

# American History Activators

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Early Nineteenth Century through the Industrial Age

By Bill Lacey



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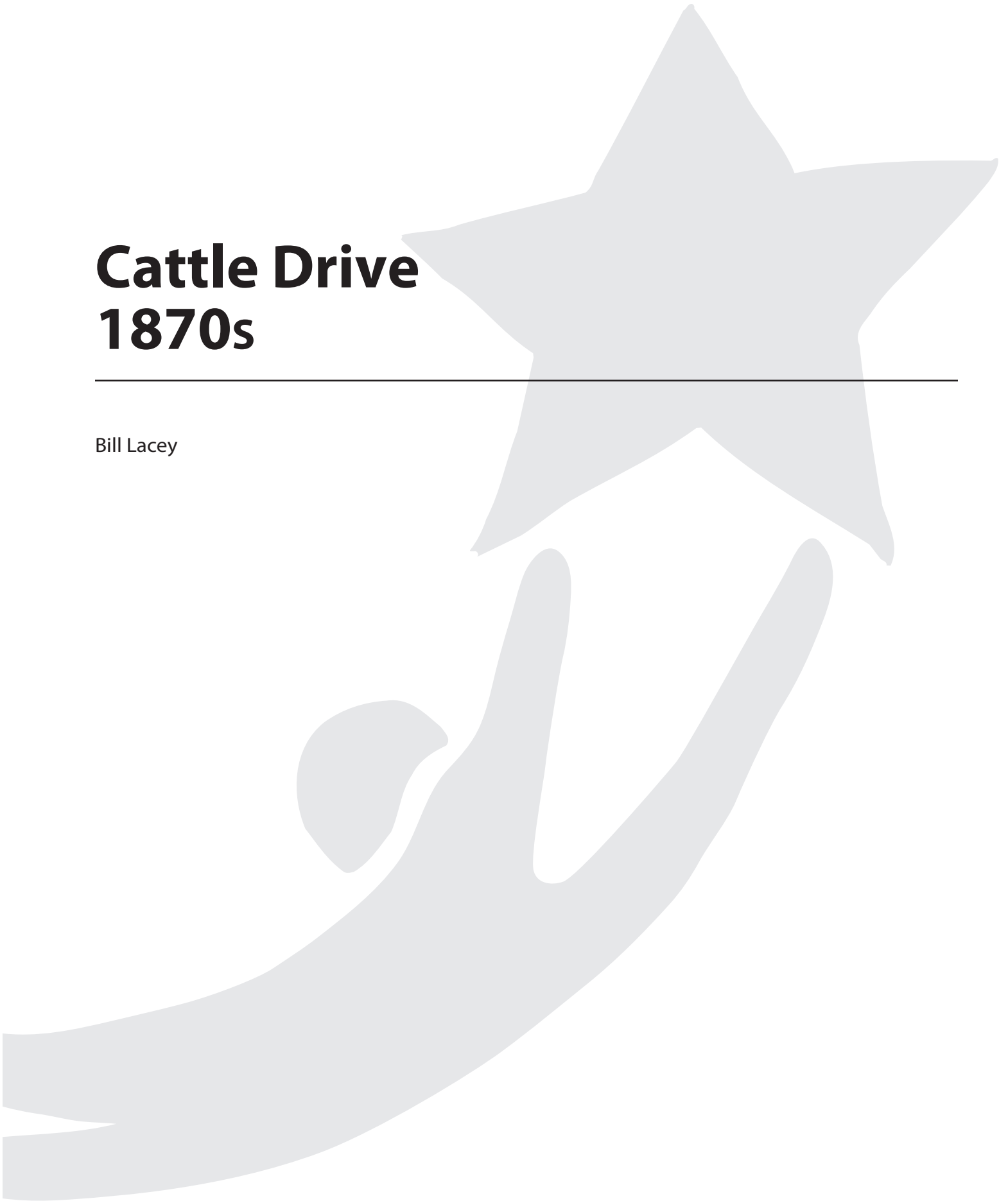
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# Cattle Drive 1870s

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Bill Lacey



# Lesson Plan

## Overview

This Activator will place your students on a western cattle drive from Texas to Kansas. They will be cowboys forming a cattle company, then rounding up the animals into a herd, and driving their livestock about seven hundred miles to the railhead in Kansas. There, they will sell their cattle to buyers, who will transport the cows to eastern slaughterhouses. As cowboys, they will learn why these romantic and legendary frontiersmen have had such a grip on our imagination. Further, they will, as they simulate the cowboy's unique skills, understand the realities of a dirty, thankless, and difficult job that was so unlike the romantic myths perpetuated in novels and movies.

## Setup

### 1. Duplication

- **Background Essay**—*class set*
- **Postscript**—*class set*
- **Cowboy Names**—*two or three* per group plus a couple of copies to post on the wall prior to the Activator's beginning
- **Rules of The Trail, Sample Brands, and Cattle Company Register and Profit Sheet**—*one copy* for each cattle company
- **Cattle Buyer**—*one copy* for the student who is selected for this role

2. **Schematics, props, costumes:** Study the **Schematic** carefully. Find and bring into your classroom any props or costume pieces that will help create the setting of a Texas ranch and a dusty cattle trail to Kansas. (Perhaps students could help by bringing in cowboy hats, boots, vests, branding irons, etc.) See your school custodian and ask for six or seven push brooms to move cattle up the Chisholm Trail. Finally, gather paper due for recycling that your students can tear and squeeze into balls for "cattle" that will travel the Chisholm Trail.

3. **Roles:** Once students are divided up into cattle companies (five or six groups of seven students each), have each group select one trail boss, two swing riders, two flank riders, and two "young men" as drag riders. (Of course, if you have a small class, you will have only one student for each role.) Stress to your companies that their trail boss should be a John Wayne type with the most leadership qualities. The students riding drag should be the youngest in each company. (Groups should check birth dates to be fair.)

### Teaching tip

Names are important to your students.



They will enjoy selecting their cowboy names. These names will really add to the Activator's overall success.

### Teaching tip

Pilot testing the drive phase of



this Activator revealed that using regular and handheld whisk brooms worked better than the larger push brooms. If you decide to follow this recommendation, seek help from students so that several can bring brooms (six or seven) to school for your cattle drive.

### Teaching tip

Select drag riders, the youngest



riders on the trail, by checking birth dates of all company personnel.

4. **Narrator(s):** In this particular Activator there is no narrator. The phases involve the group in active learning with your guidance.

## Directions

1. Either hand out the **Background Essay** as homework the day before class or pass it out now. If you have given it as homework, conduct an informal discussion of the main points brought out in the essay. If you are passing it out now, read the essay aloud to the students as they read with you, pausing to explain the main points.
2. Display the **Cattle Company Register and Profit Sheet**, explain it, and then divide the class into cattle company groups of six or seven each. Cattle companies next select their trail bosses, who will then fill the other needed roles of cowboys riding swing, flank, and drag on the drive. Move furniture to accommodate groups.
3. When the cowboys are in their groups ready for **Phase 1: Organization**, pass out to each company a **Sample Brands** sheet and a **Cattle Company Register and Profit Sheet**. Have each company spend some time choosing a company name and an appropriately clever brand. Stress that the **Sample Brands** Sheet is only samples to examine. Encourage each company to be unique and to come up with its own brand reflecting the company name. Point out that the brand should be difficult for rustlers to alter. (One technique rustlers loved was superimposing another brand on top of the original brand.)
4. Pass out the **Cowboy Names** sheet and have students adopt new identities.
5. Once all companies have named their business, devised a clever brand, and listed their real and cowboy identities on their **Company Register and Profit Sheet**, rearrange the room for **Phase 2: The Roundup**. In this phase, students roll up pieces of old newspaper (cut appropriately 10" x 10") or used notebook paper in fairly tight balls. Then, from six to eight feet away, they toss the paper balls into a circle about three feet wide until they have at least eighty separate balls within the circle. (They may have fellow cowboys in their companies remove the "cows" periodically from the circle to make room for additional ones.) To facilitate the roundup, either impose a time limit of ten minutes or end the roundup when one company has tossed a hundred paper balls inside the circle. The remaining companies, not as efficient in "lassoing" cows, will start their long drives in **Phase 3** with less than a hundred cows. After completing the roundup, have trail bosses write in the number of cows rounded up (x 30) in the space on their **Company Register and Profit Sheet**. Once this has been done, you and the eager cowpunchers are ready for **Phase 3: The Long Drive**.



### Teaching tip Possible pep talk before the cattle

**drive begins:** "On this drive we move cows. We don't gamble, we don't swear, and we don't use our guns unless it's absolutely necessary. **Leave your pistols in their holsters.** All right, men, let's move 'em north to Abilene. **Yee-hah!**"



### Teaching tip Roundup:

During first pilot testing, six circles were chalked with three-foot diameters. On a second testing a thirty-six-inch Hula-Hoop was used. Both techniques work well. The roundup took three to four minutes for companies to "corral and brand" a hundred head of "cattle" and then to gather them into a box.



## Cattle Drive: 1870s

### Lesson Plan

#### Teaching tip

The rough asphalt and linoleum hallway used in pilot testing resulted in stray “cattle” going everywhere, requiring cowboys to work hard.



#### Teaching tip

A cowboy-style card draw by each of the five or six trail bosses could determine herd order on the trail.



You can take cattle from cowboys who violate rules.

#### Teaching tip

While Cattle Drive was being pilot tested, students went a distance of seventy-five to eighty-five feet in five to seven minutes with four river crossings, two rustling incidents during “nighttime” stops, and one Indian toll request.



**Note:** Use one blue rolled-up paper ball, which must go through a six-inch opening at each river crossing first.

6. Before beginning **Phase 3**'s long drive, make sure you have found and secured a hallway, corridor, or dusty athletic field along which the “cattle” will be moved/swept the distance of the drive. Seventy-five to eighty-five feet will likely be long enough to require five to seven minutes for each drive, which includes seven river crossings, two rustling incidents, and one toll payoff to farmers.
7. Another pre-drive task for you is to have the trail bosses draw a numbered slip of paper to determine their order to start up the Chisholm Trail. (Make sequentially numbered slips equal to the number of cattle companies going on the trail. Tell your class the first company to arrive in Abilene may or may not get the highest price per head).
8. Hand out to each company a **Rules of the Trail** sheet. The trail boss should read it aloud to company cowboys to ensure their understanding.
9. Go over the most important of the **Rules of the Trail** just before the first company is sent off with the “firing of a pistol” (or the slamming of a book on a table top) and the “**Yeee-hah!**” shouts of all students—and you—at once.
10. Appoint two students from other companies to be the rustlers who will throw Frisbees from ten to twelve feet along the sides of the trail and one or two others to be farmers demanding a toll fee for trespassing through their land.
11. Let the first cattle company assume positions of point man (trail boss), swing, flank, and drag—with their brooms in hand. Now “fire the pistol” to start the first drive. Walk along the trail and watch for infractions in order to assess cattle losses. Make sure students adhere to the rules set down on **Rules of the Trail**.
12. When the first company finishes, return the brooms to the next company whose members are waiting to start while the first cattle company negotiates a price with the cattle buyer in Abilene.
13. Continue the process until all cattle companies have driven the trail, assessed losses, and sold their steers in Abilene.

You have a few different ways you can conduct this Activator:

**Option A** is what is outlined above—several cattle companies drive cows over the trail to Kansas one at a time.

**Option B** involves having one large cattle drive with all students driving their cows at the same time. In this option, all the cattle companies will pool all their rounded-up cows with different distinctive brands and sweep them all up the trail. Option B could be a massive undertaking, with twenty or so brooms sweeping away. If you use this option you could assign some students—not on the drive—to be rustlers. A few more could be buyers in Abilene.

**Option C** is a somewhat different option. Have some literary students utilize data from the handouts to write a narration for one select cattle company of six or seven to go up the trail. The remainder of the class could be sideline spectators, rustlers, farmers, and Abilene cattle buyers.

## Debriefing

Decide whether you wish to use a short or long debriefing. Here are possible ways to make meaningful what happened before, during, and after a Texas to Kansas cattle drive in the 1870s:

### Short Debriefing

1. Pass out the **Postscript**. Either read this to your students or summarize the main points of each paragraph before going on.
2. Ask students to discuss what they learned and what they felt as they played out the different phases of the cattle drive.
3. Consider having students write a Learning Log entry following the short debriefing.

### Long Debriefing

Use one or more of the following debriefing activities:

1. Pass out the **Postscript**. Either read this to your students or summarize the main points of each paragraph before going on.
2. Have students individually create a two-column ledger and fill it in with the myths and realities of a cowboy's life. They can share ideas within their debriefing groups. To get them started, make a format model on the board.

Cowboy Life	
Myths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involved in frequent shootouts</li> </ul>
Realities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rarely fired his rusty pistol</li> </ul>



#### Teaching tip

Following reading of the **Postscript**,

ask students this question:  
**“What does cowboy food tell you about these men?”**

S.O.B. Stew

Red Bean Pie

Sourdough Biscuits

Vinegar Cobbler

Coffee

Coffee

Coffee

## Cattle Drive: 1870s

### Lesson Plan

#### Teaching tip



An intriguing activity to use during the long debriefing would be showing filmed interviews on the trail of one or more of your “cowboys”

- after branding;
- after a river crossing;
- after a stampede; and
- while the herd was being moved up a ramp onto a St. Louis or Chicago cattle train.

#### Teaching tip



You may wish to write a chart such as this on your whiteboard before the debriefing.

3. Play some country and western songs that might reflect the lifestyle and/or values of a cowboy. *Example:* Willie Nelson’s “Mammas Don’t Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Cowboys.” Then have some talented students compose and perform a cowboy song.
4. Show some paintings by Frederic Remington and Charles Russell. Help your students analyze the art in terms of how accurately they portray real cowboy life during the late nineteenth century.
5. Show photos taken by Erwin E. Smith in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Compare the photos with the works of Remington and Russell.
6. Show “The Longhorns,” an episode of James Michener’s miniseries *Centennial* from 1978. Starring Dennis Weaver as trail boss R. J. Poteet, it dramatizes what could happen on the Goodnight–Loving Trail in this era. *The Real West*, narrated by Gary Cooper, is a shorter film option; it has ten to twelve minutes on cowboys and cattle drives.

7. Cowboy lingo widely used on cattle drives and ranches for decades has found its way into our modern American language. Challenge students to come up with approximate translations (see *The Cowboy Dictionary* in **Resources to consult**):

Word/Phrase	Translation
Ace in the hole	
Keep an eye peeled	
Low-down heel	
Horsing around	
Trot that by again	
Small fry	
Lone wolf	
Haywire	
That’s a cinch	
Irons in the fire	
Pass the buck	
Whingding	
Shindig	
<b>Less Common</b>	
Pecos strawberries	Beans
Overland trout	Fried bacon
Belly cheater	A cook on the trail
Prairie coal	Dried buffalo/cattle manure used as wood
Bug juice	Hard liquor
Pearl diver	Dish washer

8. As alluded to in the **Background Essay**, cowboy poetry has become an important genre, especially since the mid-1980s, when poets of the purple sage met in Elko, Nevada, to test their verses on fellow cowhands. Each year since their first meeting, these poets and their work have gained more recognition and status. *People, Life, Newsweek, The New York Times, The Tonight Show, Good Morning America*, and PBS have all carried stories about cowboy poetry. Cowboy poets such as Colen Sweeten, Wallace McRae, Baxter Black, and Waddie Mitchell have become celebrities. After you've located a book or two on the subject, have students select some favorites and dramatically read them. Recommended: Baxter Black's *Coyote Cowboy Poetry* and Wallace McRae's *Cowboy Curmudgeon and Other Poems*.
9. Movie cowboy Gene Autry wrote his *Cowboy Code* in 1951 for youth of this author's generation. Have students comment on each rule in the code and why the early 1950s, in particular, had celebrities support a "Sunday school morality." Also discuss what real cowboys of the 1870s might have thought about Mr. Autry's code:
- The cowboy must never shoot first, hit a smaller man, or take unfair advantage
  - He must never go back on his word, or a trust confided in him
  - He must always tell the truth
  - He must be gentle with children, the elderly, and animals
  - He must not advocate or possess racially or religiously intolerant ideas
  - He must help people in distress
  - He must be a good worker
  - He must keep himself clean in thought, speech, action, and personal habits
  - He must respect women, parents, and his nation's laws
  - The cowboy is a patriot

**Teaching tip**

To begin this debriefing, reread the poem in the **Background Essay**. Consider having students write their own cowboy poetry on one day and share it on the next day.

**Teaching tip**

You may wish to write this on your whiteboard before the debriefing.

## Cattle Drive: 1870s

### Lesson Plan

#### Teaching tip

Note how the student was helped with writing the Learning Log by the debriefing discussion.



Students will usually write more concrete details if they have reflected upon ideas and experiences they have discussed with their peers—before they pick up their pens to write.

10. To really complete your cowboys' education, why not teach them how to rope. (See Mason's book on roping in **Resources to consult.**)
11. Consider having students write a Learning Log entry following the debriefing's various activities.

### Write a Learning Log ...

Learning Log	
●	I rode drag for the Windy X Cattle Company because I was the youngest one in our group. Several times Billy swept dust back into my face from dry spots where no grass was living on the football field—I mean the Chisholm Trail. At first sweeping those cattle along seemed stupid. Why was Ms. Fairfax having us do this silly thing? I kept wondering. But once we discussed it in our debriefing, I began to get it. It was really difficult to keep those paper balls (the cattle) on line. And we did face problems with farmers and rustlers. The important thing is that I'll remember this experience ...
●	

### Resources to consult

#### Nonfiction

Abbott, E. C. "Teddy Blue," and Helena Huntington Smith. *We Pointed Them North: Recollections of a Cowpuncher*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939.

Adams, Andy. *The Log of a Cowboy: A Narrative of the Old Trail Days*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1903.

Adams, Ramon F. *The Cowboy Dictionary: The Chin Jaw Words and Whing-Ding Ways of the American West*. New York: Perigee, 1968.

Dary, David. *Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1981.

———. *Seeking Pleasure in the Old West*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1995. (Especially chapter 7.)

Davis, William C. *The American Frontier: Pioneers, Settlers, and Cowboys, 1800–1899*. London: Salamander, 1992.

Forbis, William H. *The Cowboys*. Old West Time-Life Series. New York: Time-Life Books, 1977.

Mason, Bernard S. *Roping*. New York: A. S. Barnes, 1940.

Moore, Jacqueline M. *Cow Boys and Cattle Men: Class and Masculinities on the Texas Frontier, 1865–1900*. New York: New York University Press, 2010.

Stern, Jane, and Michael Stern. *Way out West*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993. A fascinating compendium of cowboy nostalgia: food, costumes, memorabilia, and long-gone roadside attractions.

Ward, Don. *Cowboys and Cattle Country*. New York: American Heritage, 1961.

### Fiction

Novels about cowboys abound and have since the Ned Buntline dime novels in the 1865–1890 era. Recommended for student reading are the works of Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour, Jack Schaefer's *Monte Walsh*, and (this author's all-time favorite novel) Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*, an absolutely stunning work about a cattle drive from Texas to Montana.

### Visual history

**Feature films:** Like cowboy literature, cowboy movies and TV miniseries have been plentiful. Of the hundreds on film, these are recommended: *Lonesome Dove* (the 1989 six-hour miniseries), *Red River* (John Wayne and Montgomery Clift in the 1948 John Ford classic), "The Longhorns" (starring Dennis Weaver as trail boss R. J. Poteet in a two-hour episode of James Michener's *Centennial* miniseries from 1978), *Cowboy* (a well-made 1958 movie with Glenn Ford and Jack Lemmon), *The Cowboys* (John Wayne leading a pack of young cowboys on a drive), and the author's favorite cowboy flick, *Monte Walsh*, a 1970 movie starring Lee Marvin and Jack Palance, about the last years of the cowboys' heyday (remade in 2003). For a cattle drive comedy, see Billy Crystal's *City Slickers* (1992).

**Documentaries:** *Adventures of the Old West*, from the mid-1990s, has an episode entitled "Texas Cowboys and the Trail Drives" narrated by Kris Kristofferson; it parallels the subjects in this Activator. If you have only a little time to show a segment on cowboys, show "The Real West," from the *Project XX* series originally broadcast in 1960 and narrated by Gary Cooper. The segment on the cattlemen is well done and brief (ten to twelve minutes).



#### Teaching tip

In James Michener's miniseries

*Centennial*, the Dennis Weaver characterization of R. J. Poteet and the accompanying story line are both marvelous. Your students would really enjoy seeing this episode.

# Background Essay

**Place:** Near San Antonio, Texas, and on the trail toward Abilene, Kansas

**Time:** Spring, the 1870s

## The Throw-Back

'Twas the end of the nineteenth century  
 When the cowboy era peak'd,  
 An' a motley clan of horse-back men  
 Perfected a technique,  
 Of handlin' an' movin' cattle  
 A type raised primarily for meat,  
 Thus insurin' a hungry young nation  
 There would always be plenty to eat.

The words above raise two points relevant to this Activator. One, the poem mentions the economic and nutritional importance of the cattle industry and its employees to America (supplying beef to the populous eastern cities). Two, it illustrates the current popularity of the cowboy poetry genre. This poem and thousands like it hark back to the 1865–1890 era, when the frontier was coming to an end. These years saw the economic development of the Great Plains grasslands and the evolution of several hundred individuals called cowboys. These men, who spent years raising cattle on vast ranches and then driving them to market, left a colorful legacy.

## Texas origins

The animal that became the center of this industry, the bovine, came to the Americas from Spain. Eventually, New Spain became Mexico and the vast herds of longhorn cattle that came from the original herd settled in the province called Tejas, or Texas. Restless Americans emigrated to Texas, fought Mexico for independence, and then joined the Union in 1845. After the Civil War, a few entrepreneurs saw the opportunity to earn huge profits if they could supply an abundant

amount of beef to a meat-hungry population east of the Mississippi River. After all, four-legged creatures outnumbered their two-legged masters nine to one in Texas.

## Joseph McCoy

One such visionary was Joseph McCoy, who effectively brought together the Texas herds of longhorn cattle, the long drive to Kansas, and the railroads to ship the animals to Chicago for slaughter. Although there were earlier visionaries and earlier cattle drives in the West (e.g., California to Oregon, and over the Oregon Trail), McCoy conceived the idea of a rendezvous point where animals could be driven to the railroad out on the Kansas plains. His choice for the first cow town was Abilene, along the Kansas-Pacific railroad.

## Roundup time

Now with an ingenious plan and a profit incentive, Texans began efforts to gather together personnel to drive the longhorns the seven hundred miles to market: a trail boss, a cook, and several cowpunchers (*cowboys*, *cowhands*, and *waddies* are words used synonymously). Before the journey over a trail charted by Jesse Chisholm could begin, the cattle had to be rounded up, branded, and readied for the trip north. As colorful as the long drive it preceded, the roundup took place each spring and fall when cowboys located the “maverick” animals that had wandered, identified them, and then branded the newborn calves with a hot iron. These brands, universally used in Texas and later on in the Wyoming and Montana ranches where the industry eventually settled, were highly distinctive and served to recover stolen cattle. Skilled cowboys rode swift and maneuverable cow ponies to “cut out” animals

Poem Source: “The Throw-Back” by Waddie Mitchell from Cannon, Hal, ed. *Cowboy Poetry: A Gathering*. Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith, 1985.

needing branding from the rest of the herd. Once branded, cattle had a permanent scar to mark their ownership.

### **Mexican flavor**

During the roundups and on the drives themselves, especially the ones originating from Texas, the new industry distinctively blended American and Spanish-Mexican cultures. Examples of the blend abound in the unique lingo used by cowboys. A rope, used to lasso cattle and horses, was a *lariat*. A cowpen was a *corral*. The Mexican word for cowboy, *vaquero*, became *buckaroo*. A runaway herd was a *stampede* (from *estampida*). Cowboys rode horses called *mustangs* or *broncos*, both of Spanish origin. Most cowboys wore *chaps* (from *chaparreras*) for protection against thorny bushes. A *remuda* of horses awaited as replacements for tired cow ponies.

Of the hundreds of cowboys who gloried in the name, if not the actual job, one-third or more were Hispanic and African American. Lists of company personnel are peppered with names such as “Mexican” Joe Herrera and Nat Love, reflecting the diversity of this unique fraternity.

### **The cowboy**

The hardy individuals called cowboys who moved cattle over trails to railheads for thirty dollars a month were mostly young men. (Anyone over the age of thirty was an “old man.”) For some reason, the hard, dirty, and frequently dangerous job the cowboys did has evolved into a romantic myth. Nothing could be further from the truth. Long hours on horseback under a blazing sun attending one of nature’s wild creatures was no picnic. Even a cowboy’s outfit, romanticized in countless movies and TV shows, was more practical than fashionable. Just about every stitch had a purpose. The wrangler’s most prized possession, beyond his cow pony, was a wide-brimmed hat. It was used as a sun shade,

a drinking cup for man and beast, and a fan to fan a campfire. His boots, so imitated today, provided needed traction while roping cattle and protected ankles against snake bites. A six-shooter, usually unused and perhaps rusty, was at his side just in case it was needed to turn a stampeding herd, to kill a rattlesnake or two, or, on really rare occasions, to thwart rustlers. Each article of clothing had its function, even a simple large bandanna—to protect the face against dust or to mop away sweat. Despite his practical appearance and the fact that he ate a monotonous diet of beans, biscuits, bacon, and coffee, the cowboy exuded a romantic image that has remained intact. In the end, he was, whatever else we think, a mover of cows and a man who rarely complained in any situation, no matter how difficult.

### **On the trail**

Romantic costume aside, the cowboy’s real job remained moving cattle. Each day was filled with long hours and dust, to say little of numbing routine and often sudden temperature changes. The major trails north out of Texas took about two months to traverse. A trail boss supervised the herd (average size—2500) and the twelve to fifteen men who rode along. The drive’s cook (“cookie”), a most valuable employee if he had the skill to make a boring cuisine tasty, rode ahead in a chuck wagon, stopping an hour or so early to prepare meals. Certain cowboys rode *drag*—the position behind the herd where they kept cattle from straying—and continually breathed dust and manure; they were young greenhorns, usually teenagers, who had no trail experience or influence. By contrast, certain honored cowpokes rode *point* at the front of the herd; they were experienced, dependable riders who ate no dust and acted as scouts watching for trouble and deciding exactly where to lead the herd.



An arresting visual sight on a cattle drive was the emergence of one of the “cows” that aggressively walked out ahead of the herd on the first day. This animal then guided the rest of the herd north for the entire journey. One such memorable creature was Old Blue, who spearheaded several drives over the years.

### **Problems**

As ordinary and unenviable as life on the trail usually was, the job of punching and moving cattle was beset with problems and dangers. Swollen, deep rivers—especially the Red River—complicated the task of fording thousands of cows across the water often filled with deadly water moccasin snakes. Torrential rainstorms with clapping thunder could stampede a herd and set a pattern of “spooking” the animals throughout the trip. Sometimes a mere clang of the cook’s pans would set them off. Cattle rustlers and defiant farmers often demanded a per-head toll across their lands, thus increasing the difficulties of a journey already fraught with physical dangers and other vexations. Traversing

the baked land of the Llano Estacado (along the Goodnight-Loving Trail to Colorado) could also result in a reduction of the herd. All these obstacles had to be overcome before arriving at the Kansas railhead, where, in eventual business transactions, the price per head might fluctuate enough to generate less profit for the investors.

A “mixed herd” consisted of bulls, cows, and cattle or steers (castrated bulls).

### **Point ‘em north**

What you have read above is the way it was for a decade or two when men drove cattle to railroad towns to sell beef on the hoof. Now it is time for you and your classmates to simulate some phases of cowboy life. So, put on your boots, hop up onto the “hurricane deck” of your cow pony, and get ready to create a cattle company with its unique brand, take an authentic cowboy name, roundup a mixed herd, and move ‘em north along the old Chisholm Trail. Buyers await to pay cash money for the beeves you have driven to market. **“Get along, little doggies, yee-hah!”**

