

The Myths of the West (Highlight Factual Cues)

No region is more shrouded in myth than the area west of the Mississippi River. In popular films and best-selling novels, the late nineteenth century western frontier was represented as a place where heroic, ruggedly independent pioneers struggled against an unfamiliar environment and brought civilization to a savage wilderness.

COWBOYS and FARMERS and OUTLAWS

Ranching introduced a colorful mode of existence with the picturesque cowboy as its central figure. Far from romantic, its mythological hold on the American imagination has remained strong, from the "dime" novels of the 1870s and the Wild West Show (Buffalo Bill) at the turn of the 20th century... to the films of John Wayne and Clint Eastwood in the late 20th century... and the continued Western theme of many movies. The very first movie to tell a story, Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) had a western setting, and for thirty years, from 1939 to 1969, the Western was Hollywood's most widely produced action film, and John Wayne was Hollywood's most consistently popular star. Roughly a quarter of all Hollywood movies made before 1970 were westerns. Farmers haven't had the same mythical hold as cowboys, but they have been misunderstood or misjudged over time. Outlaws were only a small part of the Western world, but those that did exist were quickly exaggerated.



As the last west was developing, people were becoming more literate and wealthier and could use their increased leisure time to read newspapers, magazines, and cheap western novels. These stories were rarely written by people with any direct experience with that west nor would the veracity of the stories ever be questioned, for few went to that part of the country. People wanted to believe that there was once a simpler, more honest time when men fought evil (often portrayed in terms of people like the Apache and the Sioux) and good triumphed over evil. The knight errant became a stock feature of Western fiction. Radio and cinema used stories of the West because they were popular and easy to tell. The good guys wore "whiter hats." Television adapted many radio programs, like *Gunsmoke*, and broadcast them. The myth endures because people react to the complexities of modern life.

Myth:

Cowboys were White men living a picturesque, romantic life for a considerable chunk of our history.

Reality:

It was simply a boom-bust episode. Like the Pony Express, which lasted less than 2 years but lives on and on in the imagination of the American psyche. Skills were learned from Mexican vaqueros who lived in Texas and other areas of the Southwest. Most were boys, and 1/3 Black; 1/3 Mexican, 1/3 White. The job had low pay and was grueling work. There are American cowboys today (and ever since) but they are a very small group and live a very different life than the romanticized long drive cowboy.

Myth:

Westerners were individualistic, competent, sincere, honest, straight-shooters, and quick to fight. They had common sense which was superior "intellect."

Reality:

In general, the western myth was part of the agrarian myth, the belief that virtue only resides on farms or in small towns and villages and that cities are corrupting. Westerners were individualistic but eventually organized politically and helped start the Populist movement which led to record level government regulation and reform. They weren't any more violent than Easterners. Crime existed in all sections of the nation and small communities policed each other whether they were in Texas or New York. Most were uneducated. Having common sense as more virtuous than being educated... well... that is hard to defend as accurate.

Myth:

The frontier west was a violent "Wild West" overrun with outlaws and bank robbers.

Reality:

Western bank robberies were **almost nonexistent** in the "Wild West" period. Over the four decades from 1859-1900 in 15 states (including Nebraska), there were **only about half a dozen bank robberies**. Lots of people carried concealed weapons, so potential robbers were always vulnerable. The few robberies that did take place didn't involve murder. (FYI...today there are roughly 7,000 bank robberies per year... a trend that started in the 1920s... there are more robberies in a typical American city in one year today than the entire Western era combined.) There is no evidence anyone was ever killed in a frontier shoot-out at high noon.

Myth:

Billy the Kid, Wild Bill, Buffalo Bill... larger than life / American legends

Reality:

Billy the Kid was a psychopathic murderer, but he didn't kill 21 people by the time he was 21 years old, as the legend says. Authorities can account for three men he killed for sure, and no more than a total of six or seven. Wild Bill Hickok claimed to have killed six Kansas outlaws and secessionists in the incident that first made him famous. But he lied. He killed just three—all unarmed. Bill Cody's reputation as a gunslinger was mostly from his own fiction. He freely admitted that he fabricated all the excessive shooting in those dime novels that made him famous. But he was a good shot and is said to have proved it repeatedly at bison-killing contests where he earned the nickname Buffalo Bill. But he didn't kill many Indians (theme of the novels in that era were "cowboys and Indians"). He had been wounded in combat with Indians only once, not 137 times as the stories said.

Myths are often popular with students (and obviously Americans in general); some wonder why these themes are not a bigger part of history curriculum. Why they aren't usually emphasized? Should they be?

To what extent are myths a significant part of American identity? Provide three pieces of evidence to support your answer.

Myths are a significant part of American identity to a _____ extent, because

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

What other myths persist in our society?

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

Home on the Range

Written By: Brewster Higley, Music By: Daniel Kelley,
Copyright: Unknown

Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam
And the deer and the antelope play
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the skies are not cloudy all day

Chorus:

**Home, home on the range
Where the deer and the antelope play
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the skies are not cloudy all day**

How often at night when the heavens are bright
With the light from the glittering stars
Have I stood there amazed and asked as I gazed
If their glory exceeds that of ours

Chorus

Where the air is so pure, the zephyrs (wind) so free
The breezes so balmy and light
That I would not exchange my home on the range
For all of the cities so bright

Chorus

Oh, I love those wild flow'rs in this dear land of ours
The curlew (bird), I love to hear scream
And I love the white rocks and the antelope flocks
That graze on the mountaintops green

Chorus



Brewster Higley wrote a poem called "My Western Home" in the early 1870s. It was first published in a December 1873 issue of the Smith County Pioneer under the title "Oh, Give Me a Home Where the Buffalo Roam." Higley's original words are similar to those of the song today but not identical. It was officially adopted as the state song of Kansas on June 30, 1947, and is commonly regarded as the unofficial anthem of the American West.

Describe the mood of this song:

Who viewed the west this way?

Who did not view the west this way?

Why does this song remain popular?