

COWBOYS AND INDIANS
BUFFALOS AND WOLVES

Study Themes for 1984
West Riverside and Pine City
Museum Schools 1900

by
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VACH COLLECTION



C O W B O Y S

Take the trail bosses, the professional trail drivers. Mostly they were men in their late twenties. They had to be a combination of intelligent businessman and saddle-smart cowboy. They had to know cattle, their habits and menace. They had to be gamblers in the sense that they gambled on buying a herd at one price, and on pushing it to market despite all manner of trouble and danger, and on selling it at a higher price to make a profit. They had to be leaders, of even temper, and know the land ahead. Many were veterans of several drives north before they took on the risk of bossing a herd.

What about the trail boss's crew, the cowboys? Most were young lads in their teens and early twenties. Some were sons of stock raisers; some were drifters; many were greenhorns who had never chalked up a trip to their credit. If a lad had made two or three trips, was dependable, loyal, courageous, and a hard worker, he was considered a 'top hand'. If he had made four or more trips, he was an old veteran. A few made a career of trail driving, but many either went into cattle raising, or left the business forever. Mostly they were young Americans, sons of pioneering settlers, though there were a few English adventurers, some Mexican vaqueros, Negro drovers, and Chinese 'waddies'.

Personal loyalty to a trail boss wasn't enough. Trailing cattle promised a long haul accompanied by dirt, fatigue, danger, monotony, and long weeks with the same men, sleeping on the ground, and eating plain food. Some couldn't take it, and quit, leaving the crew short-handed. Others grumbled the whole way and couldn't wait for pay day, and that day never came until after the herd was sold. In the early days the pay was poor - fifteen to thirty dollars a month and grub, with the cowboy furnishing his own horse, saddle, ropes, blankets, and guns. They had to put up with heat, cold, dust, sweat-burn, saddle gall, insects, skunks, rattlesnakes, wolves and bears, swollen streams, ornery cow horses, storms, lightning, stampedes, Indian raids, rustlers, and irate settlers.

The cowboy had to work as part of a closely-knit team; be neither coward nor bully, neither overbearing nor subservient. He had to be suspicious of cattle, because the ornery dumb critters couldn't be trusted five minutes. He had to be able to make a snap judgment that put neither himself nor the cattle in jeopardy. He had to be "long on memory," spotting troublesome beeves or trouble spots.

He had to withstand quick changes in temperatures, the onslaught of storms, quicksand, poisonous weeds and water and flash floods. He had to keep awake day and night, if need be, and spend long, monotonous hours in the saddle, knowing that calm could explode in a second because a steer took a notion to bolt. Once the herd started to run, he had to stay with it, racing in the dark over rough country pocked with holes or deep cuts.

And yet, despite this catalogue of woes, hundreds of boys every season clamored to join an outfit and head north. The job spelled excitement and adventure, and a chance to cut away from home and see the country; to wear boots, swing a rope, eat chuckwagon fare, ride and ride and ride, and cut a caper in a cowtown at the end of the trail.

Though the cowboy is a distinct American type, he inherited a large part of his equipment, methods, and language from the Spanish and Mexican cattlemen of the very early days. His clothes were designed for the job at hand, and a far cry from those worn by movie and television cowboys. First, the hat. It was broad-brimmed to protect a cowboy's neck and head and eyes from the blazing sun. It served as an umbrella in the rain. The crown made a handy water bucket if a cowboy's horse was unable to get water. The brim served as a drinking cup. A cowboy started his campfire by using his hat as a bellows to fan a weak blaze. It was also used for signaling. In cold weather, the brim was pulled down and tied with a handkerchief to protect his ears.



Trousers had to be narrow, and of rugged cotton material to withstand the hard work and riding. Where there was heavy underbrush, leather chaps were slipped on to protect the legs and thighs. Most cowboys wore galluses, or suspenders, because a belt often cut a man seated on a saddle.

A neckerchief was indispensable. It was used to cover nose and mouth from heavy dust or freezing sleet, to tie down a hat, as a towel, mop, bronc blindfold, hobble, sling, tourniquet, bandage and signal marker, but seldom to wipe a man's nose! When a cowboy got to town and spruced up, he usually blossomed out in a bright red or yellow silk one.

Because pants' pockets were unhandy for a man in the saddle, cowboys used vests of leather or heavy sailcloth. These had four small pockets in them, for holding 'makings,' cigarette tobacco and rice papers and matches, or snuff, or chewing tobacco. Cowboys disliked 'tailor makes,' or factory-rolled cigarettes, because they crushed too easily. Shirts were usually collarless, of grey or blue cotton or wool, with elastic arm-bands holding the cuffs at their proper place.

Two-inch heels on boots were not for show. The high heel was worn to give the cowboy protection against losing his stirrups at critical moments. Since the heel extended below the stirrup, it kept the boot from slipping through, when a cowboy applied sudden pressure on quick stops or turns. The soft leather top of the boot, almost knee high, protected ankles and calves against wear and tear and rattlesnakes. It was broad enough so the pants could be tucked into it, thus preventing snags on brush. Nickel-plated spurs were worn with them. However, the high-heeled boots had one disadvantage; they were very uncomfortable to wear for walking. A cowboy seldom walked a block, if he had to.

Cowboy underwear came in two styles: the long-handled red flannel variety, or three-quarter-length cotton union suits. Socks were grey, but mostly black. A cowboy always had a raincoat or slicker, which he kept handy at all times by tying it behind his saddle.

The cowboy's outfit also consisted of his high pommeled saddle, a revolver or two, a bedroll, and a lariat. The lariat had many uses. A cowboy used it to catch his horse, drag wood to camp, pull cattle from bogholes, throw an ornery steer, or pull the wagon across streams. An extra length came in handy for tying up a bedroll, staking out a horse, lining out a corral, killing snakes, and whipping cows in line.

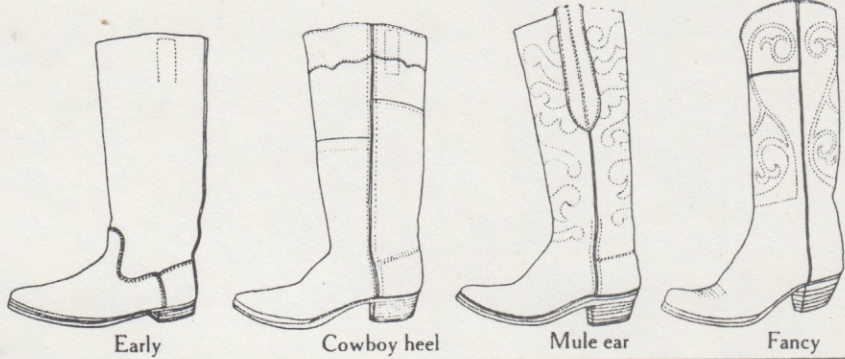
Every cowboy had a horse, but this mount was turned into the horse herd on the trail drive. The boss had to furnish from three to eight horses for each cowboy to use on the road. These were mostly mature, hardy cow ponies that could stand long hours, hard work, and considerable abuse. Although he might treat his own horse well, a cowboy had little regard for the cayuses furnished for his work.

Horses were cheap and expendable in Texas, and cowboys used them with little consideration. Most were sold at the end of the drive. A cowboy soon noted which horse was the most sure-footed and sharp-eyed, and used that mount for night riding. Most were of mustang blood, and only a generation or two removed from the wild horses of Spanish breed that had roamed Texas.



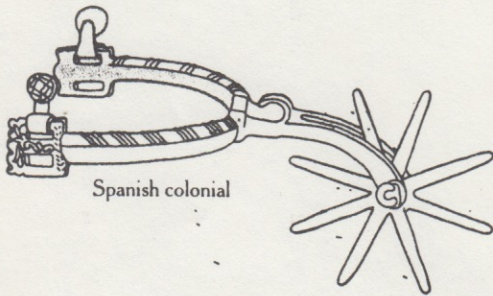
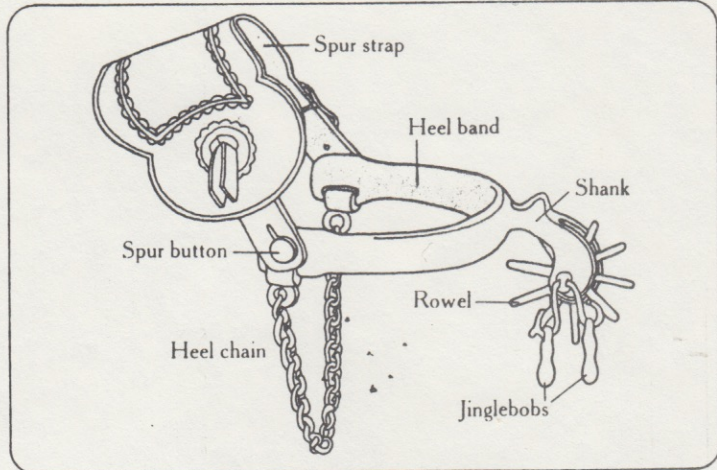
THE EVOLUTION OF THE COWBOY BOOT

Early cowhands wore flat-heeled, round-toed boots they brought home from the Civil War. In the 1860s the true cowboy boot appeared featuring a reinforced arch and higher heel. Later boots took on semi-functional frills, such as a more pointed toe and floppy grips called mule ears to make them easier to pull on. The fanciest boots, made after the mid-1880s, were of soft leather with decorative stitching, which some cowboys claimed gave a snugger fit.



SPURS FOR RANGE WORK AND DISPLAY

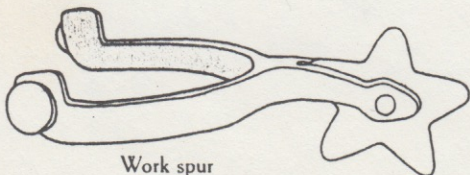
Highly practical, spurs were also a vital part of the cowboy's image, and he rarely took them off. The spur's heel band fit over the back of the boot, while the spur strap fastened across the instep. The heel chain not only kept the spur from riding up but, along with the jinglebobs, produced a sound that was music to any strutting cowboy's ears. Most Americans shunned Mexican spurs, with their spiky rowels, and used models like the OK, with rowels filed down to avoid scouring the pony's flanks. The plainest type was a work spur, with a gentle, star-shaped rowel. However, many cowboys also owned a pair of fancy silver spurs like those shown at lower right.



Spanish colonial

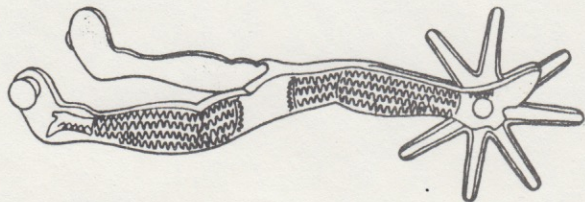
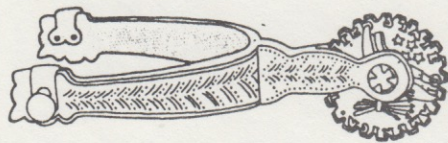
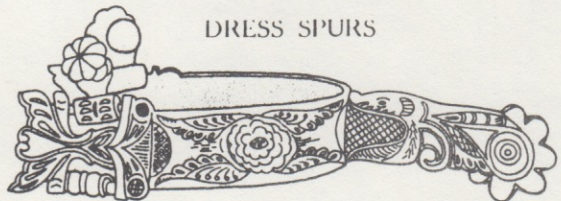


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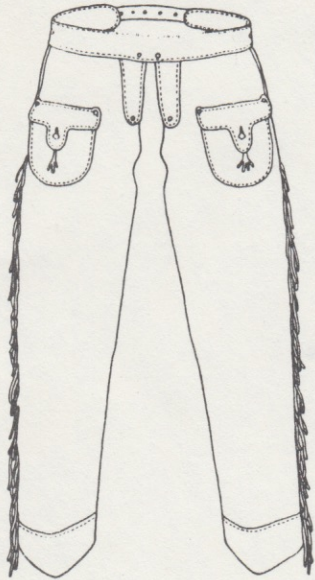


Work spur

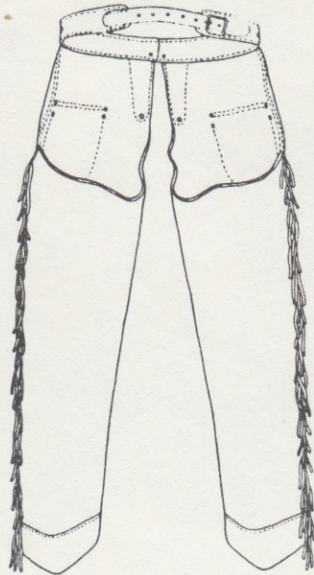
DRESS SPURS



THE RIDER'S LEATHER LEG GUARDS

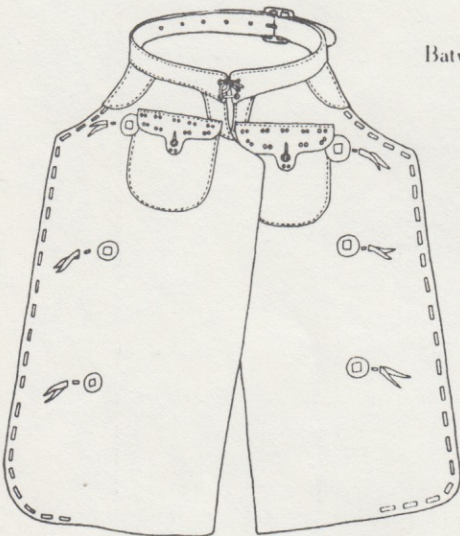


Shotguns

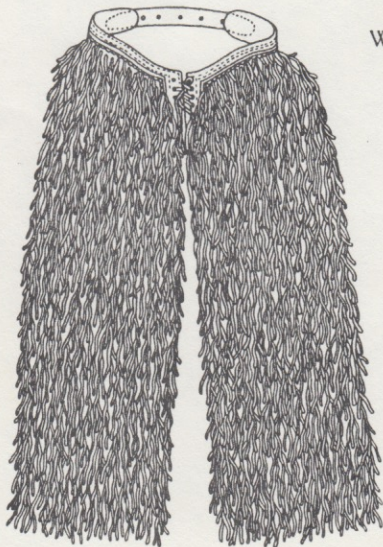
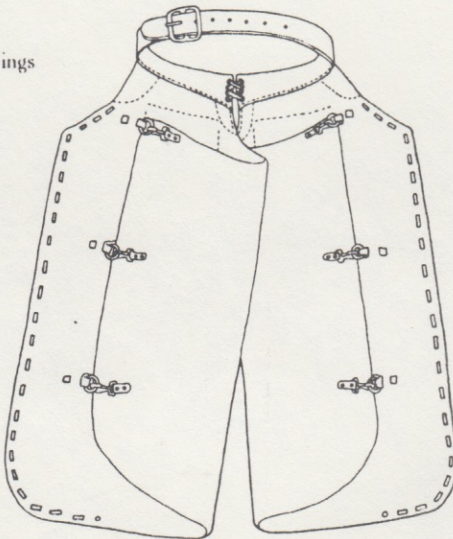


Before mounting up, a cowpuncher would often pull on a pair of chaps. These were seatless coverings first used by vaqueros who had to hunt cattle in heavy brush. Cowhands found they also gave good protection against rope burns, abrasions from corral poles and even horse bites.

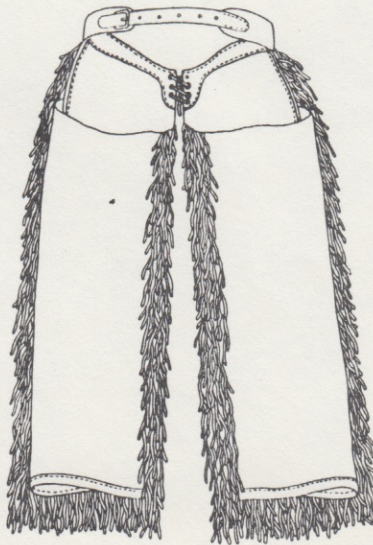
Chaps came in three basic styles, shown here in front (*far left*) and rear views. The earlier chaps were climb-in models called shotguns, because they resembled parallel tubes. Like later chaps, they buckled at the waist. Many riders came to prefer batwing chaps, with wrap-around leggings that fastened at the back and could be snapped on without removing boots and spurs. On the cold northern ranges cowboys pulled on woollies, wintertime chaps covered on the front with wool or sometimes with fur.



Batwings



Woollies





THE WOLF HUNT

