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## "Black Cowboys: Self-Sufficiency in the American West through the ideology of Booker T. Washington"

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"Black Cowboys: Self- Sufficiency in the American West through the ideology of Booker T.  
Washington"

Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
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**"For with God nothing will be impossible"**

- Luke 1:37

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## Abstract

Despite the black cowboy's considerable achievement, the history of their lives remains largely uncovered. Most historiographies present a sympathetic picture, but what is missing is the voice of the black cowboys. Using the views and ideologies of Booker T. Washington, black cowboys were able to become self-sufficient men. This thesis will present a comparison and contrast between the historiography and autobiographies of black cowboys. Furthermore, giving black cowboys a voice through the philosophies of Booker T. Washington and presenting an argument on why the stories and histories of black cowboys have only recently been resurrected, largely because popular media in the progressive era did not include their stories.

Keywords: Black Cowboys, Cowboys, American West, Booker T. Washington, Progressive Era

## Introduction

"Thursday afternoon, the best and longest industrial parade ever seen in the Southwest marched through the streets of Muskogee. This parade was worked up by Rev. S.S. Jones who headed the parade on a big spirited steed, followed by various kinds and styles of floats, representing every conceivable kind of trade or industry. A very spectacular feature of the parade was the float of Jake Simmons of Haskell, Okla., followed by an imposing cavalry of 500 Negro cowboys on horseback, led by a banner which read: "Jake Simmons and His Cowboys." In this group of real Western cow punchers rode a number of pretty girls dressed in cowboy style, and they were loudly applauded all along the line. The parade was indeed an exceptionally good one."<sup>1</sup>

This article in *The Tulsa Star* described a parade held on August 29, 1914 in honor of the National Negro Business Men's League. Booker T. Washington delivered a speech to his audience about race relations. His presence in the West was important to African American migrants and black cowboys. Washington spoke about blacks endeavor in the West: "Within the fifty years of our freedom, and even before physical freedom came, great and almost marvelous progress has been made, but we must not rest upon the past; we must continue to go forward." Furthermore, Washington explained that several black farmers were struggling and it was the League's responsibility to help the poor. Washington presented a list to the local league, in regards to conducting successful meetings. The list specified that each local league should bring a white man to the meeting. Believing that the presence of white man could financially benefit

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<sup>1</sup> Chronicling America Historical American Newspaper, "Oklahoma Makes Good to the National League," *The Tulsa Star*, August 29, 1914 (accessed on March 10, 2013)

the League, Washington also offered that a white man would see a more in-depth side of African Americans. In turn, the negative stereotypes of financial carelessness often associated with black people would be broken. Washington continued, " Each League should have for one of its objects the bringing of the white man, by whose side we live, into friendly and sympathetic contact with the progress of the race... The white man will help and we will be helped."<sup>2</sup>

Even though Washington was in the West to spread the message of the National Negro Business League, his ideas influenced black cowboys' values. Furthermore, Washington explained that several black farmers were struggling and it was the Leagues responsibility to help the poor. The article mentioned another prominent figure that demonstrated Washington's impact on the West, Jake Simmons. An example of "pulling himself by his bootstraps" prosperity, Simmons' great- grandfather, a former slave of the Creek Indian Tribe, was freed and became a leader of the freed Creek slaves. Simmons' father, Jake Simmons Sr., owned a 500-acre ranch in Haskell Oklahoma. As a young boy, Jake Simmons Jr. repaired fences and worked the cattle. Simmons graduated from Tuskegee Institute, the school Washington founded, and later became the leading African American in the oil industry.<sup>3</sup> Jake Simmons Jr. was a black farmer who found success in the West by following Washington's message. Importantly, Simmons was also a black cowboy. I will refer back to this article in Chapter 2.

Being a black cowboy opened doors for many African American men. The cowboy occupation allowed black men to experience freedom. Furthermore, black men were able to manifest their masculinity. Black cowboys made tremendous contributions to the history of the American West. For example, Bill Pickett, created bulldogging and Nat Love was famous for

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<sup>2</sup> "Oklahoma Makes Good to the National League," *The Tulsa Star*.

<sup>3</sup> Oklahoma Historical Society's, "Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture Jake Simmons, Jr." <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/s/si004.html> (accessed on March 10, 2013)

his steer wrestling ability. There were outlaws as well, like Cherokee Bill. Through the years, the media and literature focus exclusively on cowboys as white males, leaving black cowboys and their history uncovered.

Consequently, this account of the American West does not leave much space for the history of the African American cowboy. The image of the American cowboy image has been used in support of the ideology of white superiority and masculinity. Indeed, as recent histories have found, the frontier in modern society were highly racialized and sexualized environments.<sup>4</sup> It was not until recent efforts that secondary sources have become accessible. However, these secondary sources reflect and use many of the same primary and secondary sources to convey their message.

In Chapter 1, I will provide a review of the secondary sources, arranging them thematically, to summarize their position on black cowboys' history. I will also explore a contemporary view of Theodore Roosevelt's stance on the West and how his leadership provides a useful lens on the perceptions of blacks in the West. In previous histories of cowboys, the authors discussed the determination of former slaves to move West and stake a claim for themselves. Furthermore, the authors discuss how the cowboys acquired their equestrian skills, as well as the discrimination they faced on the frontier. I will examine the autobiographies of three black cowboys, to compare their self-written life stories to the histories.

In Chapter 2, I will explain Booker T. Washington's influence on black cowboys. Also, I will discuss the biographies and autobiographies of famous and infamous black cowboys: Cherokee Bill, Nat Love, Bill Pickett, and Oscar Micheaux. I will take a closer look at their lives

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<sup>4</sup> Pleas see: June Namias, *White Captives: Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993); Stephanie Cole and Alison M. Parker, eds., *Beyond Black and White: Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in the U.S. South and Southwest* (Arlington, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004);

and describe how their experience as a cowboy help changed their lives and how their lives helped change African American history. Finally, I will explore the technology, media, and literature in regards to the exclusion of black cowboys from American frontier history.

## CHAPTER 1

### **Black Cowboys in Historiography**

The various histories of black cowboys agree that African Americans were an important presence in the West. Life in the West was tough for ranchers, cowboys, homesteaders, railroad workers, and short-term migrants. African American also faced discrimination, though there were opportunities for prosperity, as well. But, the histories differ in the estimated number of black cowboys in the West, the level of discrimination and the reasons why the history of black cowboys remains uncovered. While lack of primary sources remains a problem, authors like Roosevelt made no room for African American cowboys. Black cowboys did not appear in the history of the West until after World War II. The secondary sources were late to pick up on this prejudice. As the following chapters show, the autobiographies of black cowboys revealed that they worked hard to be recognized in history.

#### **Black Cowboys: Migration and Opportunity**

Black cowboys were mostly enslaved men. They moved further West in search of freedom and prosperity. William Loren Katz's *The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History*, states that some slaves who went West were roping and branding cows before they were emancipated. Others came to the West simply as free men looking for prosperity where their skills were valued. Black cowboys experienced more freedom on the trail than in town.<sup>5</sup> In *The Negro Cowboys*, Phillip Durham and Everett Jones describe most black men as skilled equestrians, because as enslaved people they worked with horses as stable boys, trainers and jockeys. Southerners rode more than Northerners did because the elastic clay prevented the

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<sup>5</sup> William Loren Katz, *The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History* ( New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1971), 118.

South from building smooth roads. Thus, transportation via horseback riding was the preferred method of choice.<sup>6</sup> John Ravage's *Black Pioneers Images of the Black Experience on the North American Frontier*, also corroborates the notion that the West was alluring to former slaves. From 1860-1910, Ravage finds that between three to nine thousand black cowboys worked on a Western trail, occupying different positions. Many of these were former slaves who were also skilled equestrians.<sup>7</sup>

Quintard Taylor, in *In Search of the Racial Frontier African American in the American West 1528-1990*, agrees. Taylor writes that pre-Civil War black migration was limited by slavery and 90 percent of blacks lived in the South. Legislation in the West also prohibited blacks from migrating to the West. The Thirteenth Amendment, which ended slavery in 1865, allowed thousands of blacks to migrate to the West.<sup>8</sup> Michael Searles, in "Taking Out the Buck and Putting in a Trick: The Black Working Cowboy's Art of Breaking and Keeping a Good Cow Horse," differs from the other authors only slightly. He states that some black cowboys came from Mexico, but he agrees that other black cowboys came to the West as slaves or after the end of slavery. Searles notes, that a well-trained horse was important if one wanted to raise cattle. If African American cowboys were employed on ranches, they were expected to break the horse.<sup>9</sup>

The authors disagree on exactly how many black cowboys were in the West. In *The Negro Cowboy*, Durham and Jones claim that between the years 1868-1895 about one-third of

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<sup>6</sup> Phillip Durham and Everett L. Jones, *The Negro Cowboys* (New York: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 223.

<sup>7</sup> John W. Ravage, *Black Pioneers: Images of the Black Experience on the North American Frontier* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2008), 61.

<sup>8</sup> Quintard Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier: African Americans in the American West 1528-1990* (New York: W-M-Norton & Company, 1998), 102.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Searles, "Taking Out the Buck and Putting in a Trick: The Black Working Cowboy's Art of Breaking and Keeping a Good Cow Horse" *Journal of the West* 44, no. 2 (2005), 53-54.

cowboys were African American.<sup>10</sup> Ravage, in *Black Pioneers*, states that about three- nine thousand in the West were black cowboys. However, Taylor, in *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, states that based on the Texas 1890 census and a few other statics that black cowboys in the West made up about two percent of cowboys.<sup>11</sup> Sara R. Massey in "Black Cowboys: Wrangling the Numbers," argues that Taylor is incorrect in his estimation of the number of black cowboys in the West. She agrees with Durham and Jones that black cowboys totaled one-third of the Western population, if not more. She furthers that Taylor's figures, based on the 1890 census, do not include the non- white population and nor other groups, such as the "wranglers who cared for the horses or the cooks, who were also cowboys and included many blacks."<sup>12</sup>

Why was the West enthralling for black cowboys? After the end of the Civil War in 1865, blacks were encouraged to travel to the West. Newly freed African Americans were told that the only way they would truly be free were if they packed their few belongings and left the South. The West for black cowboys, therefore, represented a place of opportunities. They were able to create towns where they could be free to exercise their political rights. Quintard Taylor states, "In a nation of growing racial segregation and restriction, successful settlement in Oklahoma seemed a rare opportunity for African Americans to control their destiny in the United States."<sup>13</sup> Taylor describes Peter Anderson, who, in 1863, wrote an editorial in the *Pacific Appeal* calling for blacks to see their economic destiny in the "Great West."<sup>14</sup> Anderson called the West an "endeavor to infuse into the minds of these freedmen the importance of agriculture that they may become producers."<sup>15</sup> In Lillian Schlissel's *Black Frontiers: A history of African*

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<sup>10</sup> Durham and Jones, *The Negro Cowboys*, 44.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 156-157.

<sup>12</sup> Sara R. Massey, "Black Cowboys: Wrangling the Numbers," *Journal of South Texas* 17, no. 1(2004), 20-21.

<sup>13</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier*, 144.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, *In Search of the Racial Frontier* 129.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, *In search of the Racial Frontier*, 104.

*American Heroes in the Old West*, newly freed men and women who decided to stay on the plantations after the Civil War found that they had no money and thus, they were expected to pay back their former masters for seed, plows, and mules.<sup>16</sup>

Within the first year, as Leon Litwack explains, thousands of blacks left southern plantations in search of greater freedom.<sup>17</sup> Formerly enslaved blacks now had the right to demand wages, protection, and respect. Robert V. Hine's *The American West: An Interpretive History*, states that the West was alluring, because of its gold in California, Nevada, Oregon, Idaho, and Montana.<sup>18</sup> The land was inexpensive due to the Homestead Act passed in 1859 that would later be approved in 1860. Furthermore, in 1860, Abraham Lincoln solidified the West as a place of self-improvement for individuals.<sup>19</sup>

## **Black Cowboys after Reconstruction**

After the Civil War ended, the Westward migration of African Americans was more than just an impulse. It was an opportunity to improve their economic position, find lost members of their families, and most importantly, obtain new land in a more secure place. Many black southerners vowed to leave the South, saying that they would not find equal opportunity, so long as they lived in the sites of their enslavement. Litwack presents the example of Simon Crum, a black corporal in the union army. Crum promised to leave the South: "I'se made up my mind, dat dese yere Secesh will neber be cibilized in my time."<sup>20</sup> The Compromise of 1877 helped to

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<sup>16</sup> Lillian Schlissel, *Black Frontiers: A History of African American Heroes in the Old West* (New York: Aladdin Paperbacks, 1995), 21.

<sup>17</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 308.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Hine, *The American West: An Interpretive History* (University of California: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 118.

<sup>19</sup> Hine, *The American West*, 160-161.

<sup>20</sup> Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long*, 307.

bring into fruition the movement to the West.<sup>21</sup> Jim Crow and widespread racial violence forced African Americans to look for a safer place to live. Moving to the West appeared to present a solution for them to escape violence and to prosper. By 1879, about eight hundred black families from the Old South had migrated to Kansas.<sup>22</sup> Once there, the families settled and began farming. Schlissel states, in *Black Frontiers*, "Black farmers planted their first crops and in time they prospered."<sup>23</sup> Schlissel describes the life of a cowboy as unpredictable and harsh, but it was appealing to young black men because it meant freedom. Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence And Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery*, claims that in 1879, hundreds of blacks left Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas and Tennessee headed West to Kansas, a place where they believed they could acquire inexpensive land. One of these migrants was Benjamin (Pap) Singleton was a very successful black pioneer in the West. He was a Nashville realtor, and prior to the mass migration, he had campaigned for blacks to move West for a decade.

Once the men relocated, their experience in handling livestock attracted much attention from ranchers. Several cowboys became famous, because of their roping skills and their ability to tame a horse. Others became famous for being infamous. Paul W. Stewart and Wallace Yvonne Ponce, in *Black Cowboy*, describe that several outlaws of the West were black men.<sup>24</sup> Ned Huddleston, also known as Isom Dart, was a cowboy outlaw, known for stealing horses and money. Huddleston's ability to tame wild horses was impressive.<sup>25</sup> While hiding in his dead friend's grave, he stole his money belt as shots were being fired.

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<sup>21</sup> Herbert Shapiro, *White Violence And Black Response: From Reconstruction to Montgomery* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 23.

<sup>22</sup> Schlissel, *Black Frontiers*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> Schlissel, *Black Frontiers*, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Stewart and Wallace Ponce. *Black Cowboys* (Broomfield Colorado: Black American West Museum and Heritage Center, 1986), 13.

<sup>25</sup> Stewart and Ponce, *Black Cowboys*, 20.

However, Sara Massey in "Black Cowboys: Wrangling the Numbers," states, that not all black cowboys between the years 1866-1895 were on the trail. Several cowboys worked at a home ranch or base camp, to tend large herds of cattle. Thus, not every cowboy experienced the unpredictable hazards of life on the trail, often retold in the westerns in popular culture.<sup>26</sup>

Michael Searles in "Taking Out the Buck and Putting in a Trick," states that black cowboys duty, in the morning, was to prepare the horses, while the white cowboys ate breakfast. Black cowboys were expected to break the wildest and roughest horses; once tamed, these horses were immediately claimed by white cowboys.<sup>27</sup> Breaking horses was a very dangerous and sometimes deadly task. Searles quotes Emerson Hough in *The Story of the Cowboy*: "[S]ometimes their lungs were torn loose by the violent jolting of the stifflegged bounds of the wild beast they rode, and many busters would spit up blood after a few months."<sup>28</sup> He states that most white cowboys were not capable of breaking these horses. Searles notes that black cowboys took pride in being able to break these horses.

Another important change in the lives of black cowboys was the relatively fewer instances of racial violence in the West. While black cowboys faced discrimination on the frontier, their experience with discrimination and violence was not as severe as it was in the South. In the South, during the era that historian Rayford Logan called the "nadir of the Negro", black people were being lynched at record numbers.<sup>29</sup> The violence in the South escalated to the point where in 1879, a New Orleans black convention urged people to move to Kansas, and "adopted a resolution urging Negroes to emigrate and settle where they would be free from shot-

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<sup>26</sup> Massey, "Black Cowboys: Wrangling the Numbers," 22.

<sup>27</sup> Searles, "Taking Out the Buck and Putting in a Trick," 57.

<sup>28</sup> Searles, "Taking Out the Buck and Putting in a Trick," 54.

<sup>29</sup> See Rayford Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro: From Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Collier Books, 1965).

guns.”<sup>30</sup> The resolution acknowledged that Reconstruction was over and blacks could not survive their current circumstance in the south. The move to Kansas was not as simple as some black leaders suggested it would be. The land in Kansas was in fact cheaper than the South; however, it was still expensive for former slaves with little or no income. Furthermore, racial violence in the West was just as frightening to blacks as it was in the South. Many people in the West felt that the Great Frontier should be the White Frontier.<sup>31</sup>

However, in the West, black cowboys were able to live without the constant and consuming fear of been lynched. William Katz notes in *The Black West*, that black cowboys suffered less discrimination as cowboys than in other occupations partly because they were isolated on the trail, compared to cooks and ranch hands, who worked under supervision. A rural area, especially without women, would allow black cowboys a chance for equal opportunity. Black cowboys were always mindful that disagreements with their white counterparts could result in death. Blacks organized in opposition against discrimination, though this effort was not successful. Many black cowboys headed further West into Mexico and other areas.<sup>32</sup>

Unfortunately, the solitary lives of black cowboys exposed them to many forms of discrimination, and they were often in position where they could not respond in full measure. For instance, in *Black Cowboy*, Stewart and Ponce state that approximately 8,000 cowboys in the West were free African Americans, after the Civil War. However, the authors find that the racial prejudice against black cowboys was known and widely accepted and would often be inflicted by the white trail boss.<sup>33</sup> Black Cowboys were often referred to as “nigger” and their first name or boy. For example, Bill Pickett a famous black cowboy who invented bulldogging a

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<sup>30</sup> Shapiro, *White Violence Black Response*, 23.

<sup>31</sup> Shapiro, *White Violence Black Response*, 23.

<sup>32</sup> Katz, *The Black West* 118

<sup>33</sup> Stewart and Ponce, *Black Cowboys*, 13.

highly skilled form of roping would be called "Nigger Bill."<sup>34</sup> Searles, in "Taking Out the Buck and Putting in a Trick," also details other forms of racial prejudice. He writes that black cowboys often were called 'nigger' and black cowboys would often have to relinquish their excellent steed to a white cowboy if he asked for it. There was little recourse.<sup>35</sup>

Still, as Searles states in "Taking Out the Buck and Putting in a Trick," black cowboys had to go above and beyond the natural call of duty to last in the West. He believes that limitations were catalyst for black cowboys' success. He states that, "the lack of opportunity to do other work and a tendency to restrict the numbers of nonwhites who were able to participant meant that to get and hold a job required extraordinary efforts."<sup>36</sup> Massey in "Black Cowboys: Wrangling the Numbers," states in an article "Tribute Paid to Negro Cowmen" by John Hendrix that "for black cowboys to be remembered he had to be outstanding. He had to excel at his craft, work harder than the rest, and do more than other cowboys."<sup>37</sup>

Durham and Jones, in *The Negro Cowboys*, state that in Western history nearly every racial or ethnic group has a historical presence, except African Americans. Although Native Americans and Chinese were negatively stereotyped, they were still represented as part of western society. However, the authors reveal that black cowboys did not venture to certain territories like Idaho and Montana. As Durham and Jones describe, the steamboat that rode up the Missouri river allowed immigrants from the South to settle there. Fort Benton, one of the towns in Idaho that resisted black landownership, passed legislation in 1882 that established separate schools for blacks. A year later, the law was repealed because no school had been

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<sup>34</sup> Stewart and Ponce, *Black Cowboys*, 13.

<sup>35</sup> Searles, "Taking Out the Buck and Putting in a Trick," 57.

<sup>36</sup> Searles, "Taking Out the Buck and Putting in a Trick," 57.

<sup>37</sup> Massey, "Black Cowboys: Wrangling the Numbers," 23.

created. Thus, the black children in Fort Benton were robbed of their civil rights and education.<sup>38</sup>

## **Black Cowboys on the Frontier**

There were many similarities in the lives of black and white cowboys. Phillip Durham and Everett L. Jones state, in *Our Negro Cowboys*, that white cowboys and black cowboys both shared the same profession and endured the same hardship of being a cowboy.<sup>39</sup> Some of the hardships cowboys faced living on the frontier included living in a lonely, dry and dusty land. As Nate Love explains, life on the frontier was full dull, boring tasks most days and dangerous responsibilities on other days. He writes in his autobiography, “When we were not on the trail taking large herds of cattle or horses to market or to be delivered to other ranches we were engaged in range riding, moving large numbers of cattle from one grazing range to another, keeping them together, and hunting up strays which, despite the most earnest efforts of the range riders would get away from the main herd and wander for miles over the plains before they could be found, overtaken and returned to the main herd.”<sup>40</sup>

Robert V. Hine, in *The American West: An Interpretive History*, describes the West as a place of adversity. The environment was dry and treeless. The Western territories were filled with wind, locusts, and isolation, which was later replaced with corporate lawyers and railroad tracks, which would eventually end the exploration of the West.<sup>41</sup> The closing of the frontier in 1890 coincides with growth of industrializations and the idea of forward progress through technology. Stewart and Ponce in *Black Cowboys* claim that old cowboys, both black and white,

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<sup>38</sup> Durham and Jones, *The Negro Cowboys*, 141.

<sup>39</sup> Durham and Jones, *The Negro Cowboys*, 223.

<sup>40</sup> Nat Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love Better Known in the Cattle Country As "Deadwood Dick"* (Los Angeles California, 1907), 44.

<sup>41</sup> Hine, *The American West*, 125.

were a product of their environment, a pre-industrial time of the early cattle business.

Industrialization and the creation of barbwire changed the frontier forever.<sup>42</sup> After the American frontier closed, several black cowboys gained work as Pullman porters. Nat Love and Oscar Micheaux both were Pullman porters.

Robert Peterson's article "Black Cowboy" describes the daily life of black cowboys. Black cowboys were paid about \$30 a month while their daily diet consisted of beans, bacon, and coffee. They guarded the cattle from thieves, making sure the herd had enough water, and driving the cattle to the market, while constantly defending themselves from stampedes, Indian raids, and white settlers. Peterson explains that black cowboys were not allowed to enter some venues.<sup>43</sup> However, William Loren Katz's *The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History* states there was no discrimination in pay and they usually slept in the same vicinity.<sup>44</sup>

Hines depicts the West as "cattle kingdom." He claims from 1865-1885 the cattle drive spread from Texas to Wyoming. The cowboy worked the ranch and trails. Their main purpose was to transport the cattle from Texas, where they were born and bred, to the railroads. Cattle would be shipped to the markets, but as the railways extended further into the trail and plains of the West, cowboys became less important. Black cowboys faced many hardships on the trail. Cowboys were often plagued with black phlegm and dust that was thick as fur on their faces. Stampedes were a constant threat, as were dehydrated cattle, lightning storms and thunderstorms

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<sup>42</sup> Stewart and Ponce, *Black Cowboys*, 13. Although, my thesis focuses primarily on black cowboys, Mexican cowboys, also known as vaqueros, greatly influenced the cowboy techniques. Cattle ranching are a blend of Mexican and American practices. The merging of Anglo and Mexican traditions provided the technique that was used during the 1860's and 1870's in cattle ranching. For further information please see, Exploring the West "Vaqueros," <http://www.stanford.edu/group/West/> (accessed on April 6, 2013), Bill Wittliff, *Vaquero: Genesis of the Texas Cowboy*, Arnold R. Rojas (Texas: University of Texas Press, 2004), *These Were The Vaqueros: Collected Works of Arnold Rojas* (California: Alamar Media, Inc. 1974), Russell Freedman, *In the Days of the Vaqueros* (New York: Clarion Books, 2001)

<sup>43</sup> Robert Peterson, "Black Cowboy," *Boys Life*, Vol. 84, IV (1994), 1.

<sup>44</sup> Katz, *The Black West*, 70.

that were blinding, and fear of Native American attacks. Hine states cowboys would describe themselves as wet, muddy, aching tired and hungry.<sup>45</sup>

Given the difficulty of life in the West, Hine suggests that Hine's that popular media began turning the painful cowboy into a supreme being the idea of them being half god and half man. The cowboy was half god, because he conquered impossible goals and half man because he was one with nature.<sup>46</sup> The cowboy image represented self-truth and awareness. Cowboys knew their place and value in life and measuring themselves to society standards was irrelevant. Hine describes the first popular novel Owen Wister's *The Virginian* published in 1902.<sup>47</sup> This is very important, because the novel created the iconic and romanticized cowboy- a white, youthful man in charge of his surroundings and masculinity. Searles in "Taking Out the Buck and Putting in a Trick," that in a male dominated society, white men allowed black men to display their exceptional skills. From the perspective of white cowboys, Searles writes, it was safer to let a black cowboy break a dangerous horse. However, black cowboys did not mind, because it meant more money for them and it provided job security. Searles states, "He could secure his position on a ranch, and perhaps enhance an inner feeling that the mythology of white male superiority was just that."<sup>48</sup>

Thus, the Westerner became the national hero, as Hine states; it was a uniquely American archetype that set cowboys apart from the world. The narrative of the American cowboy incorporated regions west of the Mississippi river; though, some were areas excluded

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<sup>45</sup> Hine, *The American West*, 126-127.

<sup>46</sup> Hine, *The American West*, 268.

<sup>47</sup> Hine, *The American West*, 270.

<sup>48</sup> Searles, "Taking Out the Buck and Putting in a Trick,"60. Searles also notes that as a form of resistance, when training the horses black cowboys would put a trick in them. If a white cowboy wanted to claim the horse the black cowboy would make a signal to the horse to buck wildly. The white cowboy assumed that it was still a wild horse, thus the black cowboy was able to keep his well-trained horse from himself.

specifically, the North and South. He states that the cowboy was not only an American icon, but also a world phenomenon, as Germans, Frenchman, and Englishmen were creating Western films.<sup>49</sup>

## **Roosevelt's Ideology**

When Theodore Roosevelt was elected to become the 26th president, he won the presidential election running as the "Cowboy of the Dakotas." Surely, being a cowboy and representing masculinity could not be associated with blacks. Roosevelt wrote four novels titled "Winning the West." In the books, he wrote, blacks were inferior. As Gail Bederman, in *Manliness and Civilization* states, Roosevelt viewed the West as place to construct manhood. There, white Americans would break the barriers of nature while cultivating a supreme civilization. The white American cowboy would lead the world in this new endeavor. Gail Bederman notes, "Roosevelt constructed the frontier as a site of origins of the American race, whose manhood and national worth were proven by their ability to stamp out competing, savage races."<sup>50</sup> Roosevelt felt that the American race was different from the English race, but they shared the same blood. They were all descendants from the older British race.<sup>51</sup> For Roosevelt, Bederman writes, the cowboy was integral to American frontier history because the cowboy represented manhood, where the American man frontiersmen conquered nature with his whole being. Furthermore, maintaining gender roles was important on the frontier. The cowboy was the protector and provider. Although, sometimes he was a lone ranger, the women were expected to be the keeper of the home. The women raised their sons to become superior men. As

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<sup>49</sup> Hine, *The American West*, 281.

<sup>50</sup> Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 178.

<sup>51</sup> Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 179.

Bederman states, Roosevelt believed that "there was little that was soft or outwardly attractive in their character, it was stern, rude, and hard, like the lives they led; but it was the character of those who were every inch men, and who were American through to the very heart's core."<sup>52</sup> Roosevelt believed to maintain superiority as a civilized nation men must have intelligence, humanity and morality.<sup>53</sup> For Roosevelt, Americans may draw from myriad immigrant races, but they are still European in origin.

However, blacks do not exist in Theodore Roosevelt's frontier history. Theodore Roosevelt's vituperation of slaveholders explicitly depicted his disgust with the slaveholders. They were "the worst foes, not only of humanity and civilization, but especially of the white race in America," wrote Roosevelt in *The Winning of the West*.<sup>54</sup> Roosevelt was also aware of black people's determination and perseverance. He wrote, "Moreover, the negro, unlike so many of the inferior races, does not dwindle away in the presence of the white man. He holds his own; indeed, under the conditions of American slavery, he increased faster than whites, threatening to supplant him."<sup>55</sup>

A lack of primary sources makes it difficult to explain why black cowboys were excluded from the frontier history. Durham and Jones argue that one possible reason for the exclusion of black cowboys in Western fiction is that cowboys are American folk heroes who represented the American boy or man. If you have courage and independence, you could be the next American cowboy. But the image of the American cowboy does not include black people or any other races. The spread of Jim Crow from the South to the West overshadowed the efforts

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<sup>52</sup> Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 181.

<sup>53</sup> Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, 185.

<sup>54</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West, Volume Three: The Founding of the Trans-Alleghany Commonwealths 1784-1790* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1882), 29.

<sup>55</sup> Roosevelt, *The Winning of the West*, 28.

of African American cowboys and affected their performance of the frontier. As a result, African American cowboys were dismissed from the media and literature.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Durham and Jones, *The Negro Cowboys*, 223.

## Chapter 2

### Black Cowboys: The Famous and the Infamous



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*There are desert hills and country mountainside  
beyond the plains where I reside  
Through the valleys and across the river  
When I move cattle, I make sure to deliver  
Home-style cooking, the best of meals  
Feeding the horses and the steers  
Daily chores around the year  
So happy to have my horse right here  
We ride, and ride, and start new quest  
Following behind Bronco Jim and Nat Love, trying to be the best  
Performance audiences come from all over  
To gaze upon this Buffalo Soldier  
Strenuous work hours and fighting discrimination  
Will not make me rethink my choice of occupation  
From early morning into the late night  
I'm a black cowboy and it fits me right...<sup>58</sup>*

*-Phillip Boutte, Jr.*

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<sup>57</sup> Chronicling America Historic American Newspapers, "Black Cowboy and Horse," <http://cdm15330.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15330coll122/id/22033> (accessed April 2, 2013).

<sup>58</sup> Phillip Boutte, e-mail message to Paige Brown, February 27, 2013. The West I will be referring in this chapter consists of the states of California, Colorado, Kansas, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Texas. The West does extend further and is comprised of more states, but in regards to the Black Cowboys I will follow, these states are influential in shaping their lives as cowboys.

This thesis defines “cowboy” in the following ways: a cowboy was someone who tends cattle or horses in the American West, such as a usually mounted cattle-ranch hand. A cowboy was also a ranch hand who placed a priority on the completion of his responsibilities on the ranch, farm, or trail over his physical well-being. Finally, a cowboy was a ranch hand or trail rider who, as a rodeo performer, showed off his skills.

Race and racial prejudice affected the definition of cowboys. Discrimination and segregation helped to exclude the stories of black cowboys for a long period from an important historical moment in America and that was the cultivation of the West. Black cowboys were sometimes given the harder task of perhaps crossing a swollen river or a menial task of preparing the horses in the morning. They were not able to hold the position of trail boss. They were referred to as “nigger” or “coon” and in some instances they were not allowed in the same vicinity. This language was not far-fetched, because either these black cowboys were born enslaved or they were the first generation of free black men. However, black cowboys experienced the same danger on the trails, facing harsh weather and fighting for their lives as white cowboys. Unfortunately, some of the black cowboys accomplishments were not publicized because of the color of their skin. Black cowboys had to exceed their white counterparts in performing to be recognized by society.

However, not all black cowboys were left behind by history. Some, as described in this chapter, used their skills to acquire measureable wealth. This is where Booker T. Washington’s advocacy of economic self-sufficiency played an important role in the lives of black cowboys. In this chapter, I will consider the lives of famous and infamous black cowboys, and how Washington’s ideology of self-sufficiency and his support of industrial education, helped black

cowboys promote their talents in the West amidst discrimination. The black cowboys chronicled in this chapter became extremely successful during the Progressive era, between 1890-1920.

## **Booker T. Washington and his influence on black cowboys**

Booker T. Washington's promotion of racial advancement through self-sufficiency, independence, and economic autonomy played a key role in changing the ideology and beliefs of white people in regards to black people. I argue that black cowboys migrated to the West in search of self-sufficiency. In the same manner, as Booker T. Washington transformed the South, by insisting black people become educated through trades, black cowboys used their trade to become independent and vital members of society.<sup>59</sup> Black cowboys performed the same task for the West; they helped break racial barriers, while creating an independent life for themselves and their families.

Booker T. Washington wrote about his life as an enslaved boy in Virginia, rumored to be the son of the plantation owner in *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography*. After emancipation, he and his family moved to West Virginia to work in a salt furnace and coal mines. Washington received a secondary education from Hampton Institute. He taught for a while in different schools, including Hampton. In 1881, he opened Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute.<sup>60</sup>

Booker T. Washington wrote in *Up from Slavery*, that slavery was a disadvantage for blacks and whites. He wrote, whites did not acquire basic skills like mending fences or sewing

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<sup>59</sup> Booker T. Washington had a complex record regarding to race relations. He believed that the doctrine of separate-but-equal was beneficial to both races. However, in regards to Washington's ideology and views that I speak about in the above paragraph, I believed that through his quest for the advancement of blacks he was able to break racial barriers, by changing the image of African American men. Through education and hard work he was able to create the notion of the self-sufficient black men. For more information on Washington see: Louis Harlan, *Booker T. Washington: Volume 1: The Making of a Black Leader, 1856-1901* ( New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); David H. Jackson, *Booker T. Washington and the Struggle against White Supremacy: The Southern Educational Tours, 1908-1912*(New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

<sup>60</sup>Documenting the American South, "Booker T. Washington," *Encyclopedia of Southern* (North Carolina: University of Carolina Press, 1989) accessed (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/washington/bio.html> April 10,2013).

clothes those tasks were left for the enslaved. However, the enslaved did not care for their duties thus, they care not to master their obligations. He wrote, "My old master had many boys and girls, but not one, so far as I know, ever mastered a single trade or special line of productive industry. The girls were not taught to cook, sew, or to take care of the house. All of this was left to the slaves. The slaves, of course, had little personal interest in the life of the plantation, and their ignorance prevented them from learning how to do things in the most improved and thorough manner. As a result of the system, fences were out of repair, gates were hanging half off the hinges."<sup>61</sup>

This lack of care on both parties black and white affected Washington greatly. He later organized and form the Tuskegee institute to contradict this way of living for blacks. He believed black people should master and take pride in their occupations. By displaying this type of manner, black people proved themselves worthy of respect and capable of being independent. The black cowboys I mention, below exemplified Washington's views. These black cowboys took pride in their occupation and became masters of their task like Nat Love and Bill Pickett.

Booker T. Washington wrote, black people had to work harder than white and outperform them, but the reward after was worth the struggle. He wrote, "the Negro youth must work harder and must perform his tasks even better than a white youth in order to secure recognition. But out of the hard and unusual struggle through which he is compelled to pass, he gets a strength, a confidence, that one misses whose pathway is comparatively smooth by reason of birth and race."<sup>62</sup> The historiography also reflects this idea of working harder. Black cowboys were required to exceed their measure of work to be recognized by society.

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<sup>61</sup> Booker T. Washington, *1856-1915 Up from Slavery: An Autobiography* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday &Co, 1901), 15.

<sup>62</sup> Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 23.

Washington's address at the Atlanta Cotton Exposition in 1895 stated that African Americans should cast down their buckets. Called the "Atlanta Compromise," Washington argued that "[i]t is in the South that the Negro is given a man's chance in the commercial world." He assured the members at the exposition, a predominately-white audience that black people would stay in the South and use their brains and skill to do manual labor, instead of trying to acquire occupations that are more sophisticated. He spoke "no race can prosper until it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem. It is at the bottom of life we must begin." Washington expressed that white people should not look to foreigners to bring prosperity to the South, but they should look to blacks to help bring wealth back to the South. He stated that if it were not for the help of northern philanthropists, blacks would not have been as successful in their current endeavors. However, Washington noted that it is important for blacks to enjoy the full privilege of the law. He described, "It is more important and right that all privileges of the laws be ours, but it is vastly more important that we be prepared for the exercise of those privileges."<sup>63</sup> By 1900, the popularity of Washington's message, particularly among white philanthropists, earned him the nickname "The Wizard of Tuskegee" or the "Moses of His People."

In August 29 1914, Washington traveled the West addressing African Americans communities. Although he spoke on behalf of the National Negro Business Men's League, Washington had encouraging words for the new black migrant in the West. He still spoke to African Americans about having a successful white man to help them along the way, but he also states that it is time for black people to be more aggressive. Washington continued:

I believe that the time has come when we as a race should begin preparing to enter upon a new policy and a new program. In plain but in emphatic words I want to suggest whether the time has not

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<sup>63</sup> Booker T. Washington, "The Atlantic Exposition Address," reprinted in Raymond D' Angelo, *The American Civil Rights Movement* (McGraw-Hill/Dushkin, 2001), 12.

come when we should get off the defensive in things that concern our present and future and begin to inaugurate everywhere an aggressive and constructive progressive policy in business, industry, education, moral, and religious life.<sup>64</sup>

He believed that African American farmers should become aggressive in acquiring more live-stock and in their marketing ability. They should get off the defense and have the world talking about their surplus instead of what they lacked. He stated that instead of the United States buying produce and cattle from overseas, where the prices are going up daily, the U.S. should be buying from these black farmers. Washington was trying to impress upon the blacks in the West that they had much to offer and it was their responsibility to use their talents to become successful and self-sufficient men. Thus, instead of African Americans seeking assistance from white people, whites would need assistance from blacks.

Black cowboys realized early on that their education came from the plains of the West and not the classrooms of the north. They knew to become successful in the West they must perfect their trade. Although the notion at the time was, the way to success was through books and not burdens. Booker T. Washington, aware that education was not afforded to everyone, believed through blue-collar work or trades black men became just as successful as college-educated men did. Washington wrote, "The ambition to secure an education was most praiseworthy and encouraging. The idea, however, was too prevalent that, as soon as one secured a little education, in some unexplainable way he would be free from most of the hardships of the world, and, at any rate, could live without manual labour."<sup>65</sup> Black cowboys used the idea of manual labor to capitulate themselves into better positions. Granted, education was important to black cowboys, but the lack thereof did not prohibit them from becoming successful men.

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<sup>64</sup> Chronicling America Historical American Newspaper, "Oklahoma Makes Good to the National Legue," *The Tulsa Star*, August 29, 1914 (accessed on March 10, 2013)

<sup>65</sup> Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 36.

African American cowboys following the ideology of Washington and became proficient in a skill that was in demand. It was their equestrian skills and new techniques that helped softened the racial barrier on the frontier; allowing these black cowboys to become independent, self-sustained, economically stable and famous. Washington wrote, " The individual who can do something that the world wants done will, in the end, make his way regardless of race."<sup>66</sup> Black cowboys mastered the idea of self-sufficiency.

Nat Love and Bill Pickett, successful black cowboys, who entered this world as enslaved men, like Booker T. Washington, died as vital and renowned citizens. There were many other notable blacks in the West that was influenced by Washington's beliefs and the presence of black cowboys for example Oscar Micheaux, his childhood experiences in the West weighed heavily his life's work. Certainly, in the West there was good and bad cowboys. Let me first introduce the bad Cherokee Bill.



Cherokee Bill as a young man<sup>67</sup>

### **Cherokee Bill: An Outlaw**

In the West, we find some notorious black cowboys like Cherokee Bill, who was born in Crawford Goldsby in 1876, at Fort Concho, Texas. Cherokee Bill was of mixed racial descent:

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<sup>66</sup> Washington, *Up from Slavery*, 61.

<sup>67</sup> Google "Cherokee Bill," [http://www.whitsett-wall.com/Fort\\_Smith/Outlaws.htm](http://www.whitsett-wall.com/Fort_Smith/Outlaws.htm) (accessed March 24, 2013)

Native American, African American, Mexican and European.<sup>68</sup> William Loren Katz, in *The Black West*, explains that Cherokee Bill's father was a soldier in the Tenth Cavalry. At the age of three, his parents separated; when he was twelve, his mother remarried and he could no longer be the man of the house.<sup>69</sup> Durham and Jones state, "He was tall and graceful, a copper-skinned man whose long wavy black hair fell to his shoulders."<sup>70</sup>

At the age of fourteen, he shot and killed his brother-in-law. He became a professional hit man, killing railroad agents, business owners and a multitude of other individuals. He rode with a gang of miscreants who terrorized the Native American community and robbed stores, train and post offices vigorously. He was also a ladies' man, rumored to have a girl in every part of the West he traveled.<sup>71</sup>

While visiting one of his companions, who was the cousin of the deputy marshal, Cherokee Bill was warned that the marshal was going to arrest him. He ignored her warning, and during his second night in town, he was arrested and charged with the murder of an unarmed man during a post office robbery. He was sentenced to death. While in jail waiting for his day of execution, he arranged for a gun to be smuggled in and to have a prison break of 250 federal prisoners. Cherokee Bill sent for the head jailer and pointed the gun demanding that he opened the jail cell. When the head jailer refused, he killed him. A huge gunfight broke out and Cherokee Bill was captured and sentenced again. Durham and Jones state, Glenn Shirley in *Toughest of Them All*, quotes the judge as calling Cherokee Bill "undoubtedly the most ferocious

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<sup>68</sup> Durham and Jones, *The Negro Cowboys*, 173.

<sup>69</sup> William Loren Katz, *The Black West* (Seattle: Open Hand Publishing Inc., 1973), 153.

<sup>70</sup> Durham and Jones, *The Negro Cowboys*, 172.

<sup>71</sup> Durham and Jones, *The Negro Cowboys*, 172.

monster, and your record more atrocious than all the criminals who have hitherto stood before this bar."<sup>72</sup> On March 17, 1896, Cherokee Bill walked on the gallows and died quickly.<sup>73</sup>

Contemporary authors agree that black cowboys were often lawless men. *The Iola Register*, a Kansas newspaper once reported that four black cowboys entered a gun store pretending to buy guns, but in actuality, their intentions were to steal the guns. On June 9, 1882, "Four colored cowboys recently entered the store of R.S. Davis, in Atchison, and requested to be shown revolvers, chose four British bull-dogs and had them loaded by the clerk, when the quartet leveled their arms and hold the man in anxiety. Slowly retreating, each gained the door, giving a farewell shot, and escaped."<sup>74</sup>

Although, Cherokee Bill and other outlaws do not quite fit the full philosophy and views of Washington, they do exhibit the idea of self-sufficiency. Cherokee Bill was determined to take care of himself as a cowboy. At young age, he left his home in search of manhood. On the frontier, he was able to provide for himself, granted his methods was illegal and disturbing, but this path that he chose allowed him to be in control of his own destiny.



<sup>72</sup>Glenn Shirley, "Toughest of Them All" (Albuquerque, New Mexico, 1953), 131-132.

<sup>73</sup> Durham and Jones, *The Negro Cowboys*, 175.

<sup>74</sup> Chronicling America Historical American Newspaper, "Kansas State News." *The Iola Register*, June 9, 1882 (accessed on March 10, 2013).

Nat Love watching his mother work during slavery.<sup>75</sup>

## Nat "Deadwood Dick" Love: Cowboy and Pullman Porter

There are notable black cowboys that left a positive legacy, like Nat Love and Bill Pickett. They broke the stereotype of black men as lazy, shiftless, and criminal. These black cowboys actually surpassed their white counterparts, showing the world that they were strong, intelligent, and courageous and law abiding citizens. They embodied manliness the epitome of manhood. Although they faced considerable discrimination, their roping skills and fast guns could not be ignored. In fact, men like Nat Love and Bill Pickett wrote autobiographies to make sure that their stories to leave a historical legacy. While their autobiographies were self-serving, they also promoted themselves as successful examples of Washington's theories of economic self-sufficiency.

Nat Love was born into slavery in 1854, in Davidson County, Tennessee. The property of Robert Love, his father was a foreman over the slaves and his mother ran the kitchen in the big house. He was not very educated, but his father, who could barely read himself, taught Love all he knew. After emancipation, his family moved from the plantation to begin a new life, but without money or possessions, it was difficult for them to make a living. Nat's father cultivated tobacco, but it was not enough to make it throughout the year. Love's father died when he was a teenager, leaving him to become the head of the household.

Love worked breaking horses for his neighbor Mr. William. He went there on Sundays to ride horses. The eldest of Williams' sons asked Nat Love if he would break a wild horse for 10 cents. Love broke a dozen colts, but that one wild horse, "Blackhighway," was terrifying to

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<sup>75</sup> Nat Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love Better Known in the Cattle Country As "Deadwood Dick"* (Los Angeles California, 1907), 10.

break. However, after negotiation he decided to take the challenge for the price of 50 cents. Nat Love wrote, "We did not dare to put the bridle on them as we were afraid the boss might surprise us and we would not be quick enough to get it off."<sup>76</sup> After his long and rough ride, the horse was broken. On that particular horse, he learned to either break the horse or break his neck, because if he were to let go the horse, he would have been seriously injured or killed.<sup>77</sup>

Love eventually won a horse twice in a raffle. The host knew that Love needed money, thus he offered to buy the horse back for fifty dollars and Love agreed. The horse was re-raffled and Love won again, once again the host offers to buy it back. Love sold the horse back on both occasions and left with a hundred dollars. Love split the profits with his mother and a month later, he left for the West. Love wanted to experience freedom and the opportunity to prove himself as a man. Love described, "I wanted to see more of the world and as I began to realize there was so much more of the world than what I had seen, the desire to go grew on me from day to day. It was hard to think of leaving mother and the children, but freedom is sweet and I wanted to make more of the opportunity and my life than I could see possible around home."<sup>78</sup> According to the histories, Nate Love's life in the West only improved marginally after he moved to the West. However, Love's autobiography shows that this was not the case.

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<sup>76</sup> Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love* 30.

<sup>77</sup> Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, 30.

<sup>78</sup> Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, 37-38.



The Roping Contest at Deadwood, S. D.

Nat Love posing as "Deadwood Dick"<sup>79</sup>

On February 10, 1869, Love left home in Nashville, Tennessee in search of his new life as a cowboy. Love traveled to Kansas, because he heard it was a good place to find employment. He arrived in Dodge City, Kansas and joined a Texas outfit. However, before he joined he had to prove he can break a wild horse. The trail boss asked Bronco Jim, a black cowboy to grab a wild horse called "Good Eye." If Love tamed Good Eye then he could join. Love succeeded in breaking "Good Eye" and that was the start of his cowboy career. Traveling with his new outfit down the trail to Texas, he experienced his first shoot out with some Indians. He realized a cowboy's gun was very important; as a result, he practiced diligently until he mastered the use of his 45 Colt Pistol.<sup>80</sup> There was no law in the West according to Love; your friend was your gun. Love states, "I became fairly proficient and able in most cases to hit a barn door providing the door was not too far away, and was steadily improving in this as I was in experience and knowledge of the other branches of the business which I had chosen as my life's work and which I had begun to like so well, because while the life was hard and in some ways exacting, yet it was free and wild.... I gloried in the danger, and the wild and free life of the

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<sup>79</sup> Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, 96.

<sup>80</sup> Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, 40-41.

plains, the new country I was continually traversing, and the many new scenes and incidents continually arising in the life of a rough rider."<sup>81</sup>

As Love described in his autobiography, Native Americans and white outlaws who wrought havoc on the cowboy lives. They would scatter the cattle over hundreds of miles. Love's outfit spent days and months trying to recover the cattle. Many other outfits noticed Love's skills as a cowboy; consequently, he was offered higher position with different outfits. Love describes his new position as the Chief Brand Reader. His tasks including taking large herds of cattle or horses to the market or other ranches, keeping the cattle together while moving them from one ranch to another, finding and picking up stray cattle and range riding. Range riding usually consists of the cowboy riding the range to ensure no wolf or person disturbs the cattle. Love was also an excellent brand reader. A brand reader attended the big round-ups to pick out their brand and to ensure their cattle was not counterfeit.<sup>82</sup> Love contends brand readers never slept. After the cattle was rounded up and taken home, brand readers stayed behind to make certain the stray was not mixed up again. After the big round up, cowboys would relax by participating in game a called 7 Y-L steer, which was a steering competition. Love states, the "test of a cow boy's worth is his gameness and his nerve. He is not supposed to know what fear means, and I assure you there are very few who know the meaning of that word."<sup>83</sup>

Love's autobiography in comparison to the historiography is very accurate. He describes his life as a former slave, who became free and migrated to the West from the south in search of opportunity. This is precisely what several others have written on in their works. Love wrote

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<sup>81</sup> Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, 45.

<sup>82</sup> Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, 47.

<sup>83</sup> Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, 50.

that he went for opportunity and although, the life of a cowboy is difficult the gratification of freedom is worth the risk. The West for Love and many other cowboys allowed them to experience manliness.



Nate Love, posing with family<sup>84</sup>

In 1876, Nate Love made his way to Deadwood, South Dakota where he won the roping competition. Love states, "I roped, threw, tied, bridled, saddled and mounted my mustang in exactly nine minutes from the crack of the gun. The time of the next nearest competitor was twelve minutes and thirty seconds. This gave me the record and championship of the West, which I held up to the time I quit the business in 1890, and my record has never been beaten."<sup>85</sup> Love's record proved that black cowboys were exceptionally talented men and at times, they were superior to white cowboys.

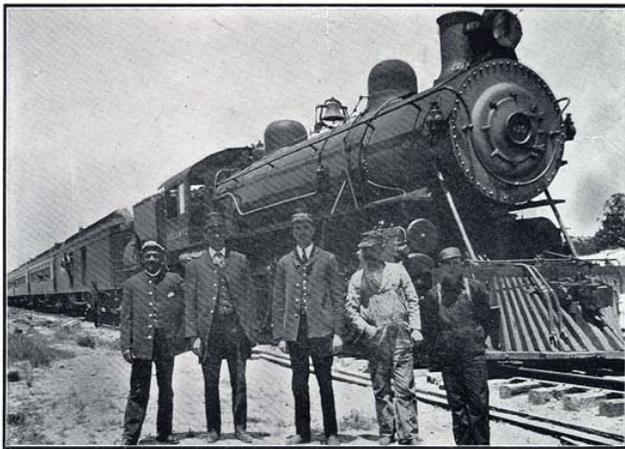
As the century turned, so did the cattle industry. Love described how railroads became more common, cowboys became extinct, and the occupation was no longer in demand. The frontier turned into towns and communities and the space that cowboys were accustomed to was nonexistent. Love wrote, "To us wild cowboys of the range, used to the wild and

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<sup>84</sup> Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, 2.

<sup>85</sup> Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, 93.

unrestricted life of the boundless plains, the new order of things did not appeal, and many of us became disgusted and quit the wild life for the pursuits of our more civilized brother." In 1889, he married his second wife. In 1890, Love accepted a position as a Pullman Porter on the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad.<sup>86</sup> Nat Love passed away in 1921. Although, the historiography mentions that technology and railroads ended life of the frontier, they have not explained that a life on the frontier catered to a young man. Love seems to imply that as one grows older on the frontier neither the adventure nor the circumstance were as easy to handle. Thus, a more civilized and settled life become more appealing.



Nate Love working as a Pullman porter<sup>87</sup>

With Wm. Blood, My Old Cowboy Friend, and Other Friends at the Close of My Railroad Career

Love's life fits perfectly with some of Washington's philosophies. Love left home at a young age, in search of freedom and independence. He found an occupation that allowed him to provide for himself. He was a self-sufficient man. As a black cowboy, he surpasses his white-counterparts and became the fastest roper. Love took great pride in his appearance, which was a ideology of Washington. Love paid for professional photographs. In the photo, Love was dressed very well for a cowboy with his pressed clothes and perfectly circled rope. His hair was

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<sup>86</sup> Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, 130.

<sup>87</sup> Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, 154.

neatly manicured and stance exudes confidence. Love was inserting his image in the West as a successful, self sufficient, confident black cowboy.



This statue in the Stockyards district commemorates Bill Pickett, a famous 19th-century cowboy and rodeo performer.<sup>88</sup>

### **Bill Pickett: Rodeo Star & Film Star**

Bill Pickett's family in 1854 traveled from South Carolina to Texas as slaves. Willie M. Pickett, later known as Bill Pickett, was born in 1870, in Texas. He was one of thirteen children born to Tom and Mary Pickett. According to Bailey C. Hanes's *Bill Pickett, Bulldogger: The Biography of a Black Cowboy*, Pickett grew up as a cowboy. His father broke horses and tended to the cattle. Bill learned at a young age to read horse and cattle brands correctly. He describes, Pickett, as a child was fascinated with cowboys. Hanes describes the daily tasks of a cowboy. He claims that Pickett would watch "how they broke and shod mustangs for saddle mounts, how they swung lariats in precise patterns and with exact timing to encircle an animal's neck, how they herded and branded wild Longhorn rounded up from cast open ranges."<sup>89</sup>

After completing fifth grade, he learned to ride and rope. By the time he turned fifteen or sixteen, he began riding broncos on Sunday afternoons.<sup>90</sup> Pickett began cultivating a new skill

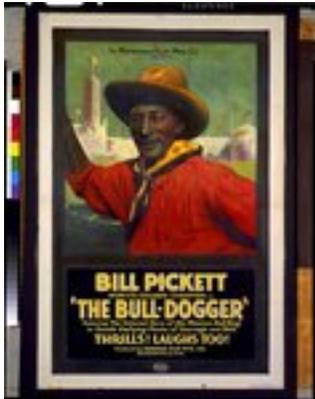
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<sup>88</sup> U.S. News Travel "Dallas -Fort Worth Bill Pickett Statue," [http://travel.usnews.com/Dallas-Fort\\_Worth\\_TX/Pictures/Bill\\_Pickett\\_Statue\\_755/](http://travel.usnews.com/Dallas-Fort_Worth_TX/Pictures/Bill_Pickett_Statue_755/) (accessed March 20, 2013)

<sup>89</sup> Bailey C. Hanes, *Bill Pickett, Bulldogger: The Biography of a Black Cowboy* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 22-23.

<sup>90</sup> Hanes, *Bill Pickett Bulldogger*, 25,29.

called bulldogging. In 1881, Bill Pickett noticed a bulldog had wrestled a cow by holding her upper lip. Bulldogging is when a cowboy leaps from the horse, grabs hold of the steer's head and twisting it upward. The cowboy proceeds to bite the steer's lip with his teeth and throw his body to the ground and wrestling the steer on its side.



Poster advertising a silent film Pickett made around World War I demonstrating his famous bulldogging technique.<sup>91, 92</sup>

After displaying his bulldogging method for a gang of cowboys who were having little success steering a cow, the leader asked Pickett to go to Nashville, Tennessee, to perform at the Wild West Show that was held during the Confederate Soldier Reunion. The confederates were amazed at his abilities.<sup>93</sup> Pickett would later take this act on the road. His manager promoted him as the Dusky Demon, never referring to him as Negro, because white men felt that it was "below their dignity to compete with a black man."<sup>94</sup> Uniting with his brothers, under the name of The Pickett Brothers Bronco Busters & Rough Riders, Pickett performed all over the United States and also in South America and Britain.

In 1907 *The Coconino Sun* in Flagstaff Arizona 1907 described one instance where an event promoting Pickett's bulldogging method was canceled. Claiming that bulldogging showed

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<sup>91</sup> Katz, *The Black West*, 161

<sup>92</sup> *Chronicling America Historic American Newspaper*, "The Bull-dogger," <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/92500459/> (accessed April 2, 2013)

<sup>93</sup> Hanes, *Bill Pickett, Bulldogger*, 30.

<sup>94</sup> Hanes, *Bill Pickett, Bulldogger*, 40.

excessive cruelty to animals, the sheriff threatened to arrest any cowboy who attempted to demonstrate the technique. Since Pickett's new skill involved biting the lip of the bull, the ranger of the town believed that this method put animals in danger. The article continues, "With the action taken by Ranger Captain Harry Wheeler Sunday, at don Luis, in preventing an exhibition in which steers were to have been roped and tied, and 'Nigger' Pickett was billed to throw a steer with his teeth, the end of cruelty to animals in Arizona... Sunday, April 13, was the first time in history of this territory that cowboy sport was peremptorily called to a halt under threat of imprisonment."<sup>95</sup> The article proceeds to describe, "For the past three weeks O.C. Nations and clay McGoniall, both famous throughout the West as steer tying and broncho busters, have been conducting weekly exhibitions of their ability, and as a side line 'Nigger' Pickett, of Texas a black cowboy, has been throwing a steer by catching the animal's lip between his teeth after mounting the running steer from the back of a fleet pony, and throwing the beast. To the morbid this has proven a most interesting feat and crowds have gathered expressly to see this part of the performance." The newspaper article notes there is no one that has resisted this temporary law and instead of "steer tying and the "nigger" steer contest, a whole lot of rough riding," took place instead.<sup>96</sup>

Bill Pickett legacy has lasted for decades. He was a rodeo and film Star. He even starred in his own movie "The Bulldogger" made in 1921 and "The Dusky Demon and The Crimson Skull" produced in 1922 an all black cast.<sup>97</sup> In "The Bulldogger," a grainy film from 1921, Bill Pickett exhibits bulldogging. The film opened with Pickett mounting a horse. He began to rope a calf and he jumped from his horse, he bit the lip of the calf and the calf surrenders. He then

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<sup>95</sup> Chronicling America Historic American Newspaper, "Stops Steer Tying" *The Coconino Sun.*, May 2, 1907 (accessed on March 10, 2013).

<sup>96</sup> Chronicling America Historic American Newspaper, "Stops Steer Tying" *The Coconino Sun.*, May 2, 1907

<sup>97</sup> "Bill Pickett Bulldogging (1921)" <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AH5j9s4wm8E> ( accessed March 1, 2013).

tied the hoofs of the calf and raised his hand in victory. The film then proceeds to show another cowboy trying to wrestle a bull, but he is unsuccessful. Pickett took the bull by the horns and began to wrestle him using the bulldogging method. While wrestling the bull, he removed his hat and waived to the crowd showing his dominance over the animal and his confidence in his abilities. Bill Pickett died in 1932, after being kicked in the head by a wild bronco.<sup>98</sup>

Nat Love and Bill Pickett are just a few on a list of several famous black cowboys known for their roping skills. Unfortunately, a plethora of black cowboys is unnamed. The "Cheyenne Transporter," in 1884 wrote an article describing that a Black Cowboy roped and tied down a steer in a minute and thirty seconds, but a white cowboy claims he can beat that time. The article states, "A "coon" cowboy on the Panhandle range recently roped and tied down a steer in one minute and thirty seconds. W.S. Decker thinks he can discount this, although it is the quickest time on record."<sup>99</sup>

Bill Pickett lived his life as a successful black cowboy. He invented a new wrestling technique, which later was performed by all races. He was able to take his act on the road with his brothers, providing a living for himself as well as his family members. Pickett took proud in his occupation. Through practice and perseverance, he became a leading figure in the West and rodeo performances. Pickett's life accomplishments are similar to Washington's beliefs. Pickett was self-sustaining black cowboy, whose abilities exceeded the ability of other cowboys.

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<sup>98</sup> Oklahoma Historical Society's "Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture Bill Pickett" <http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/p/pi003.html> (accessed March 24, 2013)

<sup>99</sup> Chronicling America Historic American Newspaper,, *Cheyenne Transporter*, December 5, 1884, vol. 6



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Still from "The Homesteader," a film that Oscar Micheaux produced in 1919

## Oscar Micheaux: Going Against the Grain by Creating Novels and Films that featured black Cowboys

Micheaux used his life on the frontier to create his novels and films. *The Homesteader*, *The Conquest* and *The Symbol of the Unconquered* all embodied the frontier belief the spirit of individualism, where one could realize their destiny and become self-sufficient. In *The Symbol of the Unconquered*, Bowser and Spence contend, the star of the film, Hugh Van Allen, "a gentlemanly frontiersman riding in a buckboard, embodied the Western hero, self-sufficient and calmly rugged..."<sup>101</sup> In 1910, Micheaux was quoted in the *Chicago Defender*, encouraging people to go West. Micheaux believed the West and its open land allowed Black men to accomplish their personal goals. The article continued, "For Micheaux, the land openings along the frontier provided the opportune moment for the Negro to do something for himself."<sup>102</sup> Micheaux is known as the first black film director, creating novels and films that would depict black life. Oscar Micheaux used his movies to serve as autobiographies; thus, more than any other cowboy before him, he was well aware of the power of popular cinema to create and disseminate the narrative.

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<sup>100</sup> "The Homesteader," <http://www.flickr.com/photos/22067139@N05/2183564619/in/set-72157603631207075/lightbox/> (Access: April 15, 2013)

<sup>101</sup> Bowser and Spence, *Writing himself into History*, 156.

<sup>102</sup> Bowser and Spence, *Writing himself into History*, 156.

Oscar Micheaux was born January 2, 1884. His parents were Calvin and Bell Micheaux. They raised him and his siblings to fear God and to work diligently. In 1870, his family moved to Kansas. In Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence's *Writing himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences*, Thulani Davis states that Micheaux and his family would naturally be intrigued by the West, because it offered a Black man a new start. Davis argues "Micheaux was enraptured not only by the idea of going West to seek his own fortune and making a new beginning as a Black man and homesteader but also by the prospect of getting others to go and build new communities on the land that was offered. It is impossible to grow up in this culture without being introduced to the dream of finding a new land where one can live freely."<sup>103</sup>

In the West, his family would become very successful. His parents were not educated, but his mother believed that education was the key to success and admired Booker T. Washington because of his great transformation from slave to educator. Patrick McGilligan, in *Oscar Micheaux the Great and Only*, states, "Bell Michaux treasured books and education, and instilled in her children an appreciation for high ideals. Among her heroes was Booker T. Washington."<sup>104</sup> Oscar would enter Metropolis school, in Massac County, Ks. His father, Calvin Micheaux, bought more land and eventually owned eighty acres of land.<sup>105</sup>

Booker T. Washington heavily influenced Oscar Micheaux, from his childhood through his adult life. Micheaux, like Washington, believed that African American people could accomplish and overcome any task in their life. Micheaux states, "One of the greatest tasks of my life has been to teach that the colored man can be anything." Using the views of Washington

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<sup>103</sup> Pearl Bowser and Louise Spence, *Writing himself into History: Oscar Micheaux, His Silent Films, and His Audiences* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2000), xii

<sup>104</sup> Patrick McGilligan, *Oscar Micheaux the Great and Only* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), 7.

<sup>105</sup> McGilligan, *Oscar Micheaux the Great and Only*, 9,11.

that views of Washington and asked for from his former white neighbors to invest. Through his personal funds and with the help of his neighbors he was able to start the Micheaux Book and Film Company. Through this new medium, he was able to depict the real West which included black cowboys. Furthermore, he was able to make a living for himself and his family.<sup>106</sup>

Although, Booker T. Washington and Oscar Micheaux were not black cowboys, they both played an influential role in the way we think about black cowboy. Washington helped shape the views of these black cowboys, by encouraging to take pride in their labors and to become self-sufficient men. Micheaux helped preserve the memory of black cowboys, while changeling the media.

Whether the black cowboys were famous or infamous, they were very much a part of Western history. These men exemplified what it meant to be a man in the West. Courageous, strong, gallant, intelligent, innovative and fearless, they are true cowboys. The local papers acknowledged black cowboys for their feats, although some were not flattering. However, as the years progressed and the nation ideology changed we see less and less of black cowboys in history.

## **Analyzing the Literature and Media**

In the early days before superheroes and comic books, there were cowboys and dime novels. Dime novels were generally fifteen pages long and between 1860-1865, approximately 5 million copies were sold. Some of the heroes of dime novels are Calamity Jane, Buffalo Bill and Deadwood Dick (not Nat Love), but Nat Love's Deadwood Dick is reminiscent of this dime novel. I contend that Love was inserting his image into an all white genre. As Thulani Davis

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<sup>106</sup> Internet Movie Database, "Oscar Micheaux," <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0584778/bio>(accessed on April 10, 2013).

writes, "The early days of Black Media outlets and organizational culture ... illuminate how a diverse and scattered population of slavery survivors and Black immigrants shaped a nation within a nation"<sup>107</sup>

However, there is one-dime novel that describes a black cowboy, which is very rare. Schlissel describes in *Black Frontier* how the dime novel *Arizona Joe* features the black cowboy as the hero. Ebony Star (the black cowboy), saves Joe Bruce (white cowboy), while Texas Jack (the male protagonist, also a white cowboy) kills Native Americans. *Arizona Joe* depicts a rare image that was usually not seen in the media, a black cowboy.<sup>108</sup> Black film directors and scholars helped change the myths about the West through the media.

Theodore Roosevelt and Oscar Micheaux both used the frontier as a vehicle for their message, returning to the same ideas of masculinity, self-sufficient, bravery, quietness as the embodiment of manhood. However, Roosevelt's image of a cowboy overshadowed Micheaux's and his historical image. Although Micheaux was very successful in his films, he was no match for Hollywood and their big budget all black cast films. Unfortunately, Hollywood did not create black Westerns and as a result, the perception of cowboys has been distorted. Davis states, "Motion pictures were seen by many to have a role in...building people's social awareness, [to serve as] a force for social betterment and...to make a strong moral statement."<sup>109</sup> Durham and Jones also argue the media did not have space for black cowboys. In an article published in the "Negro Digest" in 1965, they state "In this modern day, when Hollywood has at best, an Uncle Tom...There was no place for him [black cowboy] in these community theatricals. He had been a real cowboy, but he could not pretend to be a mythical cowboy."<sup>110</sup> Literature and media

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<sup>107</sup> Bowser and Spence, *Writing himself into History*, ix.

<sup>108</sup> Schlissel, *Black Frontiers*, 45.

<sup>109</sup> Bowser and Spence, *Writing himself into History*, xvi.

<sup>110</sup> "Before Hollywood Made the Myth Negro Cowboys," *Negro Digest* September 1965, 3.

presented a one-sided history of the West and the people that inhabited the land emerged, a picture that reflects the imperialist beliefs about American expansion.

An article published on March 26, 1992 "Black Issues in Higher Education," speaks about several historians and their struggle to get their work on black cowboys published. Art T. Burton, a historian at Loyola University of Chicago argued that without the history of blacks on the frontier, history is incomplete. Burton states, "This is American history and someone needs to know it." The article discusses how black scholars had difficulty with getting their research published. Due to a lack of financial support and allegations that their work misrepresents history, black scholars were finding it extremely hard to get their message across. When trying to find publishers for his book he was declined, because his book was "too action packed" and "not academic enough for serious scholarship."<sup>111</sup>

Dr. William King, professor of Afro-American studies at the University of Colorado, believes the image of the West was created to make one race look superior. He states, "People generally write history to glorify their accomplishments or to justify their own conduct...and people in the West are concerned with looking good to their descendants. What gets saved is what makes them look good. What grows up is an official history that is not always correct and overly dependent on one perspective. Perception is reality... the new history questions the legitimacy of official history."<sup>112</sup>

Black scholars argue that their work is not taken serious by mainstream media. Critics charged black scholars of tampering with history. Burton writes, "I don't consider what I do revisionist history because it is history that hasn't been included." The article ends by stating the

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<sup>111</sup> "Rounding Up the Truth Black Scholars Push for 'Real History' of Old West" *Black Issues in Higher Education*, March 28, 1992 vol. 9, no.2

<sup>112</sup> "Rounding Up the Truth."

West is an open field, but it will be difficult for minorities to write about the West, because resources are extremely limited.

## Conclusion

Despite their considerable achievements, the history of black cowboys remains largely uncovered. Most contemporary histories present a sympathetic picture, but what is missing is the voice of the black cowboys. The absence of their voices reiterates the exclusion of their history and the contemporary assumption that black men were not cowboys. As the history of the American West reveals more perspective, the story of black cowboys will become more visible, and will help to reshape the narrative of American imperialism.

The historiography in comparison to the autobiography/biography of black cowboys is very accurate. The historiography explains how these former slaves left the south in search of freedom, opportunity, and independence. In the West, black cowboys lived a hard life, driving cattle, taming horses, and trying to survive shoot-outs. Although, this life was tumultuous, black cowboys felt the freedom outweighed the danger, because in the West they were men. Some scholars believed their lives were excluded from history, because of Hollywood images and the idea to create a folk hero, others believed it was due to imperialism.

However, one nuance I have not found in the historiography is black men used their occupation on the frontier as a launching pad for their careers. Following the beliefs of Booker T. Washington, black cowboys like Bill Pickett and Nat Love used their experience in the West as a springboard. I argue on the frontier black cowboys were self-sufficient men. In the West black cowboys experienced the value of freedom, independence and hard work, although, they were successful black men in the north and south. The West offered them an opportunity to own their own land, to work as equals among whites, and to roam freely without the fear of lynching. This privilege allowed them to advance their career. The West for some men was equivalent to college for others. I believe with further research, I could find several black cowboys who used

their occupation to successfully move or advance in different industries, thus, giving more of a voice to black cowboys. Perhaps, analyzing other successful black men, who were raised in the West, and showing how the West helped shape their adult lives. I would like to end by quoting Nat Love. He wrote, "During my life so far I had no chance to secure an education, except the education of the plains and the cattle business."<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Love, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love*, 130

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## **Vita**

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