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Black Men Were Cowboys Before It Was Cool

By: John Donovan



Black cowboys, including Nate Love (left) tamed the Wild West well before white cowboys even existed.

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When he was a boy, during season, Larry Callies and his dad would go to rodeos around his Texas hometown every Thursday, Friday and Saturday. And on Sunday, he'd go to a special, segregated rodeo, to watch his real heroes: Black cowboys.

Black cowboys have long been a part of the culture of the [American West](#), though you wouldn't know that if your knowledge of cowboys stems mainly from movie Westerns. The real-life truth is that, after the Civil War, when the Wild West really began to flourish, somewhere around 25 percent of all cowboys were Black. Some historians claim the number is even higher than that.

To which Callies, who runs [The Black Cowboy Museum](#) in Rosenberg, Texas, simply laughs.

"In 1830, 1840, the 1850s and '60s, there was nothing *but* Black cowboys," Callies says.

"You wanna know why? In Texas, 'cowboy' was a slave name. The white man didn't want to work horses and work cows. He refused to be called a cowboy. He wanted to be a cowhand or a cow puncher.

"Until people started hearing about the cowboys back East, and they didn't know they were Black. And they got famous. And then all of a sudden, the white cowboys started saying, 'Hey, I'm a cowboy.'"

How Black Cowboys Made the West

In the early 1800s, as Americans moved west into the territory of Texas for cheap land and a new start, many Southerners took their slaves along with them. When Texas was pulled into the Confederacy and the slave owners moved east to fight in the Civil War, they left their ranches in the hands of their slaves. Those slaves became some of the first Black cowboys of the American West.

After the war, when thousands of newly [freed slaves](#) in the South were searching for a way to make a living, many (some already experienced with cattle and other livestock) wound their way westward. "Being a cowboy," the late William Loren Katz, an African American history scholar, told [Smithsonian Magazine](#) in 2017, "was one of the few jobs open to men of color who wanted to not serve as elevator operators or delivery boys or other similar occupations."

Nat Love, who first learned to tame horses as a slave in Tennessee, was one of the best-known early Black cowboys. He wrote about his gun-toting, saloon-spending exploits in his 1907 autobiography, "[The Life and Adventures of Nat Love, Better Known in the Cattle](#)

Country as 'Deadwood Dick' by Himself; a True History of Slavery Days, Life on the Great Cattle Ranges and on the Plains of the 'Wild and Woolly' West, Based on Facts, and Personal Experiences of the Author," a book which also portrayed some of the less-sexy parts of cowboying:

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.

Clearly, the life of a Black cowboy wasn't as glamorous as the white Westerns portrayed it. Not only were long days and nights away from home common, Black cowboys also faced discrimination — economically and socially — just as Blacks did in much of the rest of the country. (Ironically, some of the earliest Black cowboys, still slaves, were not allowed to take on [the dangerous job of taming wild horses](#) because they were too valuable as slaves.)

Being a successful Black cowboy, Callies says, meant constantly proving your worth. Getting cattle out of the trees and back to the herd. Roping strays. Putting up with the long hours, in the worst of conditions.

"You worked 24 hours a day. You worked all night. In the 1860s, they didn't have fences. They didn't have barbed wire," Callies says. "You had to sit out all night long and watch the herd."

Run-ins with Native Americans happened, too. And an occasional [gunfight in a saloon](#) was known to occur as well. Overall, the life of a Black cowboy in the Old West was not unlike that of any cowboy you'd see in a standard movie Western.

Again, from Love:

I had lost all sense of fear, and while I was not the wild blood thirsty savage and all around bad man many writers have pictured me in their romances, yet I was wild, reckless and free, afraid of nothing, that is nothing that I ever saw, with a wide knowledge of the cattle country and the cattle business and of my guns with which I was getting better acquainted with every day, and not above taking my whiskey straight or returning bullet for bullet in a scrimmage.



Black cowboy Isom Dart (left) was born a slave and turned horse-thieving outlaw, while Bill Pickett (right) created the popular rodeo event of steer wrestling.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

The Real Black Cowboys

Love was one of the best self-promoters of his time, his book filled with the stuff of dime novels and other tall tales. "Exactly where fact left off and fancy took over will never be known," North Carolina State University Professor Emeritus [Richard W. Slatta](#) — he bills

himself as the "Cowboy professor" — [has written](#). "But Love certainly became one of the most successful cowboy self-promoters of his day."

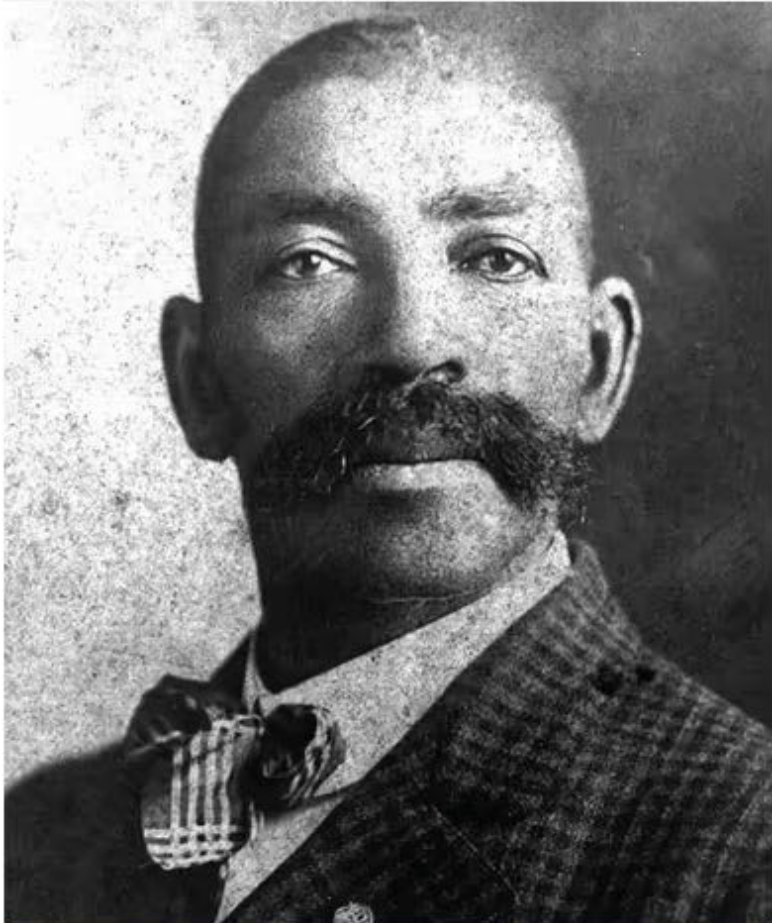
But other Black cowboys, among the thousands who once roamed the West, are at least as notable. Among them:

Bill Pickett was born after the war and is credited with creating the rodeo event of [steer wrestling](#) — known in some circles as bulldogging — in which a cowboy pounces on a steer from the back of a horse and wrestles the steer to the ground. Pickett, born somewhere around 1870, used his teeth to bite the steer into submission, as described by a Wyoming Tribune report that [Slatta dug up](#):

"[Pickett would] attack a fiery, wild-eyed and powerful steer, dash under the broad breast of the great brute, turn and sink his strong ivory teeth into the upper lip of the animal, and throwing his shoulder against the neck of the steer, strain and twist until the animal, with its head drawn one way under the controlling influence of those merciless teeth and its body forced another, until the brute, under the strain of slowly bending neck, quivered, trembled and then sank to the ground."

Bose Ikard is described in his Hall of Fame entry at the National Multicultural Western Heritage Museum and Hall of Fame as the steady right-hand man to [Colonel Charles](#)

Goodnight, one of the most successful Texas cattlemen ever. The character of Joshua Deets, from Larry McMurtry's "**Lonesome Dove**," was based on Ikard. Deets was played in the TV show by Danny Glover.



Bass Reeves (left) was one of the first Black U.S. deputy marshals. He later became the inspiration for the Lone Ranger. Bose Ikard (right) was right-hand man to Charles Goodnight, one of the most successful Texas cattlemen ever.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Isom Dart was a [former slave turned outlaw](#), famed for his bronco-busting and horse-thieving ways. Dart, born Ned Huddleston, was known to steal horses and cattle in Mexico, move them across the Rio Grande and sell them in Texas. He was killed in 1900, at age 51, by hired gun [Tom Horn](#).

Bass Reeves was the first Black commissioned U.S. deputy marshal west of the Mississippi. Born a slave in Texas in 1824, he lived for a long time in Indian Territory before he was assigned to oversee a part of it as marshall in a law enforcement career that lasted at least 32 years. Good with a gun, deft with a disguise when needed, and morally unimpeachable, some insist that it was Reeves who was the inspiration for the [Lone Ranger](#).

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Now That's Interesting

In 1965, "[The Negro Cowboys](#)," written by Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones, became one of the first major works considering the contributions of Black cowboys in the American West. Durham and Jones suggested that as many as 5,000 cowboys in the years following the Civil War were

Black. "An observer standing on a rise and watching a herd of cattle being driven up a trail could not differentiate one cowboy from another," **they wrote**. "He saw only a group of men doing a job in a cloud of dust."

