

# THE AMERICANS --- THE DEMOCRATIC EXPERIENCE

Daniel J. Boorstin

"American life is a  
powerful solvent."

GEORGE SANTAYANA



Random House | New York

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THE  
AMERICANS

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<sup>Joseph</sup>  
Daniel J. Boorstin

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BOOKS BY DANIEL J. BOORSTIN

*The Americans: The Colonial Experience*  
*The Americans: The National Experience*  
*The Americans: The Democratic Experience*

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*American Civilization* (editor)

\* \* \*

for young readers

*The Landmark History of the*  
*American People*

## THE AMERICANS THE DEMOCRATIC EXPERIENCE

FOR *Ruth*

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## CHANGES

*In 1868, as the first transcontinental railroad was nearing completion, Charles Francis Adams, Jr., predicted the impending transformation of American experience:*

“Here is an enormous, an incalculable force . . . let loose suddenly upon mankind; exercising all sorts of influences, social, moral, and political; precipitating upon us novel problems which demand immediate solution; banishing the old, before the new is half matured to replace it; bringing the nations into close contact before yet the antipathies of race have begun to be eradicated; giving us a history full of changing fortunes and rich in dramatic episodes. Yet, with the curious hardness of a material age, we rarely regard this new power otherwise than as a money-getting and time-saving machine. . . . not many of those . . . who fondly believe they control it, ever stop to think of it as . . . the most tremendous and far-reaching engine of social change which has ever either blessed or cursed mankind. . . . Perhaps if the existing community would take now and then the trouble to pass in review the changes it has already witnessed it would be less astounded at the revolutions which continually do and continually must flash before it; perhaps also it might with more grace accept the inevitable, and cease from useless attempts at making a wholly new world conform itself to the rules and theories of a bygone civilization.”

*The century after the Civil War was to be an Age of Revolution—of countless, little-noticed revolutions, which occurred not in the halls of legislatures or on battlefields or on the barricades but in homes and farms and factories and schools and stores, across the landscape and in the air—so little noticed because they came so swiftly, because they touched Americans everywhere and every day. Not merely the continent but human experience itself, the very meaning of community, of time and space, of present and future, was being revised again and again; a new democratic world was being invented and was being discovered by Americans wherever they lived.*

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# Book One

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## EVERYWHERE COMMUNITIES

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"When you get there, there isn't any there there."

GERTRUDE STEIN

AMERICANS reached out to one another. A new civilization found new ways of holding men together—less and less by creed or belief, by tradition or by place, more and more by common effort and common experience, by the apparatus of daily life, by their ways of thinking about themselves. Americans were now held together less by their hopes than by their wants, by what they made and what they bought, and by how they learned about everything. They were held together by the new names they gave to the things they wanted, to the things they owned, and to themselves. These everywhere communities floated over time and space, they could include anyone without his effort, and sometimes without his knowing. Men were divided not by their regions or their roots, but by objects and notions that might be anywhere and could be everywhere. Americans lived now not merely in a half-explored continent of mountains and rivers and mines, but in a new continent of categories. These were the communities where they were told (and where they believed) that they belonged.



## PART ONE

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# The Go-Getters

"Most of the time we were solitary adventurers in a great land as fresh and new as a spring morning, and we were free and full of the zest of darers."

CHARLES GOODNIGHT

"Money-getters are the benefactors of our race."

P. T. BARNUM

"To live outside the law you must be honest."

BOB DYLAN

THE YEARS AFTER the Civil War when the continent was only partly explored were the halcyon days of the Go-Getters. They went in search of what others had never imagined was there to get. The Go-Getters made something out of nothing, they brought meat out of the desert, found oil in the rocks, and brought light to millions. They discovered new resources, and where there seemed none to be discovered, they invented new ways of profiting from others who were trying to invent and to discover. Lawyers, who in the Old World had been the staid props of tradition, became a Go-Getting profession, profiting from the hopes of others, from the successes and frustrations of boosters and transients. Federalism itself became a profitable commodity, making business for lawyers and hotelkeepers and bartenders, and building improbable new cities. The moralism of Americans, even their high-minded desire to prohibit vice, itself

became a resource, created new enterprises, accumulating fortunes for those who satisfied illicit wants. All over the continent—on the desert, under the soil, in the rocks, in the hearts of cities—appeared surprising new opportunities.

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# 1

## “Gold from the Grass Roots Up”

AMERICANS WOULD BECOME the world’s great meat eaters. In the Old World, beef was the diet of lords and men of wealth. For others it was a holiday prize. But American millions would eat like lords—because of the efforts of American Go-Getters in the half-charted West.

The Western combination of desert, inedible forage, and unmarketable wild animals offered a puzzling, enticing opportunity to men in search of new wealth. It was seized by Western cattlemen and cowboys. Their great opportunity was to use, apparently useless land that belonged to nobody. “There’s gold from the grass roots down,” declared California Joe, a guide in the gold-rich Dakotas in the 1870’s, “but there’s more gold from the grass roots up.” Westerners took some time to discover that gold. But once they discovered it, a rush for the new gold was on. That rush would transform much of the West, would shape the American diet, and created some of the most distinctive American institutions and folk heroes—including the cowboy.

NOBODY KNOWS EXACTLY how it all began. Legend has it that sometime toward the end of the Civil War a heavy-laden govern-

ment ox train traveling through the northern plains of eastern Wyoming was caught in a snowstorm and had to be abandoned. The driver returned the next spring to see what had become of his cargo. Instead of the skeletons he had expected to find, he saw his oxen, living, fat, and healthy. How had they survived?

The answer lay in a resource that unknowing Americans had trampled underfoot in their haste to cross the "Great American Desert" to reach lands that sometimes proved barren. In the Eastern parts of the United States the preferred grass for forage was a cultivated plant. It grew well with enough rain, then when cut and stored it would "cure" and become nourishing "hay" for winter feed. But in the dry grazing lands of the great West, that familiar blue-joint grass was often killed by drought. To raise cattle out there seemed risky or even hopeless.

Who could imagine a fairy-tale grass that required no rain and somehow made it possible for cattle to feed themselves all winter? But the surprising Western wild grasses were just like that. They had wonderfully convenient features that made them superior to the grasses cultivated by Eastern cattlemen. Various known as buffalo grass, grama grass, or mesquite grass, they were not only immune to drought; the lack of summer and autumn rains actually preserved them. They were not juicy like the cultivated Eastern grasses, but had short, hard stems. And they did not need to be "cured" in a barn, but dried right where they grew on the ground. When they dried in this way they remained naturally sweet and nourishing through the winter. Cattle left outdoors to fend for themselves thrived on this God-given hay. And the cattle themselves helped plant the fresh grass year after year, for they trampled the natural seeds firmly into the soil to be watered by the melting snows of winter and the occasional rains of spring. The dry summer air cured them, much as storing in a barn cured the cultivated grasses.

In winter the drifts of snow, dissolving under the warm breath of the cattle, enlarged the range which in summer was limited by lack of water. Even when deep snow covered the grama grass, the Western range offered "browse feed" in the form of low shrubs. The white sage (*Eurotia lanata*; sometimes called winter fat) had, like other sages, its own remarkable qualities, for its nutritious value improved after it had been through a frost.

The Western cattle, too, had surprising virtues all their own. The great career of the Texas Longhorns had begun in Spain. Their ancestors had been brought over by the Spanish explorers and missionaries, who raised them for beef or for the bullfight. By the eighteenth century thousands of head, strayed from the missions, were roaming wild. When settlers from the United States came to the Mexican

province of Texas in great numbers in the 1830's, they found large stocks of wild cattle bearing no brand or any other mark of ownership. To acquire a herd of Texas Longhorns required only the skill of the hunter. Texans, forgetting that these were descended from Spanish cattle, began to think of them as native wild animals—"wilder than the deer."

When the knowledgeable Army scientist Major William H. Emory was surveying the southern boundary of Texas in 1857 after the Mexican War, he reported that "hunting the wild horses and cattle is the regular business of the inhabitants of Laredo and other towns along the Rio Grande." But such hunting was no child's play. "The wild cattle of Texas, miscalled tame," were, according to an experienced hunter, "fifty times more dangerous to footmen than the fiercest buffalo." In the years after Texas' independence, they ranged over most of the state. This was the cow that made the cowboy.

Seldom has a wild animal so shaped the life of a civilized people. We read with incredulity how the buffalo dominated the life of the Plains Indians, yet the Texas Longhorn wielded a similar power over thousands of Western Americans. One consequence was, as J. Frank Dobie has explained, that "America's Man on Horseback" was "not a helmeted soldier, but a booted cowboy" who had his own kind of pride and insolence and self-confidence. The Texas Longhorn put the cowboy on horseback, kept him in the saddle, and fixed the rhythm of his life. The wildness of the Wild West, then, was in large part the wildness of the Texas Longhorn.

"In Texas," the saying went, "cattle live for the sake of man, but in all other countries, man lives for the sake of his cattle." Old World peasants were accustomed to coddle their cattle, and in harsh weather brought them indoors to sleep with the family. The "well-bred" Shorthorn cow of the East, as the cowboys remarked, had been spoiled by civilization. "Take her away from her sheltered surroundings and turn her loose on the range, and she is as helpless as most duchesses would be if left on a desert island." But since the Longhorns had preserved the wild animal's ability to fend for itself, the Western cattleman was saved much of the trouble of looking after them. Their long, sharp horns were no mere ornament, for the mother cows knew how to use them against wolves and others who attacked their calves. The Longhorns liked water and were ingenious at finding it. Ranging in solitude or in small groups, they did not require the large water source of a traveling herd. When a number of cows traveled together with their brood, they even developed their own lookout system. Two at a time would stand guard against the wolves while the other cows took the long trip to water, and then returned to refresh their own calves with milk.

The wild animal's sense of smell enabled the mother Longhorn to care for her own. Her bloodhound's nose could make the difference between life and death. Experienced cowboys driving cattle in desperate need of water would let the lead steer act as guide. Longhorns were said to be able to smell a shower fifteen miles away. Stories told how trusting cowboys were finally rewarded by a remote solitary lake or a hidden stream after a forty-mile trek.

The Longhorn's skill at finding food became a legend. Contrary to common report, his cloven hoofs actually made it impossible for him to paw snow or ice off the grass, but he was independent and resourceful in finding other food in winter. He had a remarkable ability to graze *up*. There was the apocryphal story of the dry cowhide (with bones inside) seen hanging high up in a tree. "Great browsers, those cattle of mine," the owner is supposed to have explained. "Spring of the year, and that old Longhorn clumb the elm like a squirrel to eat the buds, and jest accidentally hung himself." In sober fact, the Texas breed really did raise their forefeet on the cottonwood limbs to reach twigs and leaves, and they used their horns to pull down the long blossoms of the Spanish dagger. They could live on prickly pear, and where there was no grass, they browsed like deer on the shoots of trees and bushes. They were supposed to have the limber neck of a goat, a mouth that could chew and a stomach that could digest the thorns of cactus and chaparral—together with a barometric sense to warn of oncoming storms.

The Texas breed, destined to make so many men so wealthy, had been naturally bred to thrive "on air and scenery." What made them a rich resource was the vast unappropriated, unfenced West. In the scrubby, water-poor stretches thousands of miles northward of the Rio Grande, the Longhorns needed not tens or hundreds of acres, but hundreds of thousands of acres. The Longhorns required the bigness of Texas.

The fortunes of cattlemen were creatures of the public domain. While cattlemen sometimes called that "God's Country," they were reluctant to acknowledge their tenancy. Like the railroad builders, they believed themselves the rightful beneficiaries of the government. But while the railroad men received only particular parcels along their rights of way, cattlemen claimed a residual title to the whole undivided West. They made it theirs by ranging their cattle all over. "Free grass" was the foundation of their life and their living. "Our Eastern farmers are giving up the cattle-breeding," General James S. Brisbin explained in *The Beef Bonanza; or, How to Get Rich on the Plains*, in 1881. "They cannot compete with plains beef, for while their grazing lands cost them \$50.00, \$75.00, and \$100.00 per acre, and hay has to be cut for winter feeding, the grazing lands in

the West have no market value, and the cattle run at large all winter—the natural grasses curing on the ground and keeping the stock fat even in January, February, and March." Brisbin could not imagine "why people remain in the overcrowded East" when out West, fortunes were there for the taking.

THE RANGE-CATTLE INDUSTRY, then, seemed made for the Go-Getter. The hero of the Western success saga was bright and enterprising, housing a strong character in a sturdy physique—the first American athletic idol. A hybrid of Davy Crockett and Horatio Alger, he could not have won his fortune without the agility to dodge Indian arrows, the stamina to ride for days, and the boldness to match fists with all comers.

If he was as versatile as John Wesley Iliff he was a herd builder, a trailblazer, and a city founder. Born in 1831 on a prosperous Ohio farm, Iliff attended Ohio Wesleyan, a newly founded booster college—one of the scores of optimistic little institutions founded in the hope that cities would grow up to nourish them. In 1856 when his father offered to give him \$7,500 if he would settle on a good Ohio farm, young Iliff refused, and (so the story went) asked instead for a mere \$500 so he could make his start in the West. His first stop was a rendezvous in April 1857 with some friends in eastern Kansas Territory, where he helped lay out a new town, to be called Ohio City. Lumber was hauled from Kansas City for the very first building—characteristically a two-story hotel. Iliff, after raising money by popular subscription, built the first store, then secured some farmland. Those were the days when Kansas was bleeding from its wounds in the antislavery struggle. Murder was a common weapon of both pro- and anti-slavery forces anxious to prevent the proposed state from falling into the hands of the enemy.

In autumn, 1858, news reached Kansas of gold discovered in Colorado. By early 1859 Iliff had sold his Kansas property, bought an ox train and provisions, and joined the rush to Pikes Peak. There, with two partners, he opened a store on Cherry Creek. By May there were eleven thousand wagons on the plains moving toward Denver. When these arrived along the South Platte River, in the neighborhood of Pikes Peak, their owners shed their belongings for the steep trip through the mountains. Many sold their oxen or put them temporarily in charge of the new "cattle ranches." "Cattle Ranch!" read an advertisement in the *Rocky Mountain News* on April 23, 1859. "Our ranch is on the Platte River about three miles below the mouth of Cherry Creek, where we have built a large and secure 'Correll' in which the stock put in our care will be put every night. Terms \$1 a

Head per month." These ranchers grazed their cattle on the plains, knowing from experience the winter before that their cattle could survive the winter fending for themselves on the native grasses. Iliff and his partners bought worn-out work cattle from the parties coming into Denver, fattened them on the free grass of the plains, and sold the beef at a substantial profit to the mining camps, to butcher shops, and to other wagon trains bound for points farther west.

When the Territory of Colorado was created in 1861, Iliff moved his operations north to the neighborhood of the already flourishing town of Denver. There, along the north banks of the South Platte River, he built a large-scale business reconditioning for sale the trail-weary cattle which the immigrants were only too glad to dispose of. "A great many of their cattle," one of Iliff's friends recalled, "became footsore traveling the sandy roads and had to be sold or traded to ranchmen or left with them. As traffic increased there were more cattle and more ranches, and trading in these 'footsore' became quite a business with the ranchmen, for it did not take long on good grass to rest up one of these steers and as soon as he was able to go to work he was traded for another footsore and sold and put to work." Then Iliff and a few others brought in cows and bulls and began breeding their own herds.

If you knew the range and could organize a crew of cowboys, your expenses were low and your profits could be high. The use of the range was free, and there was your year-round feed. Corrals were built from local materials that cost nothing, from adobe, or from poles found along the creeks. A few cowboys at \$30 to \$40 a month were all the labor required. Beef on the hoof sold by the living pound. Cattle fed on the native grasses of the range might gain one quarter of their original weight in a few months.

Risks also were there: some ranchers lost as much as one third of their herd on the range each winter. But the risks could be reduced by shrewd management, and Iliff succeeded in keeping his winter losses down to about 5 percent. The Indians, too, were a real and constant threat. When Iliff started his herd in 1861 he was lucky to have his own intelligence agency in the form of a neighboring fur trader whose family connections (he had married both the twin daughters of Chief Swift Bird of the Oglalas) enabled him to warn Iliff when Indians were about to attack. In 1862, when Indian raids had increased in Wyoming, the Postmaster General ordered the mail route up there abandoned and brought down along the South Platte, which meant more business for Iliff.

Iliff profited from the Indian menace in more ways than one. He made a small fortune by supplying meat to federal troops in remote outposts so they could fight the Indians. Then, after a region had

been pacified and the local Indians were confined to reservations, he did just as well by selling beef to the federal troops to feed the Indians.

When the railroads came, the whole Eastern market was suddenly opened to Western cattle. And it took beef to build the railroads through the West. At the end of the Civil War when General Grenville Dodge, the road's chief engineer, decided that the Union Pacific would not go near Denver and through Berthoud Pass but through southern Wyoming, Cheyenne became a boom town. By November 1867, most of the town of Julesburg, Colorado, was moved to Cheyenne on flatcars. The foresighted Iliff boldly signed contracts to deliver cattle by the thousands to Union Pacific construction gangs and to the troops guarding them against Indians.

WHERE WOULD ILIFF find these thousands, and how would they be delivered? He needed help from another type of Western Go-Getter. The cattleman-trailblazer was as essential to the Western cattle business as the railroad builder was to the great industries of the East. Seizing the peculiar opportunity of unsettled, unfenced America, he made beef-on-the-hoof into its own transportation. The rewards were rich when steers, bought for \$3 or \$4 a head in Texas, sold for \$35 or \$40 a head up North.

Big money went to men who could organize the long drive. Charles Goodnight was such a man, and Iliff gave him his chance. Born in Illinois in 1836, Goodnight had lived in Texas since 1845; after the Civil War he began trailing cattle north. In 1868 Goodnight agreed to deliver \$40,000 worth of Texas cattle to Iliff's camp near Cheyenne. Since there was no trail going up that way, and of course no railroad to carry them, Goodnight with his partner Oliver Loving made a new trail of their own. The Goodnight-Loving Trail started in northcentral Texas near Dallas, came through the valley of the Pecos, northward across eastern New Mexico and Colorado and ended just above the Union Pacific route in southern Wyoming. Goodnight delivered the cattle, which Iliff sold at a good profit: some to local butchers, some to railroad crews, and the rest in carloads on the new Union Pacific to dealers in far-off Chicago.

To deliver that first big herd of Texas stock to Wyoming, three thousand head of cattle across eight hundred miles, required no less skill than to command an ocean liner across the Atlantic in uncertain weather. The cattle, of course, moved on their own legs, but the vehicle that carried them was the organized drive.

The cowboy crew gave shape to the mile-long herd, kept the cattle from bunching up into a dense, unwieldy mass or from stringing out

to a thin, discontinuous thread. At the front were two of the most experienced men (called "pointers"), who navigated the herd, following the course set by the foreman. Bringing up the rear were three steady cowboys whose job it was "to look out for the weaker cattle—the drags. Since the speed of the herd was determined by the drags, it was their duty to see that the stronger cattle were kept forward and out of the way, so that the weaker cattle would not be impeded. This was called 'keeping up the corners.'" The rest of the crew were stationed along the sides, the "swing," to keep the herd compact and of uniform width. The men were rotated from front to rear and back toward the front (the nearer the point, the lighter the work) to divide the burden on the men and the horses. Communication on the trail, where the rumble of hoofs smothered words, was by hand signals, mostly borrowed from the Plains Indians.

Controlling the speed of the herd called for experience. "The column would march either slow or fast, according to the distance the side men rode from the line [center of the trail]. Therefore, when we had a long drive to make between watering places, the men rode in closer to the line. Under normal conditions the herd was fifty to sixty feet across, the width being governed by the distance we had to go before resting. Narrowing the string was called 'squeezing them down.' Ten feet was the lowest limit, for then gaps came, and the cattle would begin trotting to fill up the spaces. The pointers checked them in front, for they were never allowed to trot. After a herd was handled for a month or two, they became gentler, and it was necessary to ride a little closer to obtain the same results." The horses (called the "remuda") which were brought along as spares to provide remounts were in care of a wrangler who kept them moving along together, just in front of the herd. To feed the men there had to be a chuck wagon, carrying food and utensils, which the cook would drive fast ahead to the next camping place so that food could be ready when the herd arrived.

At night, guards making their rounds would sing and whistle (the veteran cowman Andy Adams explained) "so that the sleeping herd may know that a friend and not an enemy is keeping vigil over their dreams." A well-serenaded herd would be less apt to stampede. Cowboy "hymns" they were called, because their tunes were compounded from childhood memories of church services. But their words told the exploits of famous horse races, addressed the cattle with endearment or blaspheming, repeated advertising slogans from coffee cans, or simply sprinkled profanity between nonsense syllables.

Apart from Indians, the great sudden peril was the stampede. And nothing was more terrifying than a stampede at night when three

thousand cattle, which a moment before had been quietly dozing in the random postures of sleep, would suddenly rouse to become a thundering mass. They churned around, ever to the right, while the cowboy, trusting his life to his horse, joined with his fellows in a risky encircling tactic. By holding the cattle in the churning circle and pressing inward, the cowboys tried to squeeze the circle smaller and smaller until the herd became a compact "mill" and ground to a halt. If the cowboys failed to throw the herd into a mill, all was lost. The cattle would fly out like sparks, disappearing into the night. Even the toughest cowboys confessed that the stampede gave them a foretaste of hell. "The heat developed by a large drove of cattle during a stampede," Goodnight recalled, "was surprising, and the odor given off by the clashing horns and hoofs was nearly overpowering. Sometimes in cool weather it was uncomfortably warm on the leeward side of a moving herd, and to guard against loss in weight and muscular strength from the effects of this heat, the experienced trail manager always aimed to keep his cattle well distributed while they were in motion. Animal heat seems to attract electricity, especially when the cattle are wet, and after a storm I have seen the faces of men riding with a herd scorched as if some furnace blast had blazed against them." Cowboys found themselves riding blind through the night, unable to see the prairie-dog holes, the gullies, the precipices, which even in daylight would have been treacherous.

Sometimes, after weeks on the trail, the men were as jumpy as the cattle, and then it took a firm hand to prevent trouble. The foremen and owner, according to Goodnight, were "responsible for the lives of their men, not only against Indians so far as possible, but against each other in all cases." Before starting on a trail drive, Goodnight made it a rule "to draw up an article of agreement, setting forth what each man was to do. The main clause stipulated that if one shot another he was to be tried by the outfit and hanged on the spot, if found guilty." Since the successful drive had to be sober and orderly, drivers like Goodnight forbade liquor, gambling, and even swearing, on the trail.

Charles Goodnight achieved fame and fortune trailing cattle north by the thousands. In 1877 he joined with an Irishman, John George Adair, to build the JA Ranch, which soon counted one hundred thousand cattle and a million acres. He founded the first cattlemen's association to fight cattle thieves in the Texas Panhandle. He developed new equipment for the drive and the ranch—a newly designed stirrup that would not turn over, a new chuck box, a safe sidesaddle. In his effort to improve Texas Longhorns he bred them with the Eastern Herefords and Shorthorns, and he crossed the Polled Angus cattle with the buffalo to produce a new breed, called "cattalo."

After the death of his first wife, to whom he had been married for fifty-five years, Goodnight remarried at the age of ninety-one, and had a child by this marriage before his death in 1929 at the age of ninety-three. But more than anything else, he loved the life of a trailblazer and cattledrover. "All in all my years on the trail were the happiest I have lived. There were many hardships and dangers, of course, that called on all a man had of endurance and bravery; but when all went well there was no other life so pleasant."

COW TOWNS, A BY-PRODUCT of the Western cattle trade, were as American as the cowboys themselves. To build a cow town called for the ability to imagine that things could be very different from the way they were. One man who had this imagination in great measure was Joseph G. McCoy. In his *Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest* (1874), McCoy left his own vivid record, which reeks of cattle and echoes the hopeful hyperbole of the West. Born in central Illinois of a Virginia farmer and a Kentucky mother, he went to Texas in 1867, a young man "with an earnest desire to do something that would alike benefit humanity as well as himself." Like Goodnight and others, he was impressed by the great numbers of cattle in Texas, and the much higher price of cattle up North, and he aimed to find a way to bring the cattle to market. What he imagined was not so much a new trail as a new destination. Why not establish a depot on one of the Northern railroads "whereat the Southern drover and Northern buyer would meet upon an equal footing, and both be undisturbed by mobs or swindling thieves." Up there the drover would be free to refuse an unreasonable offer, since from that spot he could always ship his stock east. McCoy imagined that such gatherings of thousands of head of cattle would awaken and enrich some sleepy Kansas town.

This was not an entirely original idea. In 1866, bold Texans had driven cattle north to Sedalia, Missouri, on the Missouri Pacific Railroad. Almost a quarter million Texas cattle arrived there that year. To drive cattle through southeastern Kansas or southwestern Missouri in those days took courage. Texas drovers found their passage blocked by hardy settlers who disliked having their crops trampled and feared having their own cattle infected. Thieves would stampede a herd under cover of night, and then offer to hunt up the cattle and return them for \$5 a head. The cattle that survived to market were so thinned from hard usage that they brought little profit.

"There are few occupations in life," recalled Joseph G. McCoy, "wherein a man will hold by so brittle a thread a large fortune as by droving. In fact, the drover is nearly as helpless as a child, for but a

single misstep or wrong move and he may lose his entire herd, representing and constituting all his earthly possessions. None understood this better than the mobs of outlaws that annually infested the cattle trail leading from Texas to Sedalia, Missouri. If the drover had ready money, and could obtain an interview with the leader of the mob, it was not difficult to secure safe transit for his herd, but it was always expensive, and few drovers were disposed to buy a recognition of their legal rights; many of them had not the money." In that very year of 1866, James M. Dougherty, a young man who had not yet reached his twentieth birthday, was bringing up his herd of over one thousand head of cattle from Texas, hoping to sell them profitably in the St. Louis market. In his memoirs McCoy reported Dougherty's experience:

Soon after entering the State of Missouri, he was aroused from the pleasant reverie of beautiful prospects and snug fortune easily won, by the appearance of a yelling, armed, organized mob, which ordered him to halt. Never in his limited experience had he seen such bipeds as constituted that band of self-appointed guardian angels. Dressed in coarsest home-spun pantaloons and hunting shirts, with under shirts spun of coarsest tow, a pair of rude home made cow-hide shoes, upon whose construction the broad ax and jack-plane had figured largely. All surmounted with a coon-skin cap of great antiquity and unmistakably home manufacture. To this add a score of visages closely resembling the orang outang, bearing evidence of the lowest order of humanity, with but one overpowering passion—a love for unrectified whisky of the deadliest brand. Young Dougherty was told that "them thar steers couldn't go an inch fudder. No sare." Dougherty quietly began to reason with them, but it was like preaching morality to an alligator. No sooner did they discover that the drover was a young man and probably little experienced in life, than they immediately surrounded him, and whilst a part of the mob attacked his comrade and shamefully maltreated him, a half dozen coarse brutes dragged the drover from his saddle, disarmed him, tied him fast to a tree with his own picket rope, then proceeded to whip him with hickory withes in the most brutal manner.

Meanwhile others of the mob were stampeding the herd.

Such incidents as this inspired McCoy to seek a cattle depot farther west on the railroads—so far west that drovers could bring up their Texas herds without having to pass through the settled areas of Arkansas and Missouri. He set about trying to interest both the businessmen in the little towns along the Kansas Pacific and the Santa Fe railroads, and the officials of the railroads themselves. From the president of the Kansas Pacific he received an incredulous smile and the assurance that they were not willing to risk a dollar in the enterprise.



He next approached the president of the Missouri Pacific, the connecting road that went to St. Louis, who gave him a reception so pompous and contemptuous that McCoy (by his own report) "left the office, wondering what could have been the inscrutable purposes of Jehovah in creating and suffering such a great being to remain on earth, instead of appointing him to manage the universe." But the tireless McCoy finally secured a quotation of rates from the Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad, which ran from Kansas City toward Chicago. Then he determined to pick the most convenient little town along the Kansas Pacific where he would build stockyards and facilities for loading large numbers of cattle. This would attract the drovers from Texas and so force the railroads to admit that there was good money in carrying cattle.

He proposed his project to leading citizens in Junction City, Solomon City, and Salina, all of whom, according to his own account, regarded him "as a monster threatening calamity and pestilence." But he did not give up. "Abilene in 1867 was a very small, dead place, consisting of about one dozen log huts, low, small, rude affairs, four-fifths of which were covered with dirt for roofing; indeed, but one shingle roof could be seen in the whole city. The business of the burg was conducted in two small rooms, mere log huts, and of course the inevitable saloon, also in a log hut, was to be found." The saloon keeper, the only noteworthy feature of the town, was known throughout the countryside for his colony of pet prairie dogs which he raised for sale to tourists who took them East as curiosities. Abilene was selected, according to McCoy, "because the country was entirely unsettled, well watered, excellent grass, and nearly the entire area of country was adapted to holding cattle. And it was the farthest point east at which a good depot for cattle business could have been made."

Within sixty days McCoy had transformed the village of Abilene into a well-equipped cattle capital, with a shipping yard to accommodate three thousand head, a pair of large Fairbanks scales, a barn, an office, and inevitably "a good three story hotel." McCoy then sent his publicity agent into southern Kansas and Indian Territory "with instructions to hunt up every straggling drove possible (and every drove was straggling, for they had not where to go), and tell them of Abilene." McCoy's agent rode his pony from Junction City for two hundred miles southwesterly across the Arkansas River at the site of the present city of Wichita, thence far down into the Indian country; then turned east until trails of herds were found. "The drove was overtaken, and the owner fully posted in that, to him, all-absorbing topic, to-wit: a good, safe place to drive to, where he could sell or ship his cattle unmolested to other markets. This was joyous news to the

drover, for the fear of trouble and violence hung like an incubus over his waking thoughts alike with his sleeping moments. It was almost too good to be believed; could it be possible that some one was about to afford a Texan drover any other reception than outrage and robbery?"

The Texas herds turned toward Abilene. On September 5, 1867, when the first shipment—twenty carloads of cattle—went out from Abilene (which two months earlier had been only a prairie village), Illinois stockmen gathered in tents specially erected for the occasion to celebrate with feast, wine, song, and expansive speeches. By the end of December, thirty-five thousand head of cattle had been shipped through Abilene, and within a few years, the number totaled ten million. In addition to the moral satisfaction he was seeking of really having done something "for posterity," McCoy gained many-sided profits. When McCoy first picked Abilene he gave \$2,400 for the whole townsite (with 480 acres). The managers of the Kansas Pacific Railroad had agreed to give McCoy one eighth of the freight on each car of cattle shipped. By the end of the second year, this gave McCoy a claim against the Kansas Pacific amounting to \$200,000. The company then refused to fulfill their contract because, they now said, they had never actually expected that the business would amount to anything! But this did not dampen McCoy's enthusiasm. He became mayor of Abilene, and—booster that he was—produced for the census of 1890 an optimistic report on the livestock industry which brought large investments to his part of the West.

Abilene was only one example of this flourishing new subspecies of the American upstart community. Some, like Dodge City, which boasted herself "The Queen of Cownowns," "The Wickedest Little City in America," eventually became famous in song and story and film and television. But there were many others: Schuyler, and Fort Kearney and North Platte and Ogallala and Sydney, in Nebraska; Pine Bluffs and Green River and Rock Creek and Laramie and Hillsdale and Cheyenne, in Wyoming; Miles City and Glendive and Helena, in Montana. Some were destined to become a new brand of ghost town. A few flourished for reasons that had nothing to do with the visions of their founders. In the 1870's and 1880's their great prosperity was still before them.

## 2

## Rituals of the Open Range

THE CATTLE AND THE RANGE, there for the taking, invited Go-Getters to compete, but also brought them together. To make a living out of cattle you could not go it alone. We romanticize the "lone cowboy," communing with his horse, with the landscape, and with himself. But it was no easier for the lone cowboy to prosper safely in the West than it was for a lone immigrant to cross the ocean, or for a westward-mover to cross the continent by himself. The very landscape somehow led men to rely on one another, and to invent new community rituals to sort out their property and hallow each man's right to his own.

On the cattle trail, individual Americans who had recently faced each other on Eastern battlefields of the Civil War became reunited. "The Rebel," wrote Andy Adams in his *Log of a Cowboy*, "was a good bunkie and a hail companion, this being his sixth trip over the trail." It was a year before the two cowboys discovered they had been on opposite sides during the "late unpleasantness," and by then "the Rebel" was an amiable nickname like any other. In little metropolises like Abilene, Northerners and Southerners found the mutual respect needed to make business prosper. In 1874, when back East the sectional passions of Reconstruction were still bitter, Joseph G. McCoy reported that transactions involving many thousands of dollars were made orally only, and complied with to the letter. "Indeed, if this were not so they would often experience great hardships in transacting their business as well as getting through the country with their stock. . . . the Western Cattle Trade has been no feeble means of bringing about an era of better feeling between Northern and Texas men by bringing them in contact with each other in commercial transactions. The feeling today existing in the breasts of all men from both sections are far different and better than they were six years ago." Out West, beyond the force of settled laws, men were not bound by the political miseries of the more civilized East.

THE WEST WAS a good place for the refugee from older laws, but it offered no refuge from community. The cattleman's drive north—from Texas to meet the railroad at Abilene or Dodge City—

put cowboys under a near-military regime. A careless leader at the "point" or a sleeping sentry might mean disaster for the herd and death for the whole outfit. Men had to suppress their personal hatreds, confine their tempers, and submit to the strict law of the trail, otherwise they might find themselves abandoned or strung up or sent off alone hundreds of miles from nowhere.

The drives north were of course the longest and the most closely supervised of the cowboy's organized efforts. But they were not the only ones. The rhythm of every year was fixed by another organized communal effort, a kind of cowboy rendezvous. The Western cattle business would not have been possible without widespread faith in its own signs and symbols, and a willingness to observe its rituals. These arose out of the peculiar conditions of the American West and out of this novel form of property: wild cattle caught to be fed on wild grass on a no man's land.

Without benefit of law, ranchers had divided the range among themselves by a system that was informal, that had no standing in court, but was enforced by the cattlemen themselves. In the heyday of the cattleman—the two decades after the Civil War—each ran his stock on a portion of the range which he had taken for his own. Ideally one's range would run from a stream bed up to the top of a ridge where another cattleman's range began. The openness of the open range meant that no fence divided one man's range from another's, for in strict law it all belonged to everybody. These Great Plains "ranches" were measured not in acres but in square miles. Each rancher tried to keep his own stock inside his own pre-empted range by assigning a staff of cowboys to "ride the line" between his range and his neighbor's. Stationed in twos in remote "line camps," these line-riders patrolled the ranch borders, coaxing their owner's cattle inward toward the center of his holding, while drifting the neighbor's cattle in the other direction. But on the wide, unfenced range, the cattle did mix. There had to be a way of separating one man's cattle from another's, before they were driven to market.

Out of these needs of the open range, then, came the "roundup." A time of separating one man's property from another's, it became the harvest festival, when each rancher discovered how much his herd had increased. The importance of these two functions—of separating and of harvesting—varied, of course, with time and place. In the early days of the dry Southwest when ranches were far apart, when ranchers commonly bounded the land they called their own by some stream bed, the roundup was mainly a time of harvest. And then the roundup was a relatively simple operation. A couple of neighboring ranchers would agree on a time and place when they drove all the surrounding cattle to a common meeting point. Such