

# The Texas Cowboy: Myth and Reality

**Length:** One 50-minute class period

**Grades:** 7<sup>th</sup> grade Texas History

**Overview:** Good guys wear white and bad guys wear black. Texas cowboys have been around as long as Texas has been part of the West. These are just a few of the widely-held beliefs about cowboys, but are they true? In this introductory lesson about cowboys students observe artwork by noted Western artists Charles Marion Russell and William Robinson Leigh that portray cowboys and have contributed to the Texas cowboy myth. Use these works as a springboard for teaching the difference between the mythic version of the Texas cowboy and the reality of cowboy life.

Note: References in this lesson are made to students doing parts of the lesson online. If computers are not available for student use, alternate options are given.

## Objectives:

- Students will distinguish fact from myth when discussing the history of cowboys.
- Students will observe, discuss, and analyze works of art that refer to the cowboy lifestyle.
- Students will write original cowboy ballads based on one of the two Western artworks.

## Connections to 7<sup>th</sup> grade TEKS for social studies:

- Student identifies significant events and issues from Reconstruction through the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including factors leading to the expansion of the Texas frontier, the development of the cattle industry, the myth and realities of the cowboy way of life. (7.6A)
- Student explains the political, economic, and social impact of the cattle and oil industries and the development of West Texas resulting from the close of the frontier. (7.6B)
- Student identifies ways in which Texans have adapted to and modified the environment and analyze the consequences of the modifications. (7.10A)
- Student identifies examples of Spanish influence on place names such as Amarillo and Rio Grande and on vocabulary in Texas, including words that originated from the Spanish cattle industry. (7.19C)

## Materials:

Printed or online version of [Cowboy Myths and Truths Game](#)

Computers with internet access

Slide projector

Slides or computer images of *The Roping* by William Robinson Leigh and *The Slick Ear* by Charles Marion Russell ([Click here to order slides.](#))

[Lyrics to "Little Joe, the Wrangler"](#)

[Writing a Cowboy Ballad](#)

[Internet resources](#), textbooks, and books with information on cattle drives and cowboys

**Procedure:**

1. Begin this introductory lesson on cowboys and cattle drives by playing the game *Cowboy Myths and Truths* with the class to assess students' knowledge and misconceptions about Texas cowboys. Use the printed version of this game and play the game orally, or have students log onto the Blanton website and go to:

*eLearning > Learning Activities > The Texas Cowboy: Myth and Reality > Cowboy Myths and Truths Game* or

URL <<http://wwwtest.utexas.edu/blanton/utopia/elearning/aac/student.html>>

After playing the game, have students also look at information and images on the websites under *A Closer Look* to get a sense of realistic cowboy life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

2. Use the game as a jumping off point to discuss the difference between the cowboy myth and reality. Ask them:

- Where do our perceptions about cowboy life come from?
- Are images of cowboys in Western paintings, movies, and television accurate portrayals of the cowboy way of life? Why or why not?

3. Show students slides or computer images of *The Roping* by William Robinson Leigh and *The Slick Ear* by Charles Marion Russell. Explain to students how these paintings portray the 19<sup>th</sup> century cowboy of the long cattle drives across Texas and describe some of the historic connections the works make. Ideas you may want to include:

- Texas depended on the cattle industry to recover financially after the Civil War.
- Between 1866 and 1890, about ten million longhorns were driven across Texas to Northern markets.
- The Texas cowboy industry era only lasted about 25 years because once railroads reached Texas and the price of cattle declined, there was no reason to drive cattle north. The invention and use of barbed wire closed in the frontier making it almost impossible to drive cattle.

4. Have students carefully observe the two paintings and discuss with them the works' artistic details by asking:

- How would you describe the feelings suggested by these paintings?
- Is this an accurate portrayal of everyday cowboy life? Why or why not?
- How do these scenes compare to the photographs of real cowboys you found on the websites?
- In your opinion what do the artists think of cowboys? What details in the works make you think that?

5. Tell students that an important part of cowboy culture was the songs that told of cowboy legends like the ballad “Little Joe, the Wrangler.” From the Blanton website have students go to:

*eLearning* > *Learning Activities* > *The Texas Cowboy: Myth and Reality* > *Respond and Create*  
or URL <<http://wwwtest.utexas.edu/blanton/utopia/elearning/aac/student.html> >

Read to them or have them play and listen to the [song “Litte Joe, the Wrangler.”](#) Point out and explain the references in the song that refer to 19<sup>th</sup>-century cowboy life. Ask students:

- What realities of cowboy life are revealed in the song?
- How significant were the cowboys and the cattle drives to the development of the cattle industry and economy of Texas?

6. Have students get into groups of 3 or 4 to write an original ballad from the point of view of a character in one of the paintings using information they find in their textbooks, books, internet resources, and the image itself for the basis of their ballad. Display finished ballads on a bulletin board so students can read each other's ballads.

7. Ask students to summarize the main ideas about cowboy life that they learned and reflect on their learning by asking:

- Although the cowboy life was not glamorous and it was only a short part of Texas history, why do you think people have been fascinated by cowboys for so long?
- How has the legend of the Texas cowboy defined what people outside of Texas think of Texans?
- In what ways do cowboy ballads tell us about what cowboy life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was like? How did your ideas about cowboys change from the beginning of the lesson to the end? What cowboy myths did you discover were false?

**Related Resources:**

<http://www.net.westhost.com/loving.shtml>

The Goodnight-Loving cattle trails of the Old West

<http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/index.html>

Encyclopedia of Texas History

<http://www.cowboyhalloffame.org/index2.html>

The National Cowboy and Western Heritage shows details from real cowboy life

<http://www.cartermuseum.org/collections/smith>

Cowboy photographer Erwin E. Smith depicts realistic images of cowboys in the 19<sup>th</sup> century working, relaxing, and doing daily chores

[http://www.king-ranch.com/index\\_netscape.htm](http://www.king-ranch.com/index_netscape.htm)

Images and information on King Ranch, one of the most importance cattle ranches

## Writing a Cowboy Ballad

A ballad is a story told in song which usually includes repetition, four-line stanzas, and a rhyming pattern. Common rhyming patterns are abac, aabb, or acbc. Repetition can be entire lines or stanzas.

Check out the excerpt from "Little Joe, the Wrangler" below. Notice the rhyme pattern for this verse is abcdec.

Learned him to wrangle horses (a)  
An' try to know them all (b)  
Get them in at daybreak, if he could (c)  
An't follow the chuck wagon (d)  
An' always hitch the team (e)  
An' help the cocineros rustle wood (c)

## Cowboy Myths and Truths Game

1. The cowboy life was glamorous.

*Myth:* It was very difficult working 18-hour days and the long trail rides were sometimes boring.

2. Most cowboys had small or medium physical frames.

*Truth:* Large men were too heavy to ride mustangs.

3. A cowboy would ride his favorite horse all day.

*Myth:* Cowboys would ride a string of horses depending on what task was at hand. For example, a mild horse would be used at night and a quick horse would be used for cattle roping and tending.

4. Many Texas cowboys were Mexican or African-American.

*Truth:* During the Cowboy Era (1866-1886) one sixth of the cowboys were Mexican, and many others were African-American or Native American.

5. Most Texas cowboys were older, experienced wranglers.

*Myth:* Most cowboys were young men who learned on the job.

6. Women could not be cowboys.

*Myth:* Several women owned ranches and ran their own cattle drives, including Amanda Burks and Lizzie Johnson.

7. Cowboys often had to fight off Native Americans.

*Myth:* Cowboys rarely if ever fought Native Americans.

8. The word “cowboy” was invented in Texas.

*Myth:* Actually, the job of a “cowboy” came from the Mexican and Spanish “vaquero.” Many cowboy words and practices come from the Spanish language and Mexican culture. Here are a few examples of Spanish and English words related to ranching:

Vaca = Cow

Ranchero = Rancher

Corro = Corral

Mesteños = Mustangs

Cocinero = Cook