Sustaining Culture Through Work: A Cowboy's Life[1]

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Abstract:

Recognizing the changing modern reality of the ranching industry in the face of growing economic pressures, environmental controversy, and disappearing government subsidies, this project was an attempt to answer the question: Can cowboy culture survive in a world without cows through such representation as cowboy poetry, song, art and rodeos? As the research unfolded, a broader question emerged about the meaning of cowboy culture to the general public which has largely romanticized the profession. The project began as a life history of one man: northern Arizona cowboy Mike Landis. Interviews were also conducted with Mike's wife, Karen Landis, and a professional cowboy poet, songster, and storyteller, Ken Mikell. Through the course of the interviews, field observation, and background research, the author reaches the conclusion that cowboy culture is a work-based culture, by definition based upon the hands-on activity of working cattle on horseback. Popularized cowboy culture as conveyed through cowboy poetry, song, art, rodeos, etc. does not represent true cowboy culture but only a commodified version of it. After initially over-generalizing the cattle industry culture, the author draws another conclusion that the cattle industry is in fact highly stratified and cowboys are the socioeconomic "peasants" on the bottom end of it. Finally, though this culture appears to be vanishing in the modern world, it is a strong tradition tied to ancient human roots as nomadic pastoralists, and might just quietly persist if there are any cattle to gather, herd, and drive anywhere in the world.

"**cow-boy** (kou'boi) *n.* **1**. A hired man, especially in the western United States, who tends cattle and performs many of his duties on horseback. **2**. A performer who demonstrates feats of horsemanship, calf roping, and the like, as at a rodeo."

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language

"The golden age of the real cowboy in the American West was gone as the twentieth century dawned. Yet a cowboy culture was still glowing brightly in the minds of Americans. While this culture still permeates our society, it is not the culture of the real nineteenth century cowboy. Rather it is a blend of fact and imagination . . ." (Dary 1981).

Project Aims and Questions

I chose to study cowboy culture and do a life history of one cowboy in particular because, frankly, it sounded like fun. I imagined doing participant observation while chasing cattle on horseback, hanging out with a bunch of my informant's wise and weathered old friends, and being outside on the land. Well, it's never as you expect. However, as I will discuss below, *fun* turned out to be a prominent and very salient theme throughout my life history interviews with northern Arizona cowboy Mike Landis—I was not the first person interested in cowboying because I thought it would be fun.

I started into this project with one primary question: Can cowboy culture survive through such means as literature, song, art, and rodeos, even without cows? Two more specific questions lie at the heart of this general question: 1) To what extent does the day-to-day work of cowboying create and reinforce cowboy culture and; 2) To what extent does an intimate relationship with the land—the open spaces and solitude and sunsets—define the culture? I was also concerned with a secondary question that is connected to those above: Is the culture adapting to changing economic and environmental realities by scaling back, adopting more sustainable ranching methods, and/or finding other economic activities besides cattle?

I realized early on that these questions grew out of a couple of flawed basic assumptions. First, the assumption which led to my primary research question was that cowboy poetry, cowboy music, rodeos, etc., all represent genuine "cowboy culture." Spending just a little time with Mike made me doubt that. Second, I had lumped cowboys, ranchers, and anybody who makes a living off the cattle industry into one monolithic cultural group, but I found that to be a ridiculous generalization; there may be as much variation and socioeconomic stratification throughout the cattle industry as throughout American society at

large, and, in fact, that stratification gives significant definition to the *cowboy* culture that I am discussing here.

With a mind toward making this research relevant and useful, the project had several objectives. I hoped that answering the questions above would have a practical value in addressing concerns about the continuity of cowboy culture as the economic base and government subsidies for cattle ranching may be disappearing. Another practical issue I hoped to address is the ongoing conflict between ranchers and environmentalists. Many ranchers consider themselves "environmentalists" or "conservationists"; they value the land and have a vested interest in sustainable management, even though many of them haven't demonstrated much success in the past. I believe that, looking beyond the polarizing rhetoric, the two sides of the conflict may not be so far apart. Finally, I hoped to get some clear definitions of cowboy culture.

My focus and interests changed as I heard Mike's stories and learned more about cowboy culture. Though I did gain many insights into my original questions, this study turned from a focus on culture change into more a general investigation of cowboy culture and what it means both to cowboys and to a public that has largely romanticized the profession.

This project is primarily a life history. However, to get at a wider perspective on cowboy culture and get a sense of where Mike fit in the larger ethnographic picture, I also interviewed two other informants and conducted library research.

The Value of a Life History

One theoretical concern was: what to do with a life history? I approached it as simply a good story, a complete narrative or "text" of a person's life chock-full of culturally illuminating language, context, beliefs, and behavior. I believe that, as in any well-told story, the narrative itself communicates this information best without the ethnographer's complicating interpretation. In this view, Mike Landis said what he meant and meant what he said; his beliefs, his motivations, his preferences, his life choices were as he expressed them, with no hidden meanings or buried subtext. A life experience undistilled. As suggested by Agar (1980), Mike's story is organized in a way that makes sense to him and therefore says something about the culture he has been a part of for most of his life. That idea is echoed by Faraday and Plummer (1979, 779) who say that the life history technique is "not so much concerned with grasping the totality either of structures or personality as [it is] concerned with depicting the immediate lived experiences as actual members in everyday society grasp them."

Cowboy Literature

Regarding a more general theoretical background, I did not find any formal ethnographies or anthropological studies of cowboy culture in my search through the literature. Most of the background information and illuminating insights on cowboy culture came from works of history, environmental history, literary interpretation, and the popular media.

A professor of English named Blake Allmendinger (1992), who was raised on a ranch, attempts to decipher the metaphors and symbols of what he calls the cowboy "work culture," as represented in the hands-on activity of cowboying. He states that cowboy culture is self-represented in cowboy poems, prose, art, and performances, but that all these expressions deal with cowboy *work*. Cowboying is as cowboying does, or work is culture. Arguing against those who don't see the cowboy lifestyle as a "culture," he makes a strong case for a cowboy culture that is defined by unique beliefs, ideas, institutions, even an unarticulated but unmistakable Zen-like spirituality. But in the end he flip-flops what I think is a sage characterization and concludes that the work = culture equation has been reversed. With the absence of real working cowboys, he says, cowboy culture today propagates itself through the "work" of cowboy poetry, art, and rodeo performances to fill the void left in the public's nostalgic cravings. Culture is work? Well, maybe so. But in spite of the fact that his conclusions bear out my initial hypothesis, I now question the nature of the "culture" being propagated in this way. Also, after spending some time with a "real working cowboy" and hearing stories about many others, Allmendinger's conclusions regarding the *absence* of real working cowboys sound a little like the many premature eulogies of American Indian cultures a century or more ago. There are still a few cowboys around and some of them still chase cattle ahorseback for a living.

As mentioned above, after working with Mike for a while I became interested in the public's perception and fascination with cowboy culture, and apparently I was not the first to have that interest. Most of the other sources I looked at shared a common theme of the cowboy as an enduring legend of western folklore

(Athearn 1986; Dary 1981; Kittredge 1995; Worster 1992). The image of the lonely, hardworking man on horseback has captured the public imagination—not only in North America but around the world—and its persistence is evidenced in one recent example by a feature spread entitled "Cowboy Nation" in the increasingly mainstream *Outside* Magazine (Kittredge 1995). But why is it that the cowboy remains such a perpetually romanticized and reimagined figure? What is it that he represents to us?

In his essay on "Cowboy Ecology," Worster (1992) points out that the cowboy and "life on the range" are almost completely overlooked by most textbooks on American history. The popular interest in that era, he says, is dismissed by many historians as nothing more than a product of myth-making. Still, the cowboy holds a prominent place in the American mind and sense of "national identity" (if you'll pardon such over-generalizing concepts). He believes that the popular intuition is probably worth heeding in that it says something significant about what's important to us. Dary (1981, 336) elaborates on that idea, saying that there is more at work here than myth-making: "The real American cowboy *was* colorful. He *was* a romantic figure, even before writers embellished his life and culture. He was a human being seeking his place in the sun like countless other people since the dawn of civilization." He just came a little closer that most.

Putting it into a literary voice, writer William Kittredge (1995, 67), another product of a ranching background, characterizes cowboys as the economic and spiritual descendants of the nomads who continued pastoral wandering when most other humans took to sedentary agriculture. "[They] were horse people, who followed the herds and never stayed home. They were warriors." And like their nomadic predecessors, cowboys are still "rootless men who wanted to see what was down the road, their most powerful opinion being an ancient disdain for settlers." In this legacy, Kittredge believes, many of the rest of us fantasize some quixotic reflection of ourselves. "Inside our circumscribed routines, we yearn to lead clean, well-lighted lives—like cowboys. . . . What we've taken from them is a myth, a story to inhabit." It would be easy to assume that this yearning and romanticizing is primarily a male tendency, except for the fact that Mike's wife Karen has also been a working "cowboy" (as she calls herself) for years, and enjoys the danger and excitement of it at least as much as Mike.

Appealing as this idea is, Robert G. Athearn (1986) adds to it in a very sensible analysis of both the nature of cowboy culture and the nature of the public's fascination with it. He asks, how did this ordinary working man, lacking most of the traits from which heroes are cast, become elevated to such a pedestal? And how did this mere wage earner of a conservatively inclined industry become a symbol of individualism and freedom? He answers that the political climate in this country at the turn of the century was very progressive, and the earlier admiration of the wealthy was shifting to suspicion of them as exploiters. Ranchers were just another breed of big businessman, and abused their wealth and power as much as the rest. In this scenario the cowboy became the oppressed and exploited worker, just another little man trying to maintain his identity. But there was an important difference in the public mind: "The setting was right. He was a loner, out in that great, wide West, where he had to fight distance, isolation, the elements, and, now, big business. He was on a much better stage—sagebrush and sunsets—than his fellow worker in a New England textile mill, for the public had a weakness for the Wild West, a place where, in its view, heroes sprang forth much more readily" (Ibid., 266).

In an essay about popular literature in the Southwest, the writer Charles Bowden (1994, 16) sees a different and dangerous angle to that same phenomenon, saying that "It is a lot easier to find a good book about Navajos or gunfighters than about real estate developers. Whom do you think have done more to change the face of this land?" Indeed, I think the public's fascination with the cowboy has obscured the real issues and veiled the real culprits in the ongoing abuse of public grazing lands; not only is the cattle industry romanticized through the persona of the cowboy, but it's easy to miss the fact that it is really a huge, profit-driven industry controlled by big business, not just a few lonesome cowboys out on the range.

Anthropological Theory

Building this collection of ideas into a general theory for understanding cowboy culture, I came to a theoretical perspective closely related to Eric Wolf's work with peasants and world systems (1966; 1982). Wolf defines peasants as a group of people who have lost some control over their means of production: "[Their] simple systems have been superseded by others in which control of the means of production, including the disposition of human labor, passes from

the hands of the primary producers into the hands of groups that do not carry on the productive process themselves, but assume instead administrative functions, backed by the use of force [as has been demonstrated in this case by the range wars of the last century]. The constitution of society in such a case is no longer based on the equivalent and direct exchange of goods and services between one group and another; rather, goods and services are first furnished to a center and only later redirected" (Wolf 1966, 3).

Though the term "peasant," in its common usage, might seem inappropriate to describe the relatively exciting life of a cowboy and the measure of personal freedom in it, in an economic sense the cowboy can be considered a type of landless peasant. And even though the situation in this case did not necessarily come about by the same evolutionary processes that Wolf discusses, the cowboy is no less dependent on a larger economic system far beyond his control.

Concerning world systems and global economics, Wolf says that "the world of humankind constitutes a manifold, a totality of interconnected processes" (1982, 3). The basic idea is that in the modern world no human society or economy exists in isolation. And it is true that the cowboy has historically been subject to the whims of the national or international economy and to the cattlemen who control the resources he relies on for his paycheck. Much of the stereotypical image of the cowboy as a drifter and a loner grew out of the reality of a seasonal economy and unstable, seasonal work in which it was difficult, to say the least, to establish strong social ties to a local community, marry, or raise a family (Allmendinger 1992).

A last piece of theory, which seems useful for understanding the role and consequence of commercial cowboy literature and art, is the concept of the commodification of culture (Vasquez 1995). The popularization of cowboy poetry, literature, art, music, etc., turns the culture into a bunch of artifacts for private collectors—those who have romanticized it in the ways discussed above and have the means to pay top dollar for it. While it may start out as a genuine artistic expression of genuine culture, putting a price tag on it puts it beyond the reach of the very people it purports to represent. Along with the esoterica of the culture, the basic tools of cowboying have also become overpriced collectors' items. Mike and Karen Landis told me that they can barely afford these days to buy a quality saddle, well-made boots, or even a good hat.

Historical Context

The pastoral tradition is at least as ancient a human adaptation as agriculture, and the cowboy is but one more face of that tradition. Worster (1992) says the cowboy belongs to the larger world of human ecology, not just the western half of North America, and he aims "to situate the cowboy and his ranch in the broad panorama of human adaptation to the earth." Pastoralism, he says, began as a variant on agriculture, probably in response to the pressure of a growing population on limited arable lands. Those excluded from farming for whatever reasons were relegated to drier, steeper, rockier or otherwise marginal terrain, and took to herding livestock for subsistence. This has been a widespread and successful adaptation for up to 10,000 years in many areas of Africa, around the Mediterranean, the Middle East, South Asia, the Central Asian Steppe and Scandinavia. The expansive herding life often produced a highly independent-minded people who had, by necessity and tradition, an intimate understanding of their marginal environment. In spite of scant resources and an integrated understanding of the lands they exploited, pastoral nomads generally made little effort to conserve resources. Population densities were low enough, however, that a worn-out piece of land could simply be left for several years to recover, then grazed or overgrazed again at some later time. About 4,000 years ago the horse was domesticated on the high steppes of Central Asia and was quickly added into the life of nomadic herding societies (Kittredge 1995). With the horse came far greater mobility and an increasing specialization in larger and wider-ranging livestock.

The North American cattle industry happened onto this vast historic backdrop quite recently. Many of its economic and cultural roots on this continent reach back to the Spanish, who introduced the first cattle and horses here and were the first in the New World to build their herds into enormous economic enterprises. By the mid-sixteenth century, about the time that Coronado marched north in search of golden cities, vast herds were already well established throughout New Spain. The first *vaqueros*, the prototype North American cowboys, were Indians, Blacks, and other non-Spaniards who were taught to ride horses and look after cattle for the Spanish *padres* who disdained such menial work.

"The early *vaquero* was not a very romantic figure. Spaniards and Mexicans have never viewed him as Americans north of the Rio Grande later viewed the

traditional cowboy. The *vaquero* was, in the eyes of most sixteenth-century Spaniards, nothing more than a poor laborer on horseback. He was about as far down the social order as one could get" (Dary 1981, 13). This statement once again points out that it has taken a unique juxtaposition of historic events to elevate the common working cowboy—who is essentially still the *vaquero* of early days—to his current heroic status.

The cattle industry as we know it now first began to emerge as an institution in southern Texas in the 1860s. Though it drew in many ways on the millennia of pastoral tradition that preceded it, Worster (1992) says that this manifestation was an unmistakably modern capitalist institution. On the northern plains the industry grew exponentially over a period of only three years. In 1880 the region remained largely unsettled and millions of buffalo still wandered in immense herds, but by 1883 the buffalo were all but gone and had been replaced by about 600,000 head of cattle. Only five years later, however, the entire industry lay in ruins as a result of severe overgrazing compounded by desperately cold winters. This collapse, which Worster calls the "tragedy of the laissez-faire commons," was one of the worst in the ten-thousand-year history of pastoralism, and it took ranchers decades to recover from it. According to Worster, the debate that rages today over protecting public land from private commercial excess and abuse started with this collapse in 1888.

Local Economic History

Ranching on a local level in northern Arizona, where Mike Landis has spent the last 29 years, more-or-less reflects the regional industry. In Mojave County, the area around Kingman and the far western end of the Grand Canyon, two ranches were listed on the county tax records in 1866. Ten years later that had grown to 30 ranches with a total of 1267 cattle. Between 1880 and 1890 the rolls grew from 48 ranches and 4756 cattle to 101 ranches and 21,085 cattle (Malach 1978).

Taking a leap into the middle of this century, cattle throughout Arizona increased gradually from 1,019,000 head in 1960 to 1,134,000 head in 1967—an increase of about 11 percent. Over that same period, the number of Arizona cattle on feed (rather than on the range) increased by about 40 percent, continuing a trend begun in the early part of the century that means fewer and fewer horseback cowboys. However, all of the cattle in Mojave and neighboring Coconino Counties are and have been range cattle, not feedlot cattle, so in this part of the state, probably due to the more rugged terrain, cowboys still do it the old way. During the seventies, cattle began a gradual decrease in Arizona, with 1,420,000 head in 1973, 1,050,000 head in 1980, and finally only 830,000 cattle by 1990.

An eye-catching statistic is that even as numbers of cattle decreased during the seventies and eighties, the per capita *and* total value of cattle increased. In spite of increasing value, gross income from ranching fell during this period. Many a rancher might want to blame that loss of income on higher grazing fees, at least that is the common lament, but the fact is that between 1968 and 1990, both federal and state grazing fees increased by less that 50 percent while the per capita value of cattle increased by more than 200 percent (AASS 1990; ACLRS 1967 & 1980).

This trend appears to indicate an industry that has become less efficient over the years. Mike Landis told me that ranchers haven't figured it out yet, but they are less efficient and losing money these days because they try to make the work easier with trucks and trailers instead of driving cattle on horseback the old-fashioned way.

Fieldwork Context

Because this study is primarily a life history, I started out with a study population of one: Mike Landis, cowboy. But with the aim of getting a wider perspective and maybe a contrasting viewpoint, I also interviewed Mike's wife, Karen Landis, and cowboy poet, songster, and storyteller, Ken Mikell. This was a consciously purposive sample, as I know all of these individuals from having worked together teaching Elderhostel programs, and already knew a little about their backgrounds. In fact, I chose Mike Landis as the subject of a life history project because I already knew that he had a particularly colorful life history to tell.

I first met Mike a year and a half earlier while teaching an Elderhostel course on Lake Powell. During that week together he pondered how he might rig a horse trailer with pontoons and hitch it to a houseboat, which got him reminiscing about the time he rafted the Grand Canyon with horses to help gather feral burros. His wife Karen told many a wild tale of Mike's cowboy life, including a hilarious story about their trip to Disneyland with a grandson, where Mike's unmistakable cowboy visage caused more of a stir than Mickey Mouse, and distressed motor home campers in Anaheim offered a whisk broom when they saw Mike

and Karen setting up their cowshit-smeared teepee. Mike was clearly intrigued after hearing that I had traveled in the Himalayas. I was equally intrigued when he said, with sincere interest and a distant look in his eyes, "Them's big mountains, huh. They still got nomads over there? I'd sure like to see some nomads." He explained to a perplexed Elderhosteler that it was easy to tell the difference between bulls, steers, heifers, and cows "cuz they don't wear no clothes." And so the week went. It didn't take long before I knew that Mike was one of the most interesting characters I would ever know, and represented a distinctive and little-known cultural tradition.

I was also intrigued by the fact that Mike had been a working cowboy for fifty years but was now making a transition into the larger world and a new source of income through his work with Elderhostel. He is quick to point out that Karen had snared him into giving Elderhostel lectures, but he seems to enjoy it nonetheless, and he is very good at it. Through his Elderhostel work he has become comfortable talking to strangers in his articulate cowboy way about the cowboy life, and at 66 years of age and semi-retired, he has had the chance to reflect and understand his life in a way that a cowboy of a younger generation might not. He seemed like the perfect informant.

When I first contacted Mike to ask if he would be willing to be interviewed for this project, he said to talk to Karen about it and handed her the phone. After that I wasn't able to get hold of him for a couple of weeks and began to worry that he was out at a cow camp and I may not have an informant, but I finally reached him and again talked to Karen to arrange our first meeting. I was a little worried about Mike's enthusiasm for the project, or even his awareness of it, but when I arrived as planned to meet him and Karen at one of their Elderhostel lectures at Grand Canyon Caverns Inn, near Peach Springs, Arizona, Mike interrupted his lecture for a moment to greet me.

At lunch that day, before we headed out to begin our first interview and the participant observation of counting cows on the neighboring ranch, he said, "Karen said you wanted to talk to me for some class you was takin and I didn't know that word she used." "Ethnography?" I asked. "Nope, it was somethin else." "Anthropology?" "Yeah, that was it." In my arrogance I assumed that most people had heard of anthropology or anthropologists even if they didn't have a clue what we do. But it was refreshing to be with someone who had no preconceptions, misconceptions, or judgements about the field. Mike was happy to talk about cowboy culture and it didn't surprise him that others would be interested in it.

He told me during our second interview: "When I was a kid, from the time I was fifteen til I went in the service—I was twenty-one—I really had a lotta sympathy for anybody that wasn't a cowboy. Cuz I thought the whole world wanted to be a cowboy. I thought that. That's dumb thoughts, right. But that's what I thought, because to me cowboyin was the ultimate. I mean, you couldn't git no higher, that was as good as you could git. I'd see these poor buggers goin to work with lunch buckets and different stuff like that when I's loafin around town, and, 'Oh man I'm lucky I don't have to do that—that poor sucker,' y'know. That's the way I thought." Mike was aware then, and still is, that many Americans, and an increasing number of Europeans these days, have an abiding fascination with cowboy culture. To him, my interest in it, anthropological or not, was absolutely normal.

Besides the unexpected task of explaining anthropology, part of my "entry" included explaining my earring. "Ernie, tell me somethin. How come you wear that earring?" The direct and nonjudgmental question came from the simple curiosity of someone who had never considered piercing his own ear. Having chosen his own maverick course in life against his family's wishes, he seemed to automatically understand my response when I explained that I had pierced my ear when I was young because I wanted to stand apart from the mainstream.

Our relationship proceeded on a friendly basis from there, feeling like a two-way exchange of information and ideas to some extent. We talked about books, anthropology, and my plans to work in Ladakh, India, the following summer, as well as cowboy culture. As our first day of interview and participant observation proceeded, I found myself quickly sucked into the romance of the cowboy life, and realized that this vulnerability was probably one of my motivations for choosing this particular project in the first place. I wrote in my fieldnotes: "I realize that, in spite of the environmental damage caused by cows in the West, I am strongly drawn to the romance of the cowboy lifestyle. More admirable in many ways than people who fight to protect the land but have never lived on it. I realize also that I am drawn by the space, freedom and excitement of working 'out on the range.' I was infected at a young age."

As we bounced around the Double-O Ranch, counting cows from Mike's beat-up old pickup, I found myself feeling an absurd pride over the fact that Mike was impressed that I could spot cows from a distance. I am as much a sucker for cowboy culture as the rest of those gullible yahoos out there. But my enthusiasm was tempered near the end of that first day with a reminder of the contemporary reality of cowboy culture. A young man we stopped to talk to along the road got out of his shiny new truck wearing a T-shirt that bore the slogan, "To hell with the dolphins, save the cowboys."

A Cowboy's View of Cowboy Culture

Mike's story, his thoughts and opinions and comments in his own words, best convey the everyday lived experience of cowboy culture. As primarily a life history narrative, a collection of good stories, I did not intend this project for quantitative or analytical techniques. The tone, the language, the imagery, the subtle but revealing details, the overall ambience of Mike's narrative would be pummeled into something less than they are in an analytical rendering. More than the hard facts and figures of life as a cowboy, what's important is what Mike chooses to tell and how he tells it.

A basic and wise precept about culture is that, as with any good story, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Any analysis that dissects it into smaller pieces loses important context and other illuminating information in the process. To my thinking, the subtleties of culture, the fleeting details and contextual ambience, are possibly the most instructive aspects. This is where intuitive understanding can take place.

However, since I cannot repeat Mike Landis's entire narrative here, I will just outline his life history, sprinkled with pertinent or colorful quotes from interviews and a few of my personal impressions, comments and observations. With the intention of retaining as much of the flavor of Mike's story as possible, as conveyed through his speech and vernacular, I transcribed verbatim, using phonetic spellings and punctuating sentences the way he said them.

Ethnographic Setting

". . . Red Rider comic strips, I thought he was really it. Did you ever hear a him? He was a cowboy, Red Rider. And then I had an uncle and his dad that had a cow outfit and he told me a lotta stuff about it. And so by the time I was probably eight or nine years old that's all I wanted to do. But my dad was a farmer. A course he had horses and cattle, but not like here. But anyhow that was it for me. And I ain't ever changed my mind since, and I ain't sorry for what I've done. If I had it all to do over again it'd be more or less about the same, y'know what I mean? When I was fourteen, I left home and I went, I was hitch-hiking. I didn't have no money—nobody had any money then, huh—and I got to Fort Worth, Texas, and that's a big ole city. All I knew about Texas is I heard there was cowboys there. I went to San Antone, that's another big city, and by then I was really gittin hungry. So I started hitch-hiking. Well I hitch-hiked down, I was goin to a place I'd heard of—I don't even know why, I was just a kid—but I tried to cross to Mexico. But anyhow, in the Big Bend country in Texas this ole boy picked me up and gave me a ride and we got to talkin and he said he's runnin a ranch out there. And he said, 'Well, if you wanna come out and work,' he says, 'come on out.' And he says, 'If you like it you can stay and if I like you, you can stay, but if I don't like you or you don't like me, why,' he says, 'then you can leave.' And he says, 'Anyhow I'll feed you while you're there, see how it goes for a few days.' Well I ended up stayin there a year. And, well that was the startin of it right there. Heck, I had so much fun there I hated to see the sun go down. I worked hard too. That's the whole deal."

In this quote, as Mike describes his rite of passage into the cowboy life during the lean years of the early forties, he evokes images as potent as any novelist's and sets the contextual stage (this was actually Mike's entire response to my first attempt to elicit his life history—it took considerable prodding to get past his natural reticence).

The general ethnographic setting for the group I am describing is clearly reflected in Mike's story. Mike and the other cowboys in his story live or have lived a fairly nomadic life, seldom if ever owning land or a home, moving from job to job, outfit to outfit, throughout the West. The "West" in this story ranges from Texas north to Montana, and from that line on the High Plains west to California. It is a large territory, but the specific context of ranches and cattle operations that employ horseback cowboys is much more limited (and, with the increasing use of trucks and trailers, becoming more limited each year). Another part of the larger context important to remember is that cowboying is just a tiny part of a gargantuan industry that raises, transports,

butchers and markets millions of cattle for consumption every year.

The seasonal nature of cowboy work has resisted the development of strong social ties to local communities or sedentary groups of people. By virtue of that same fact, however, cowboys have developed a very distinctive cultural tradition that they identify with strongly, perhaps even exclusively in some cases. The seasonal nature of the work and sometimes infrequent paychecks are also not very conducive to marriage or children, so many working cowboys don't settle down into any kind of family life until either early retirement and a new line of work or relatively late in life when they have established themselves in a foreman-type job (Allmendinger 1992).

Mike's Story

When I began my interviews with Mike Landis I expected to hear a story of cowboy tradition passed from one generation to the next, that Mike was just one link in a long chain of cowboys or ranchers. I learned instead that Mike was generationally isolated in the cowboy tradition, with neither parents nor children involved in ranching, and that that was not uncommon among cowboys. Links without a chain. Mike explains, "Somethin gits under their hide or somethin gives 'em an interest in it and that's all they wanna do." The cowboy life is often simply a chosen profession, a lifestyle, a preference that comes with an unambiguous and powerful set of values, ethics, beliefs, behaviors, language, dress, customs—a culture. This idea certainly lends credence to Allmendinger's (1992) concept of a cowboy "work culture." But it is not as easy a choice as one might guess, because it also involves learning an array of specialized skills to complete hard and sometimes very dangerous work, all of which is part of a rigorous rite of passage into the cowboy world.

Mike's father was a Kansas farmer. "No, none a my family, none a them people back there was cowboys or nothin." Mike was determined to run off from that boring, settled life and become a cowboy—every schoolboy's fantasy. He left home in 1943, without his family's blessing, at the age of 14. He took off hitch-hiking to Texas because he'd heard there were cowboys there, and one day as he was heading south toward Mexico he got a ride with a man who owned a cattle outfit and offered him a job. Fate. The beginning of a long career in the profession of his dreams.

Mike paid close attention, entering into being a cowboy as if it were a sacred and very exclusive society. For him, becoming a cowboy and learning cowboy customs was an act of conscious volition: "Some of it I figgered out, but I wanted to be a cowboy s' bad that—yer always, yer together, more-or-less—you set around at night and set around the fire and shoot the bull. You listen to the stories the old-timers tell. Kids don't hardly tell stories, old-timers do. You listen to them old cowboy stories and you learn lots and lots and lots from them stories if yer really interested. If you really wanna be a cowboy you'll pay attention to them old-timers."

Dary (1981, 278) has written down some of the "unwritten . . . rules of conduct" that cowboys of a century ago were expected to abide by: cultural mores that appear to still hold among cowboys today:

- A cowboy was expected to be cheerful even if he was tired or sick.
- A cowboy was expected to have courage. (Cowards could not be tolerated in the cowboy culture because one coward might endanger the whole outfit in time of danger.)
- No real cowboy was a complainer. (Complaints were associated with quitting, and no real cowboy was a quitter.)
- A cowboy always helped a friend, but if the cowhand saw a stranger or even an enemy in distress, the rule said he was to render assistance as quickly as possible. (This mutual-help principle was essential to survival on the open range where everyone helped one another, especially during roundup time.)
- A cowboy did the best he could at all times.

As much a piece of cliché-embroidered kitchen prose as this appears, and in spite of the fact that it is a "code" of a hundred years ago, Mike Landis mentioned every one of the items on this list over the course of our interviews as important qualities for a good cowboy. Mike told me that he could always recognize a real cowpuncher on the street from someone who just dresses that way. He hadn't consciously thought about it before, but with a little prodding he was able to explain to me the subtle cues of a cowboy's manner, the way he treats other people, the way he talks, the way he dresses and wears his hat, the way he sets his

hat down, the mark of the outdoors around his eyes, big square hands that look like they work for a living—all the signals of membership in this culture that an outsider may not pick up on.

Mike says of his first year as a cowboy, "Heck, I had so much fun there I hated to see the sun go down." He talked often about how much fun and excitement he's had as a cowboy. Even late in life, at 66 years of age after more than 50 years of cowboying, he says, "If I didn't have to have money I'd punch cows for free just for the pure pleasure of it. Yeah, that's how much I enjoy it, and I know a lotta other people the same way."

Mike spent the rest of his cowboy career drifting from ranch to ranch, cow outfit to cow outfit, around the West. After several jobs in Texas (including working the legendary Upper and Lower Matador outfits), New Mexico, and southern Colorado, he ended up in Nevada. At the age of 21 he and a friend joined the Air Force during the Korean War. "He was a, I think a Idaho or Oregon guy, but we was workin in Nevada. And he just flat talked me into it. He says, 'Let's go in the Air Force, they got better lookin clothes and women like 'em a lot better.' 'Well,' I says, 'alright.'. . . You know, you stay out there a long time, you never even see a woman, so you git excited when you see a woman, right. So, here come to find out I passed the gosh dang test and he didn't. He had to turn around and go back to the ranch. And I was already stuck right there."

This passage reveals the directness and candor with which Mike has lived his life, made decisions and related his story to me, and this in turn reveals something about cowboy culture. One thing that Mike said stands out for just that sort of candor and for what it says about cowboy philosophy: "The one thing cowboys don't like is phonies. Y'know cowboys, t'heck, they can like Niggers or Hippies or anythin. But an old cowboy sayin is, 'If yer gonna be a whore be a good un.' Oh, yeah, 'If yer gonna be a toad be a toadie son-of-a-gun, if yer gonna be a bear be a grizzly.' In other words, whatever you are, gosh damn, give it yer all, and that's a good thing for anybody, ain't it. No matter what you are, y'know, you oughta take pride in it and give all you got to it."

Mike spent most of his hitch in the service stationed in Okinawa riding in exhibition rodeos. "It was a good break for me. It sure beat pullin guard duty, huh." While he was there he married a Japanese woman who returned with him to the US when his time was up. During most of that marriage, until they divorced, his wife lived with their two daughters in towns in Nevada or Arizona while Mike worked on one ranch or another. "Hell, I's married to that woman for twenty-six years and it wasn't worth a shit all the time. . . . All she done was complain." That life was a financial stretch on cowboy pay, he says. Still, with the exception of a couple of lean times when he took on mining jobs to tide himself and his family over, the low pay of cowboy work did not deter him from it.

About 29 years ago, Mike moved to northern Arizona and has lived and worked in the area on several different ranches ever since. In 1974 he started on at the Double-O Ranch near Seligman and soon after became foreman. In 1992 he "retired" (though he still looks pretty busy to me), and he and Karen started earning a new income from Elderhostel lectures on cowboy life.

"Heck, y'know, I never figgered I could run an outfit or git to be a bossin job. But the height of my ambition was to be a wagon boss and a good un. I don't mean good to mediocre, I wanted to be a *good* wagon boss. And, anyhow, I finally made it. Well I don't know I was a good 'un or not, but anyhow I run a wagon for a long time. . . . And I was here on the Double-O sixteen years. Run into Karen up in that store, where we live now, and we got married. The rest of it's history, huh (laugh)."

Discussion of Research Questions

Mike Landis had a characteristically simple and direct answer to my question about a cowboy culture continuing in a world without cows: ". . . Cowboys without cattle, I don't know (laugh). . . . Well, y'know, truck drivers, one come on tv and he said they're the last a the cowboys. I don't know what he meant. Cuz truck drivers ain't cowboys at all, they drive trucks. They don't ride a horse and work cattle, huh."

To review, I started into this project with one primary question: Can cowboy culture survive through such means as literature, song, art and rodeos, even without cows? And I concluded early on that commercial cowboy poetry, literature, song, arts, rodeo performances, etc. do not represent genuine cowboy culture these days but only a popularized and commodified version of it. Mike assures me that cowboying is a full-time job, and most working cowboys are too busy and way too tired to sit around the campfire at night reciting poems and singing songs. He also says that rodeo cowboys, while they do exhibit

basic cowboying skills, have to train like any professional athlete to stay competitive, so they also have little time for real cowboy work.

Karen Landis says, “Well, if there weren’t any cows, then you’d have a cowboy culture that they’re tryin to have now. You have just poets and people that are artists that are makin cowboybilia. . . . the only thing they’re passin on to ‘em is, it’s just like folklore. People don’t really live that way but they have folklore. . . . Those people are actually now just telling the stories, they’re not living the stories.”

Independently of Mike’s and Karen’s opinions on this question, after some reading and particularly after an interview with cowboy poet and songster Ken Mikell, I came to about the same conclusion. Ken Mikell who considers his profession “musician, entertainer,” owns no livestock, rides no horses, does not come from any ranching tradition and has never punched cows for a living. His background is in theater, but he was attracted to cowboy verse and song eight years earlier because, he says, he likes a good story, he likes poetry that rhymes and has meter, and he thinks that it all captures an important essence of life in the West, feelings of freedom, wide-open spaces, wildness—many of the qualities that Westerners extoll and appreciate. Ken may be the extreme example of a non-cowboy cowboy poet, but he is an example, nonetheless, of someone who represents cowboy culture to hundreds of people every week but is not himself a cowboy. Many cowboy poets and others who represent the culture have at some point been working cowboys, but, by definition, they are not anymore.

The commodification of culture I discussed above is a real issue that not only trivializes and superficializes a rich and unique cultural tradition, but also affects the working cowboys who are still out there trying to make a living in a very tangible way by putting many of the basic tools of the trade beyond their financial reach. As a result, many have joined ‘em rather than trying to beat ‘em. I think that it takes a very stubborn cowboy these days to completely resist the temptation to commercialize or publish. Even Mike Landis, who may be one of the purest examples of a working (retired) cowboy around these days, has taken to giving professional lectures on cowboy culture to fascinated crowds of dudes who, according to Mike, look at him and his life as a historic novelty. He has also posed for paintings and sells professionally rendered black-and-white photographs of himself at work. These enterprises do not mean that Mike has sold out or trivialized his culture in any way, they are just a matter of economic reality. He and Karen could probably not afford to be retired and settled into a permanent home without some other source of income besides occasional day work for one of the nearby ranches. The picture of cowboy culture he and Karen represent is as genuine as it gets, but I think they are an exception to the norm of who represents cowboy culture and how they do it.

Regarding the more specific question about how much the day-to-day work of cowboying creates and reinforces cowboy culture, I have come to believe, as does Allmendinger (1992), that the work is the basis of the culture. To reiterate, cowboying is as cowboying does. And this idea correlates perfectly with the idea that cowboy poetry and other popular expressions do not represent the real thing. The real thing is a work culture, and recite or sing or perform as you might, you cannot simulate the real effects of work and the social reality of a work situation.

As for the culturally defining significance of an intimate relationship with the land, and working in beautiful, wild places, Mike’s words express that best:

EA: “All these years of cowboying, how important has it been, bein outdoors a lot, bein in beautiful places? Has that been a big part of it to you?”
Mike: “Yeah. It’s been a big part of it. It really all goes together, it just does. I don’t guess I’ve ever punched cows in a place where I thought it was ugly. I just haven’t, because I like remote places. And I don’t care if it’s mountains—I like mountains, they’re real pretty. What do you call them mountains there out of Trinidad, Colorado, west of there, north of Clayton, New Mexico? Yer right close to ‘em.”
EA: “Sangre de Cristos.”
Mike: “Yeah. I worked in them mountains, pretty mountains, right. I worked in the Cerbats over here too, outta Kingman—desert son-of-a-guns—they’re pretty mountains. The Music Mountains are pretty. Heck, the plains in the panhandle of Texas’re pretty, when I was there they’s pretty to me. Because, there’s not a lotta people. That’s more-or-less like God made that country. People haven’t screwed it up yet, like they have around all these towns and farms and stuff like that. To me, little towns, that’d be alright, y’know, because they’re necessary. But all this farmin and stuff, none a that is pretty to me, because they got fences, they got irrigatin, it’s all manicured, blah, blah, blah. I mean what’s pretty is somethin that ain’t been messed with,

just like lookin out across there (pointing out the window), that's pretty to me."

EA: "Yeah. You like the wild."

Mike: "Yeah."

EA: "Think after a while you come to take it for granted?"

Mike: "No. I never did. Oh, for three or four days at a time maybe, but, not for any longer than that, really. But there's no better feelin than to git on a good horse early in the mornin and hit a long keen trot and git yer blood a pumpin, and you see the day's just—sometimes I'll start out in the dark, a lotta times then you see daylight comin. We don't really think about sunups or sundowns, we're glad to see the sun come up, makes us warmer. But, it's just a good feelin. Everything's fresh and new and there's a whole new day in front of you and you know yer gonna have fun and you got a good start. That's what I think most cowboys think inside, that's the way they kinda feel inside, maybe."

The secondary question I had about whether the culture was adapting to changing economic and environmental realities by scaling back, adopting more sustainable ranching methods and/or finding other economic activities besides cattle, I found was based on a flawed assumption. Cowboy culture and the cowboy economy are not responsible for the scale of the cattle industry or for management methods. Cowboys are hired hands who usually do not own the land they work on nor many cattle, if any.

Mike makes that distinction very clear: "There's cowpeople and then there's people that got cows. There's lotsa difference. . . . Like, ah, there's a dude, a doctor or lawyer or electronics expert that got a lotta money together, he buys a ranch, he's got cows, right. But he ain't a cowpeople, he's just a person with cows. Cowpeople know how to treat other cowpeople, they know how to treat cowpunchers, they're no strangers to a horse or a cow."

Remembering that cowboys are just a tiny and powerless part of a big, bloody, profit-driven industry that processes millions of cattle each year, they have little voice in management. Ironic but typical that it is the working cowboys who have the on-the-ground expertise and could contribute valuable knowledge to sound and sustainable management strategies.

Mike is aware of the cowboy's social and economic marginality, and his many indirect statements about it emerged throughout the interviews as an important aspect of his sense of cultural identity. He knows that cowboys are at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder—Eric Wolf's (1966; 1982) economic "peasants"—and it was my sense that this awareness is shared across the board and the source of a very strong feeling of solidarity. It's important to note, however, that there seems no bitterness about it, because, in the end, cowboys are doing exactly what they want to do.

". . . a cowboy can sympathize with a mustang or a deer or a wild cow—you admire 'em because they're kinda like you, they're sort of an outcast. Cowboys're kinda outcasts, y'know, really, they are. They're not regular people, really. That's the way we look at ourselves and other people look at us the same way. . . . But, y'know, I'd lots nearer helpin a cowboy than I would a cop or a aviator or a construction worker, y'know. . . . Cuz cowboys been down and out all their life. They know the meanin of the word, they probably wrote that deal (laugh)."

Finally, regarding my belief that the land ethics of environmentalists and the over-generalized category I called "ranchers" may not be so far apart once you cut through all the polarizing rhetoric, it may be an impossible question to answer given the socioeconomic and cultural diversity within the cattle industry (which may be comparable to the diversity within the environmental "community" these days). It's clear, however, that cowboys and some environmentalists may not be so far apart. Mike certainly got a little heated when talking about environmentalists and some of the laws they support, but overall, maybe just for my benefit, he sounded conciliatory: "I would define [environmentalists] as well-meaning ignoramuses. . . . I believe their heart's in the right place—they really believe in what they're doin—but, they need to learn a lot more than what they do know. That's my opinion of 'em. . . . I say I'm an environmentalist, like I told you before. I believe on these ranches if yer runnin a bunch a cattle, take half and leave half. Alright, the half you leave helps support the deer, elk, antelope and—which of course includes coyotes and mountain lions and the whole string a stuff. All that stuff belongs here. . . . I'm all for gittin after them people that overgraze."

Summary

Perhaps the most important summarizing statements I can make here are about the stereotypical images, misperceptions and assumptions about cowboy culture

that I started out with at the beginning of this project. They are important because they are common among the general public, and they reinforce themselves in isolation from any exposure to, or knowledge of, genuine cowboy culture. Such romanticizing and stereotyping only complicate and muddle debates surrounding grazing issues and related environmental concerns. To put it in a nutshell, cowboy culture is the culture (way of life, values, ethics, beliefs, behaviors, language, dress, customs, etc.) of hired hands who work somebody else's cattle on horseback. Cowboy culture is not ranching culture, rodeo culture, cowboy poetry or prose or art or country-western music. While these expressions may represent some aspect of cowboy culture, the are generally not the product of working cowboys.

So, this realization is the answer to that original question. Cowboy culture cannot continue without cows because, for better or worse, cowboy culture is inextricably based on working with cows. However, to be realistic, it is also a cultural tradition that appears to be fading fast. Not many people still do it, and with the range of economic opportunities available these days, few young men are choosing to go down that ancient path. William Kittredge (1995,67) points out that "There aren't many old-time cowhands left, and those who exist are pretty much beside the contemporary point." So, I start to think, perhaps all these literary and artistic and exhibitionistic expressions of cowboy culture, superficial and stereotyping as they may be, are important for preserving something of a vanishing culture. Then again, perhaps this is a premature eulogy. Cowboy tradition may be strong enough to quietly persist long into an age when the cattle industry has become thoroughly automated and/or economically and environmentally impractical.

Mike Landis told me about an old style cattle drive from Texas to Montana that will take place the summer of 1996 to raise money for a Boy's Ranch. Out of simple practicality it will employ only working cowboys and Mike has been asked to be trail boss, and he sure would love to. It would be, I believe, every cowboy's dream to relive those days of cowboy legend. He also talked a lot about going to Australia where they still have immense ranches that take weeks to ride across, and they still drive cattle on horseback for five or six months to market.[3] As long as there are cattle somewhere to be gathered, herded, driven, and the terrain is too rough or the economy too weak to allow for trucks, there will probably be cowboys ready to work. I also think that a basic allure to cowboying, the fundamental attraction our species still holds for the ancient nomadic life, will remain both for the romanticizing general public and for the cowboys who actually do it.

"Heck, I've worked a lotta different countries and states and stuff, and still there's no better feelin to git on a good horse and go work a bunch a cattle. It's still fun to me, and it keeps yer blood a pumpin and you look forward to it. And a course when yer through you look forward to gittin through too and eatin and goin to bed, but the next mornin yer rarin to go again and git after it. I think every good cowboy's that way, kinda. If it wasn't fun to 'em, if they didn't really like it they wouldn't be doin it because there's so many other things that they'd make a better livin at, y'know what I mean?"

Mike Landis

Notes

1. A longer version of this paper was originally completed in 1995 for a course in Ethnographic Research Methods at Northern Arizona University as part of an MA in applied sociocultural anthropology.

2. Ernest Atencio is an applied anthropologist, writer, and environmental activist currently working for a river advocacy organization that focuses on rural environmental and social justice issues throughout the Río Grande watershed. Contact: Amigos Bravos—Friends of the Wild Rivers, PO Box 238, Taos, NM 87571; (505) 758-3874; e-mail: eatencio @taos.newmex.com; http://www.newmex.com/amigos bravos. The author thanks Mike and Karen Landis and Ken Mikell for generously indulging this research.

3. Mike Landis traveled to Australia for several months in 1996 to work on a friend's ranch.

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