

# Unit Template

Handout 5

## **Cowboys & The Cattle Drives: A Unique Piece of History**

(This is a piece from the Old Cowtown Museum in Wichita, Kansas that explains what authentic cowboy life was like.)

The American cowboy is a symbol of the western frontier and our rich heritage. The life of the cowboy, whether on the ranch or on the trail, is a story of rough adventure. With the movies depicting a glamorous career with a pistol on each hip, most Americans do not truly understand the life of a cowboy in the 1870s.

Old Cowtown Museum in Wichita, Kansas, invites you to catch a glimpse of this timeless, unique story of the past. On 17 acres, the Museum depicts life in a Kansas cattle town from 1865 to 1880. With a backdrop of over 45 buildings, costumed history interpreters bring history to life at the 5-acre farm, historic homes, blacksmith, carpentry and newspaper shops, a saloon, cowboy camp, train depot, trader's cabin, drug store, barber shop and more.

“So many people have misconceptions of what cowboys did, what they wore and how they lived. It was not as glamorous as most people think,” said Galen Arnett, Lead Cowboy Interpreter. A cowboy was paid to take care of cattle. Most of his time was spent branding calves, rounding up cattle, and driving them to market. With so many responsibilities, he made it to town about twice a year, if lucky. He was not a sharpshooter, but unique skills were definitely needed. The job demanded physical stamina, patience and courage. Excellent riding and roping skills, singing to a restless herd, and knowing how to head off a thousand stampeding longhorns were necessities. On the ranch, a cowboy rode a horse owned by his employer, wore practical clothes, and rarely carried a gun. When he did, he wore it high and snug to his waist. He never carried two guns. Rounding up cattle on the open range was a common task for cowboys. Traveling for days, ranch hands would spread out like a spider's web for miles. They would then work their way in, collecting all the cattle. Then, they would sort them and brand the calves according to the brand of its mother.

“We teach visitors about many aspects of the cowboy life like cooking, roping, and feeding the cattle. Children, especially, like to learn how to rope. I teach them how a cowboy used the rope every day to do his job. I also teach visitors how to brand cattle by using a branding iron and a wooden block,” said Arnett.

By the late 1860s, the price of a four-year-old Texas longhorn was approximately three or four dollars in its home range. Up north, the same animal might be worth forty dollars. With no railroads leading to Texas, a unique job for cowboys evolved. From the late 1860s to the mid 1890s they moved cattle to the north for bigger and better money. A typical trail drive composed of 15 men took two to three months to move

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several thousand heads of cattle up to Kansas railroad shipping points. A herd would typically move 15 to 20 miles on a good day. After all, if the cattle were driven too fast and lost weight, they would bring a lower price at the market.

On the trail, life was rough and monotonous. A cowboy was in the saddle for sixteen hours during the day and two additional hours during his shift at night. Between night duty and early rising, a man could never get more than six hours of sleep. Food usually involved eggs, bacon and beans. Slaughtering a head of cattle was not heard of on the trail. It was too expensive for so much meat to go to waste in a short amount of time. There were dangerous times too. "A distant clap of thunder or the movement of a prowling animal was liable to frighten the herd and start a stampede in the middle of the night. After the cowboys jumped to their horses, they had to head off the herd. It is difficult to do this when you can't see the fox holes and dips in the terrain when it is dark," said Arnett. With storms and lightning, stampeding longhorns in the middle of the night, river crossings and many other life-threatening instances, there were deaths. The most common cause of deaths was riding accidents, followed by pneumonia. Lightning probably killed more cowboys than outlaws or Indians.

After arriving in town and getting paid fifty to ninety dollars, the grimy cowboys headed to the barber for a haircut, shave, and a bath. Other enjoyments included buying new clothes, sleeping on clean sheets and splurging on local entertainment. Most cowboys headed back to Texas after awhile to find employment with a trail boss for the following year. Others might have found a job at a nearby ranch. "Kansas cattle towns thrived on the business. During the height of the trading season, the town vibrated with activity and excitement. The cattle drives were unique in history because they represented an unsettled west that would soon be filled with homesteaders, barbed wire protecting fields and established communities. It is our goal to capture and preserve the stories, artifacts and history of this rich heritage for our visitors," said Jan McKay, Executive Director. The story of this intriguing piece of history lives on as the streets of Old Cowtown Museum transport visitors through the excitement of the "Old West."