

Life on the Trail

Lesson Plan for 4th-7th Grades - Social Science and History

OBJECTIVES

The students will understand the importance of cattle drives in the late 19th century. They will also be introduced to working on the trail and cowboys: fact vs fiction. The students will also learn about Trail Positions and the Chuck Wagon. Students will also learn about the tools and materials Cowboys used to do their work on the trails and later in ranches.

TEKS Requirements or Unit of Study: 1-A identify major era in Texas History, 6 A & B





VERIFICATION AND INTRODUCTION

Ask the students what they know about cowboys. How have they learned this information? Through movies, books or guessing? The students should be familiar with the concept of cowboys and have an introductory knowledge about life in the West. If the students are not familiar with cowboys, begin with the lesson plan.

OVERVIEW & PURPOSE

Texas ranching traces its roots to 1690 when Spain introduced cattle to Texas. Cowboys soon developed tools and techniques that were adapted for working cattle. From the end of the Civil War until the mid-1880s, tens of thousands of cowboys rode the cattle trails. Not all cowhands made the trek northward, but as one Lockhart drover put it, a man did not graduate from cowboy school until he “lit out” on at least one long ride. The cowboy was most often a hard-working laborer, and many were Hispanic or African American. Some women also made the journey, sometimes disguised as young men. After up to four straight months in the saddle, often in the same clothes every day, eating every meal at the chuck wagon, drinking nothing but coffee and water, the cowboy's job was finally done -- he was paid for his work, and turned loose in town. (The New Handbook of Texas).

ACTIVITY: Chuck wagon activity key

Can you guess the food item by the cowboy's nickname for it?

- Chuck Wagon Chicken (bacon)
- Pecos Strawberries (beans)
- Sinkers or Bullets (biscuits)
- Saddle Blankets (pancakes)
- Lick or Long Sweetin (molasses)
- Belly Wash (coffee)

It's a Cowboy's Life

VAQUERO TO COWBOY

Our modern-day idea of the cowboy came from the Spanish and Mexican vaqueros. These vaqueros were known for their horsemanship and stock-tending skills. Vaqueros caught and trained mustang ponies and became very good at flushing cattle out of heavy brush. Vaqueros often worked alone on large ranches and mission pastures.

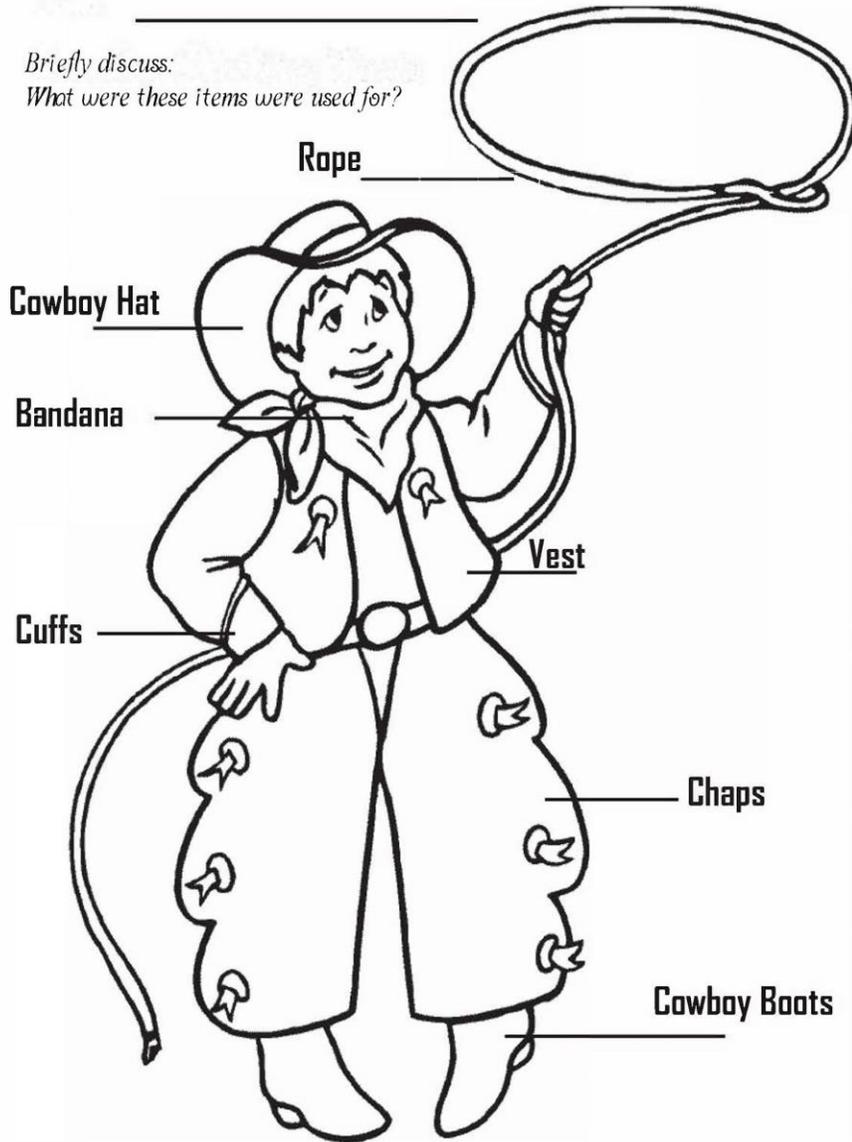


Early ranchers in Texas adapted many tools and techniques from the vaqueros for working cattle. Saddles, chaps, bandanas, sombreros, lariats (rope) and spurs soon became part of the tools and clothing that a Texas cowboy might need. The tools and clothing all had a practical purpose;

1. The **Cowboy hat** protected cowboys from the sun.
2. The **bandana** was used to protect cowboys from the dust and wiping their sweat.
3. **Chaps** are intended to protect the legs of cowboys; they help to protect riders' legs from scraping on brush, injury from thorns of cacti, sagebrush, mesquite and other thorny vegetation.
4. **Cowboy boots** served the practical purpose of allowing men to ride comfortably in the western saddle for an extended period of time without slipping.

Activity 1. Briefly Discuss: What were these items used for?

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What were these items used for?



COWBOY FACT VS. FICTION

Driving a large herd of cattle up the trail nearly a thousand miles was a real adventure and dangerous work. Many of the drovers, or “waddies,” were teenagers, including girls who dressed as boys. Movies have portrayed cowboys as men who broke the law or who loved to “gunsling” and start shootouts. The reality was that working on the Trail they were exposed to the elements: thunderstorms, extreme heat or cold, stampedes and Native American raids. Being a cowboy was hard work and took real skill.

"In person the cowboys were mostly medium-sized men... quick and wiry, and as a rule very good-natured; in fact, it did not pay to be anything else. In character, their like never was or will be again."

-Teddy Blue Abbott

WOMEN RANCHERS AND TRAIL HANDS

Ranch work was not just for men and boys. During the Civil War, small ranches were maintained by the wives and daughters of absent soldiers. During trail drives, it was women who stayed behind to manage both families and cow herds.

Some women even went up the trail with their husbands or on their own. In 1871, **Amanda Burks** accompanied her husband on a drive to Kansas, and after his death expanded their ranch in La Salle County, Texas.

In 1873, a widow, **Margaret Borland**, drove her own herd of 2,500 head up the Chisholm Trail from Victoria, Texas, to Kansas. In 1888, Willie Matthews, 19, disguised herself as a boy and worked on the trail to Colorado for four months undetected. Her boss said that her trailing skills were equal to a man.

Other women operated their own ranches or assisted their husbands in management. A school teacher, **Lizzie Johnson** (*seen in picture*) of Austin raised cattle and drove her own herd over the Chisholm Trail.



In 1877, Molly Goodnight helped her husband Charles manage the vast JA Ranch in Palo Duro Canyon, the first in the Panhandle. In 1880, Lizzie Campbell joined her husband on the Matador Ranch to play a similar role.

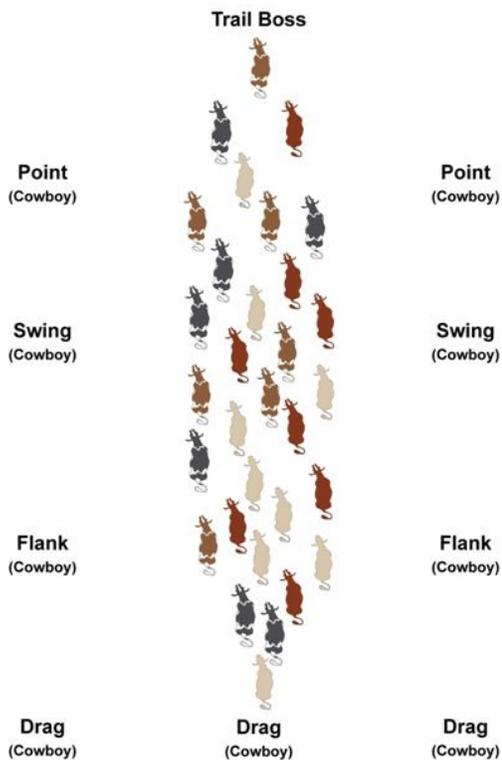
COWBOYS POSITION ON THE TRAIL

A crew usually included 12, including the trail boss, nine drovers, a horse herder, known as a wrangler, and a cook. Led by the chuck wagon, remuda (spare horses), and the lead steer (male cow in placed in front of the herd), such as **Charles Goodnight's Old Blue**, the herd would stretch out in a line over two miles long!

The drovers worked in pairs on either side of the line, the more experienced hands being the “pointers” at the head, while the least experienced worked “drag” at the rear amidst constant dust. The drive generally went about ten to fifteen miles a day and took from two to three months to reach the railhead in Kansas.

Anglos, Hispanics, Native Americans, and African-Americans all worked as trail hands. Some made a drive only once; for others, trail driving became regular seasonal work until the last drives were made in the 1890s.

Cattle Drive Positions



Point man

The point man, also called the point rider or lead rider, is the cowboy who rides near the front of the herd. An honored position on the drive, this job is reserved for more experienced hands who know the country through which they are traveling.

Swing rider

Swing riders ride closely along each side of the herd, about a third of the way back from the point rider. Their responsibility is to keep the herd together, and they are constantly on the lookout for any animals that might try to break away.



Flank rider

Flank riders ride on each side of the herd, near the rear—about two-thirds of the way back. Their role is to back the swing riders up and keep the cattle bunched, preventing the back of the herd from fanning out.

Drag rider

The drag riders ride behind the herd to keep it moving, pushing the slower animals forward. Because of the exhausting work and insufferable dust, this unpleasant job is typically reserved for new or “green” cowboys.

Wrangler

The wrangler is responsible for taking care of the drive’s remuda, making sure the horses are fed and doctored. He typically drives the horses with the wagon, as his secondary duties include helping the cook rustle firewood, unhook the team, or any other odd jobs around the camp. (Lauren Feldman; Cattle Drive Positions (Feb 13, 2017))

Activity 2. Which position would you have liked on the trail? Explain why?

COME AND GET IT AT THE CHUCK WAGON

The Chuck Wagon was the most important part of the trail drive. Drawn by mules or oxen, it carried food, utensils, water barrels, tools, firewood, and the crew's bed rolls. The Chuck Wagon was invented specifically for the use of the Texas cowboys who were driving their

herds along the trail to the closest railhead or market.

While some form of mobile kitchens did exist along the overland trails and had for generations, the invention of the Chuck Wagon is attributed to **Charles Goodnight**, a Texas rancher and co-founder of the Goodnight-Loving Trail. (© Kathy Weiser/Legends of America, updated March 2020.)

The “cookie,” second in importance to the trail boss, used only food that was easily preserved.

His job required that he get up earlier than the cowhands, usually before the first light of dawn, in order to have coffee and breakfast ready for the crew. After the men had saddled up and left the cook washed, dried and put away the dishes and cooking utensils, packed the bedrolls and any food supplies in the wagon, and hitched up the team to move on to the next camp.

In the evening, he had to move quicker than the crew in order to be at the appointed camp to have a hot meal ready when they arrived. In addition to cooking the meal, if Cookie was feeling kindly toward “the boys,” he would make a desert, which usually consisted of a pie or pastry. (© Kathy Weiser/Legends of America, updated March 2020.)

Generally, every meal included bacon or dried salted beef, beans, sourdough biscuits, and coffee.



Activity 3. Can you guess the food item by the cowboy's nickname for it? Write your answer next to the item.

1. Chuck Wagon Chicken: _____
2. Pecos Strawberries: _____
3. Sinkers or Bullets: _____
4. Saddle Blankets; _____
5. Lick or Long Sweetin: _____
6. Belly Wash: _____





Resources

Lauren Feldman ;Cattle Drive Positions (Feb 13, 2017) (americancowboy.com)

Kathy Weiser; Legends of America, updated March 2020.)

The Portal to Texas History

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