

**Black Cowboys in the American West: On the Range, On the Stage, Behind the Badge.** B. A. Glasrud and M. N. Searles (Editors), ISBN 9780806156507, 0806156503. University of Oklahoma Press, 2016. Paperback, 256 pages, Price: \$24.95.

*Black Cowboys in the American West* is a collection of essays that serves primarily to update secondary literature on the role of Black<sup>1</sup> cowboys (and cowgirls) during the period from the close of the Civil War to the mid-twentieth century. Previous scholarship has chronicled some of this, but the prevalence and diverse experience of Black cowboys remains less well known than might be expected in 2016, the publication year of this collection. These essays reveal the major role Black men and women had in the cattle culture and rural economy of the West. The book is a treasure trove of information and reference material and is profitable reading, but the essays, written by numerous individuals with different styles and ability, do not always carry the reader along as one might expect from literature. The genre is more like a history book than focused narrative, although within essays the writing style often cycles between fact-telling that is somewhat dry and vignettes that are quite readable and enjoyable. The geographic scope is wide, with a collection of characters whose individual lives often spanned slavery in the South and East to careers across the West, from the West's frontier where deciduous forest met tallgrass prairie to Montana, Seattle, the Great Basin, and everywhere cattle could be raised and traded.

Probably few *Rangelands* readers would be surprised to learn that Black cowboys were common in the Western U.S. in the late 1800s. But readers may be somewhat taken aback at this book's assertion that likely one in four cowboys was Black during the cattle boom years after the Civil War. Popular culture's depiction of life on the range, especially in film, has included much less ethnic diversity than was reality. Native Americans, Basques, persons of African American descent, vaqueros from Mexico – the people living and working in the still untamed American West, especially working mobile herds of livestock, were as colorful culturally and personally as the stories told of that era. And while racial prejudices certainly persisted in the West, Black cowboys on the range were “permitted greater autonomy and freedom than many of their counterparts experienced in either rural or urban western communities.” In our modern naivete, we risk both sides of an error: assuming that all relations between Black and White were hostile and underestimating the extent of racial prejudice. Primary sources from the late 1800s indicate that on the trail, on the range, relationships were driven more by individual ability than by racially motivated positions and a degree of equality prevailed; however, in town, Blacks were often restricted by formal segregation regulations and informal social barriers. The very term “cowboy” likely originated in the Carolinas from “boy”, a demeaning word for grown black men, and the cows black slaves were typically left in charge of. White men who owned or handled cattle called themselves drovers, stock raisers, traders, etc. Numerous essayists in this book observe that Black men and women were commonly reported to have a unique ability to handle both horses and cattle. This made them uniquely valuable, and in some cases, it can be difficult to distinguish the economic value assigned by Whites from true personal value as a fellow worker and companion. Likely this was often a confused jumble in the minds of those White ranchers who valued their Black co-workers and employees.

The strength of *Black Cowboys in the American West* is combining historical data with character sketches of the better-known Black personages who have more recorded from their lives, people such as Nat Love, Bill Pickett, Charlie Willis, and Bass Reeves. The book also includes characters that will be new to most readers. This combination is also the book's weakness, in that some essays feel more like bits of research data got stuck together in a nearly chronological sequence, but little effort was given toward connecting or creating a coherent whole. But overall, the book is worth reading for the encouraging evidence that there is only one race, the human race, and in our best moments we treat each other like fellow humans. It is also worth reading to be reminded of the tragic effects of failing to acknowledge the humanity of all persons, to be reminded that, as Solzhenitsyn<sup>1</sup> famously said, “the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart . . . This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained.” In much of the West, individual activity was governed by ability and the content of one's character rather than the color of one's skin, and Black men and women often found rewarding work, relative freedom, and a colorful place in history. It is important to remember, and this book helps us remember.

<sup>1</sup> On capitalizing “Black”, see <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159/>.

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## Reference

1. SOLZHENITSYN ALEKSANDR. *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956: An experiment in literary investigation*. First edition. New York: Harper & Row; 1974.