts and WPA interviews, for example, meant that many of the cowboy experiences they recalled were at least twenty or thirty years earlier, and thus their memories might not be accurate. In his introduction to the 1985 reprint of *Trail Drivers of Texas*, historian B. Byron Price acknowledges that the book often “reeks of ‘good old days’ sentimentality.” In addition, by the twentieth century there was a very strong heroic myth of the cowboy in the public mind that many cowboys were no doubt happy to validate. After being the source of scorn and disrepute in the late nineteenth century and in early film depictions, cowboys clearly wished to rehabilitate their reputations. Therefore, I have treated each source as critically as possible, verifying facts when possible and comparing accounts. It is fairly easy to distinguish those narrators whose goal is self-promotion from those who simply are telling their experiences, and when possible I have given more credence to the latter. I have also placed more emphasis on ideas that multiple cowboys expressed in the same way. For my purposes, the veracity of the stories the men told was often less important than the way in which they told them. For example, it mattered less to me whether or not the narrator was actually there when they captured Billy the Kid than it did the way in which he described the heroes and villains of the story and what qualities he admired in them. Nonetheless, whenever possible I have supplemented and verified these sources with newspaper accounts, ranch records, and court records.
The overwhelming majority of these primary sources come from Anglo cowboys, despite the fact that many cowboys from this period were black or Hispanic. The WPA narratives include a few from African American cowboys, and there are quite a few Anglo cowboy narratives that detail interaction with black cowboys, if sometimes in a racist manner. However, Hispanic cowboys seem to all but disappear from the documentary record for this period. Everyone agrees that vaqueros taught the Anglo cowboys many tricks of the trade during the antebellum period, that Anglos adapted the vaquero dress and gear to their purposes, and that much of the cowboy terminology such as *rodeo*, *remuda*, and *riata* come from Spanish. However, in accounts of the period after the Civil War, there is next to no mention of vaqueros in any detail outside of the King or Kenedy ranches except to say that they were there. The standard cowboy narrative usually starts with a list of men who were in the same outfit, with Anglos listed by their full names or nicknames, and then “two negroes and a Mexican,” or some variation thereof. WPA interviewers recorded the story of only one Hispanic cowboy and likely did not interview more due to a language barrier. The only published narrative I have found written by a Hispanic cowboy comes from a Uruguayan with French and Spanish parents who obviously looked down on the Mexican cowboys as much as the Anglos did. Lastly, while there has been some excellent recent scholarship on Indian cowboys, most notably Peter Iverson’s *When Indians Became Cowboys*, this topic is beyond the scope of my work. Most of the Indians who ranched worked in Oklahoma, and many of these ranches date from a later period than my research. I was only able to identify one Indian cowboy in the Texas narratives, and his story was no different from those of the Anglo cowboys. Thus, while I would have liked to have done more analysis of the experiences of nonwhite cowboys from their own perspective, it was not possible to go into as much detail as I have for Anglo cowboys.

Nonetheless, it is clear from late nineteenth-century sources that race played a role in the hierarchy of masculinities. In the opinion of the white majority, white manhood was the epitome of virility and masculinity; thus, being a minority automatically meant a man was less of a man. In part white workers retained a sense of masculinity by considering themselves superior to blacks, Hispanics, and certain immigrant groups. White supremacy ensured instant and often violent retaliation in the South and Southwest when a black or Hispanic man tried to assert himself. Ironically, the most common justification for lynching in the 1890s was that
a black man had sexually assaulted a white woman, a justification that revealed anxiety on the part of whites that perhaps black men had superior physical masculinity. Social scientists and politicians at the end of the century both worried that white men were becoming weakened by over-civilization and argued that it was the duty of whites to put their superior manhood to good uses such as conquering the “childlike” races of Africa and Asia. The cattlemen perhaps similarly feared that the cowboys’ physicality proved their manhood was more potent than their own and so downplayed physical strength in favor of strength of character.

I have discussed the unique situation cowboys of color faced whenever relevant, but I do not wish to imply that they did not share the same experiences that other cowboys faced, and indeed, I have tried to use examples that show those common experiences throughout the book, preferring not to segregate them completely in the narrative. In most ways, outside of the South Texas large ranches, black and Hispanic cowboys experienced the same treatment as Anglo cowboys on the job, and there are enough instances of friendships between whites and nonwhites to suggest that they shared many of the same values. Moreover, they were held to the same standards of manhood, whether or not Anglos believed they could meet them.

I have benefited tremendously from the work that others have done in both Western history and the history of masculinity. There is a vast repository of secondary sources on cowboys and the West, as the subject has provided endless fascination to both serious historians and buffs. There are a large number of coffee table books on cowboys as well as a number of antiquarian sources whose goal is to enumerate their clothes, technical skills, and language in a mostly celebratory fashion. However, there are also a number of excellent scholarly works on the cowboys, cattlemen, and ranching industry in general. One of the earliest of the reliable sources is Philip Ashton Rollins’ *The Cowboy* (1922), which details all aspects of the cowboys’ work and leisure although still tends a little toward the cowboy-as-bringer-of-progress-to-the-West narrative. Another excellent early source of information on the grazing industry is Edward Everett Dale’s *The Range Cattle Industry* (1930). There are several histories of individual ranches that are useful, including Cordia Duke and Joe Frantz’s *6,000 Miles of Fence: Life on the XIT Ranch of Texas* (1961); William C. Holden’s *The Espuela Land and Cattle Company* (1970); an expanded version of *The Spur Ranch* (1934); and Tom Lea’s *The King Ranch* (1957), although each of these sources is somewhat dated in its approach and interpretation.
Beginning in the late 1960s, revisionist historians began to reexamine the traditional narrative of Western expansion in which Anglo cowboys and cattlemen were the equal torchbearers of progress, defending Christian womanhood, taming the frontier, and cleansing it for development by white Americans. From this reevaluation came new awareness of the roles of women and different ethnicities on the frontier as well as a Marxist reinterpretation of labor relations that firmly established the cowboy as part of the working class. As the sources provided in the notes indicate, I have drawn on the work of many of these scholars, including William Savage, David Dary, Arnoldo DeLeón, Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, Clifford Westermeier, Richard Slotkin, Ann Butler, Kenneth Porter, Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones, Robert Hine, Byron Price, Richard Slatta, and Eliott West. Their work has enabled a new wave of scholarship on cowboys and frontier life that presents a more complete, if less shiny, picture of their circumstances, as evidenced by the work of Paul Carlson, Susan Lee Johnson, Lawrence Clayton, Richard Etulain, Louis Warren, Dee Garceau, Peter Iverson, Sara Massey, and Paul Reddin.

Given the universal acceptance of the cowboy as a masculine icon, surprisingly few scholars have applied the lens of masculinity studies to the late nineteenth-century cowboy. Almost all of the major histories of masculinity in this period note that the cowboy was an ideal for anxious East Coast middle-class men (and Teddy Roosevelt), but none of these look at the cowboy’s experience himself. Moreover, most work on cowboy masculinity has tended to focus on the twentieth century and images in film and popular culture rather than the historical cowboy. The sources that have most directly analyzed historical cowboys in light of the new masculinity studies are literary scholar Blake Allmendinger’s book, *The Cowboy*; and the essays of historians Karen Merrill and Dee Garceau in Matthew Basso, Laura McCall, and Dee Garceau, eds., *Across the Great Divide*. These works have charted a path for this study, as have most of the essays in the latter volume.

The field of masculinity studies is a relatively young one but incredibly rich. The groundbreaking work of Peter Filene, Michael Kimmel, E. Anthony Rotundo, Elizabeth and Joseph Pleck, Peter Stearns, Harry Brod and Gail Bederman has led to a flourishing of new scholarship, particularly for the Gilded Age and Progressive Era. The work ties in with other new studies of homosexuality by George Chauncey, Martin Duberman, John D’Emilio, and Jonathan Katz to create a revolution in our understanding of gender in all its forms. This has had particular implications
in the study of nineteenth-century “Victorian America,” as it has led to a reevaluation of the concepts of separate spheres, sexual identity, moral reform, imperialism, and social control. The better of these studies, like much of the new social history, have focused on the intersections of class, race, and gender and how they tend to reinforce one another. They understand that there has been no permanent model of masculinity and that gender identity is dependent on a wide variety of factors. Most of the scholarship has focused on middle-class masculinity, but more recently, historians such as Chauncey, Elliott Gorn, Susan Johnson, Peter Boag, and Craig Heron have begun to investigate working-class masculinity. It has been my intention to investigate all these issues in the context of the Texas frontier from the beginning of the trail drives in the late 1860s to the end of the nineteenth century.

The parallels between cowboy values and those of frontier miners, railroad workers, Northwest loggers, or East Coast factory workers are remarkable, and I have drawn extensively on these parallels to situate my own conclusions. I have recently had opportunities to hear work from scholars on similar conflicts between sailors and officers in the British navy; Mormon settlers and Arizona cowboys; and Klondike miners and Christian reformers, all of which stressed almost the exact same issues between social class and competing ideals of masculinity.\textsuperscript{28} What has become increasingly clear to me from this work is that cowboys were not only like their working-class counterparts in terms of economic and social relations, but that even their cultural values were far less unique than traditional proponents of cowboy exceptionalism have assured us. In \textit{Life on the Mississippi}, Mark Twain described Mississippi boatmen in terms that could just as easily have described the cowboy: “Rude, uneducated, brave, suffering terrific hardships with sailorlike stoicism; heavy drinkers, coarse frolickers in moral sties, . . . heavy fighters, reckless fellows, every one, elephantinely jolly, foul witted, profane; prodigal of their money, bankrupt at the end of the trip, fond of barbaric finery, prodigious braggarts; yet faithful to promises and duty, and often picaresquely magnanimous.”\textsuperscript{29} The cowboy was no more “knight of the prairie” than the boatman was “prince of the river.” Like all regular working men, he lived a complex life with both hardship and pleasure and made the best of his situation.

Not surprisingly, very few hired hands went on to become cattlemen themselves. Most cowboys ended up leaving the profession to become merchants or farmers, as there was little opportunity within the cattle industry itself. Some retired from the work due to injury, which was
common. A few stayed on into their forties and beyond, but the majority were between the ages of twenty and forty. And although some cowboys came from genteel backgrounds themselves, while they were cowboying, they had to conform to working-class standards of behavior or risk ridicule. Cowboys in the late nineteenth century were thus, in the words of anthropologist Beverly J. Stoeltje, “an age graded, all male, occupational group, associated with animals and mobility, representing a variety of ethnic and class backgrounds, permanently situated at the bottom of the economic scale, and often temporarily cast in the role.”

Two competing images of the cowboy emerged in the late nineteenth century. He was either a miscreant—if sentimental—boy who could not adapt to modern times; or a manly hero, fulfilling America’s destiny of taming the continent. By local standards, cowboys were a throwback to a more primitive time. However, for middle-class men outside the West, who worried they had become over-civilized, the cowboy became a symbol of masculinity at this time precisely because of his “primitive” masculinity. To Teddy Roosevelt, for example, the cowboy possessed “few of the emasculated milk-and-water moralities admired by the pseudo-philanthropists; but he does possess, to a very high degree, the stern, manly qualities that are invaluable to a nation.” By the 1920s, his image had gained heroic proportions even among Westerners themselves. Editor J. Marvin Hunter dedicated the Trail Drivers of Texas (1925) to “the old trail drivers . . . to the young and the brave who fought manfully for proud, imperial Texas” and who made possible “the development of an empire so vast in its possibilities as to excite the envy of the world.”

It is plain that all commercial achievements, civilization, good government, Christianity, morality, our school system, the use of all school and state lands making them revenue-bearers, the expansion of the stock business from the Rio Grande to the British possessions, which is producing millions of dollars; the building of railroads, factories, seaports, agricultural advancement and everything else pertaining to prosperity can be traced directly to the achievements of the old-time trail drivers.

The myths that surrounded the cowboy painted him as a perfect balance of aggressive masculinity and civility. “They may be boisterous and uncouth in some respects, yet, at heart they are ‘diamonds in the rough,’
while for charity, manhood and chivalry they stand erect—the peers of any bearer of shield and lance ‘when knighthood was in flower.’” They envisioned him as an ideal boy and sort of noble savage, wise, not through formal education, but because he was close to nature. They even held up his faults as somehow virtuous. Folklorist John A. Lomax opined, “There is a certain wholesome strength, cleanliness and variety in his profanity, and even in his vulgarity, that I do not believe is equaled by any other race of men.” In her description of “The Real Cowboy,” Bulah Kirkland claimed she could pick out a cowboy instantly on the street, not because of his clothes, but because “he has a very open countenance and almost innocent eyes and mouth. He is not innocent of course; but living in the open, next to nature, the cleaner life is stamped on his face. His vices leave no scars, or few, because old mother nature has him with her most of the time.” Ironically, if a cowboy had read such descriptions of himself in the 1870s, he might have cringed at such a childlike picture. As historian William Savage has pointed out, the B movie cowboy that evolved from these images preserved heroes in a state of arrested adolescence.

But the cowboy was always subject to other peoples’ definitions and redefinitions. Some recognized the irony of these descriptions, since just a few years earlier they had been the object of public scorn. In 1881, President Chester Arthur warned America about the dangers of the vicious, lawless cowboys roaming the Arizona countryside. While Arthur’s comments were meant to refer to a spate of outlawry in Arizona, many Americans did not make a distinction between criminal and cowboy. Lee D. Leverett described himself and his fellow cowboys quite humbly: “Fact is, we were all as strong as a hoss in power, and in smell as well.” As historian Dee Garceau has quoted cowboy Bruce Siberts (or perhaps his ghostwriter): “Owen Wister hadn’t yet written his book, The Virginian, so we cowhands did not know we were so strong and glamorous.”

I have divided the book into two parts, roughly corresponding to work and leisure. I begin part I with a brief summary of the so-called crisis of masculinity that occurred in the late nineteenth century and an overview of the history of the cattle industry, particularly the shift to more corporate methods of ranching in the 1880s. I examine how boys became men on the frontier in part by taking on a man’s workload and in part by their acceptance from men of their respective social classes. I then explore in detail the ways in which cowboys expressed masculinity through control of their working environment and their work skills, and the ways in which cattlemen increasingly limited their opportunities to do so.
In part II, I look at how cowboys increasingly turned to their leisure activities to define and display their manhood, only to find, once again, that cattlemen and other respectable townspeople tried to limit these activities as well. I look first at how the men themselves defined masculinity through their friendships and associations. Cowboys used humor against their employers and racism against nonwhites to bolster their own masculine identity as they lost opportunities to display it elsewhere. The relationships that cattlemen and cowboys had with women also led to differing ideas about manhood. The cattlemen often had their choice of respectable women to marry, and thus defined marriage and the ability to provide for a family as essential markers of manhood. As social outcasts, cowboys had few opportunities to meet with “good” women, and had mixed feelings about the prostitutes who would associate with them. Given the difficulties cowboys faced in their relationships with women, it is not surprising that they preferred socializing with other men. They performed public rituals that displayed their masculinity through drinking, gambling, and fighting. Cattlemen, while recognizing the element of honor involved in such rituals, by and large rejected them as irrational and detrimental to their main project of bringing civilization, law and order to the frontier. The cowboy thus became a pariah in the cow towns he had helped build. The Epilogue briefly traces the evolution of this historical cowboy to the mythic hero through dime novels, literature, art, and film.

In 1892, the San Antonio Daily Express published one of the earliest correctives to the negative image that people had of cowboys as gunslingers and outlaws. Cowboys were often wild, the editor noted, especially when they drank, but they were never murderous. Besides, the cowboys had all become mellower than they were in the days of the early frontier. In many ways, this defense accurately reflected a process that was taking place. In the course of taming the frontier, the cattleman tried to tame the cowboy and impose his own standards of behavior on him, including ideals about masculine behavior. Not surprisingly, the new heroic image of the cowboy reflected a restrained and virtuous ideal of masculinity that still celebrated the “boys” for being somewhat wild. The cattlemen ultimately maintained social hierarchies in part by asserting their own version of masculine behavior as being superior to that of the cowboys. By the twentieth century, the cowboys themselves embraced their heroic mythical image, perhaps in part to counter the attacks on their ideals of masculinity. How all this happened is the subject at hand.