

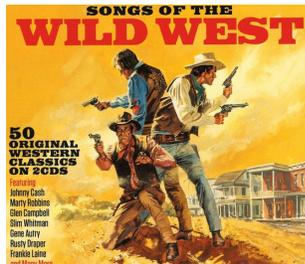
# Prompt 6.14 - The American Cowboy

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**Warm-up:** What are the first three things that come to mind when thinking about the “Wild West”?

**The Wild West:** Take notes in your journal for each paragraph that you read below.

After The Gold Rush, people from all around the world came out west to seek their fortunes. The first towns were mostly centered around mining. However, as the demand for beef rose, cattle towns were created along railroad tracks for cowboys to sell their **cattle** (cows).



**Stereotypes** (rumors) about western towns being completely lawless and full of outlaws were largely exaggerations made by Hollywood movies. However, there was some truth to them. The quickness in which settlers pushed out west often outpaced the amount of **sheriffs** (police) that the government could provide. Additionally, since most settlers were young, poor, and male, western towns would often have high rates of crime.

Crime could range from public drunkenness, to highway robberies, and even murder. Settlers would travel with a friend in the front seat holding a shotgun for protection. (In fact, this is where the term riding “shotgun” came from). Although most criminals only occasionally robbed lone travelers, others had more ambitious targets. Outlaws like “Butch Cassidy” became famous for robbing banks, trains, and stagecoaches. After committing crimes, they would escape into the vast countryside until they were ready to rob again. Some outlaws corrupted local sheriffs, as was the case with the Cochise Cowboys. In fact, the earliest form of organized crime came from gangs in the “Wild West.”

Originally, law enforcement was scarce in small towns. Sheriffs would **deputize** (arm) citizens, temporarily form **posses** (groups), and hire bounty hunters to help catch outlaws. In towns without sheriffs, citizens would even take the law into their own hands. This often meant that justice was served harshly through hangings, without the courts. As more people moved west, however, law enforcement caught up with the population and laws were enforced. In fact, some of the first gun control laws were created out west to help cut down massive gun violence.



Western towns didn’t just attract miners and cowboys, but also **entrepreneurs** (business owners) looking to start businesses. Since most towns originally consisted of poor young men, gambling halls and **brothels** (prostitution) became popular. Chinese women were frequently sold by their families to western brothels, where they would be forced into prostitution in order to send money back home. These establishments were typically the most decorated buildings in town, including a bar, stage, opium room, and hotel. Often a town's success was measured by how many gambling halls there were.



Despite towns being mostly male, families did move out west to start new lives as ranchers as well. Ranches were often further away from town and were used to grow food or raise animals. Ranching was hard work. Most ranches required large families and hired hands to operate. As time went on, towns grew into cities and the exaggerated period of the “Wild West” ceased to exist.

**Imagery:** Draw or write a scene in your journal, of a typical western town. Highlight the evidence above.

**The Real Cowboys**

Hollywood has created both positive and negative stereotypes about cowboys. A positive stereotype was the idea that all cowboys followed a “Cowboy Code” which encouraged respect, honor, justice, and courage. Negative stereotypes included the idea that cowboys were violent gunslingers who often engaged in shootouts with local sheriffs, robbed trains, and killed Native Americans. In reality, cowboys were just ordinary people who worked hard herding cattle.



Cowboy culture originated in Spain and was transplanted to Mexico upon colonization. Mexican cowboys, known as *Vaqueros*, taught American settlers how to control herds of cattle and how to **wrangle** (control) horses. As the American demand for beef increased, Vaqueros and Americans found it profitable to herd large groups of cattle across the countryside to sell from town to town. Both Mexican and American cultures fused together and created the American Cowboy.

Not all cowboys were Anglo American veterans. About 25% of cowboys were African American freedmen who sought out the cowboy lifestyle because there was less discrimination out west. Another 25% of cowboys were Mexican American Vaqueros. Some cowboys were even Native Americans, who simply were looking for a way to make money while their land was being taken. Regardless of ethnicity, most cowboys were of the lower social class in western society. They worked long days, slept in bunk beds, and typically only paid a dollar a day.



Cowboy culture did not remain popular. Due to the ever rising demand for beef across the country, cattle herds eventually became too large to take across the open prairie from town to town. With the invention of barbed wire, cowboys found it easier to fence off land instead. With the open frontier closed, the “Wild West” had ended.

**Rumors & Reality:** Complete the chart with the reality of “The Wild West” after reading the rumors.

Rumor	Reality
Cowboys were gunslingers and honorable men	
Cowboys were purely an American creation	
Cowboys came from an Anglo American background	
Cowboys were outlaws looking to rob people	
Cowboys were eventually all put in jail by sheriffs	

**Cooldown:** Hollywood has been influenced by Wild West--Westerns, Star Trek, Star Wars, anime, superheroes--all borrow straying from the law. Why do you think people love the idea of a Wild West?