

Black Cowboys In The American West: On The Range, On The Stage, Behind The Badge

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Review

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Glasrud, Bruce A. and Searles, Michael N. *Black Cowboys in the American West: On the Range, On the Stage, Behind the Badge*. University of Oklahoma Press, \$24.95 ISBN 9780806154060

“Wait a minute. Blacks Helped Pioneer the West.” – Herb Jeffries

Herb Jeffries, a Detroit jazz singer, was dismayed the first time he saw black audiences in the South lining up outside segregated theaters to watch all white casts in the popular cowboy films of the 1930s. He was inspired to create films that showed that black cowboys helped win the West, too. His story is one of many found in Bruce A. Glasrud and Michael N. Searles’s broad and fascinating collection of essays on African Americans’ experiences in the American West titled *Black Cowboys in the American West: On the Range, On the Stage, Behind the Badge*. The editors organize thirteen brief scholarly articles into three categories: “Cowboys on the Range,” “Performing Cowboys,” and “Outriders of the Black Cowboys.” Glasrud introduces the essays; Searles provides a “concluding overview” of many of the issues raised in the essays at the end. In this collection, those with interests in the American West and African American history generally will find much that is new and compelling.

The first section on “Cowboys on the Range” begins with a brief, general essay by Deborah M. Liles on the history of African Americans and cattle raising before the Civil War in the American South. This is an important foundational piece for the rest of the book, as it establishes the long history of African American work in the livestock industry. In other words, the post-Civil War black cowboys discussed in other essays in the book learned to ride and break horses, care for cattle, and other skills in the era of slavery. The other four essays in this first section are each devoted to a particular black pioneer in the nineteenth-century West, with chapters on Mathew “Bones” Hooks, Johana July, Daniel Webster “80 John” Wallace, and Nat Love (a.k.a Deadwood Dick). Each story provides insight into how African Americans negotiated the perils of

Reconstruction and the Jim Crow era in the West. One theme found in many of the essays is that because black cowboys had specialized skills that whites needed and respected, they sometimes could escape the racial discrimination that other African Americans were forced to endure in that period. Douglas Hales writes in his piece on Daniel Webster “80 John” Wallace, “Because of the often harsh and dangerous conditions on cattle drives and on the open range, cowhands understood that it was essential to cooperate with each other. Therefore, black cowboys were often exempted from the severe anti-black attitudes exhibited through much of American society in the post-Civil War era” (77). This is very much a continuation of the practice of whites privileging highly skilled slaves that many scholars of slavery have identified, such as in the cases of enslaved iron-workers and sailors. Women did not often receive the same consideration, which is evident from Cecelia Gutierrez Venable’s essay on Johana July, a cowboy of both African American and Native American ancestry. July’s story, based on her WPA interview from the 1930s, reveals much about black, Native, and white relations in the American West, as well as diverse expectations for women in these different cultures.

The second section of the book, “Performing Cowboys,” turns from the experiences of those who worked with cattle in the nineteenth-century West to those of rodeo stars, actors, and singers who evoke the culture of that earlier generation of cowboys in their performances. Two the articles examine the black rodeo circuits of Texas and Oklahoma in the twentieth century and up to the present day. The authors, Demetrius W. Pearson on Texas, and Roger D. Hardaway on Oklahoma, reveal that there is a separate circuit of black rodeos – a “soul circuit” – that mirrors the better known and better funded white rodeo in those states (102). The segregation of rodeos stretches back to the Jim Crow era, but continues informally today for several reasons. One of the chief of these is that black rodeo stars do not often receive the sponsorships that white stars do, so they have to work day jobs and cannot participate as often in the white-dominated rodeo circuits. A third essay in the section, Mary A. Dempsey’s “The Bronze Buckaroo Rides Again: Herb Jeffries is Still Keepin’ On” examines the rise of Hollywood’s black cowboy movies in the 1930s, based on the author’s interviews with Herb Jeffries before his death. This very brief piece asserts that Jeffries, a jazz singer, promoted the concept of black cowboy movies to Hollywood producers and ended up being cast as the hero of several films, nicknamed the “Bronze Buckaroo.” These films were hardly more realistic than the white-dominated Western films of the time, and were made on scanty

budgets that resulted in low-quality productions overall. However, it is fascinating to learn that in the 1930s, black audiences (these films mainly played in African American theaters) could enjoy films such as *Harlem on the Prairie*. The one drawback to Dempsey's essay is its lack of source citations beyond her interview with Jeffries. The final essay in this section, Alan Govenar's "Musical Traditions of Twentieth-Century Cowboys" makes the argument that African American cowboys had different musical traditions than white cowboys; they were more likely to sing blues or church songs than their white counterparts were. From an organizational point of view, I would have expected Jim Chilcote's "Charley Willis: a Singing Cowboy" to be placed in this section so that it would be read in tandem with Govenar's piece, rather than in the final section of the book.

That last section, "Outriders of the Black Cowboys," is devoted to the experiences of African Americans in the West who were not cowboys but lived on the fringes of cattle country. Therefore, these essays return to the individuals who lived in the second half of the nineteenth century. Perhaps the most compelling essay in the entire book is Miantae Metcalf McConnell's "Mary Field's Road to Freedom." Fields, who settled in Montana in the 1880s, was the first African American woman hired as a star route mail carrier by the United States Postal Service – but she accomplished so much more. She moved to Montana to help establish a Catholic mission school in the wilderness, carrying out all the manual labor jobs for years with no pay besides room and board to aid her friends among the Ursuline nuns. Then, with little warning or justification, the first Catholic bishop of Montana demanded that she leave the service of the school. She then became the only black resident of Cascade, where she opened a café and laundry service. In her sixties, she applied for and received her Post Office commission to carry the mail long distance over rough, unsettled terrain, and she continued in that position for eight years, carrying that mail incredible distances – once traveling 34 miles on snowshoes to get the mail through! This is an excellent analysis of a woman's life of service and accomplishment despite awful limitations based on her gender and race. The remaining essays in this section examine African American life in nineteenth-century Dodge City, Kansas, and the history of Bass Reeves, a U.S. Marshall for thirty-two years in Arkansas. The first essay, C. Robert Haywood's "'No Less a Man': Blacks in Cow Town Dodge City, 1876-1886" complements the earliest ones in this volume by emphasizing that while black cowboys did sometimes receive preferential treatment by whites because of their specialized skills, other African

Americans in the West faced the full brunt of discrimination and abuse. Haywood writes, “The concessions made by white residents to the black cowboy were not necessarily extended to other members of the race” (184). He relates that there was a great deal of turnover in the black population over that ten-year period, and while there were some successful exceptions, such as restaurateur Sallie Frasier, African Americans in Dodge City generally had few economic opportunities and were mocked and criticized in the local newspaper and by the town’s white population. The final essay, Art T. Burton’s “Bass Reeves: a Legendary Lawman of the Western Frontier,” briefly reviews Bass Reeve’s heroic career as an “invincible” Deputy U.S. Marshal – perhaps the first African American to serve in that role west of the Mississippi River. While Burton’s piece is primarily narrative in nature, it is easy to connect his success and fame to that of a select few black cowboys of the same period; impressive abilities outweighed his race among most whites, exempting him from the limitations enforced upon most African Americans of his day. His imposing frame, fearlessness, exemplary shooting and riding skills, and unimpeachable integrity (he once led a manhunt against his own son, who ran from justice after killing his wife) all made him a legend in early Arkansas.

In short, *Black Cowboys in the American West* has much to offer both fans and scholars of the West and of African American history. Many of its engaging essays would work well in an undergraduate classroom, while the issues that emerge regarding the black experience in the West are sure to inspire further thought and research by historians.

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