



Penny Musco | February 17, 2021

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## African American cowboys thrived in the Old West.

If your idea of a cowboy comes mainly from movies and television, then you might imagine Black herdsmen and law enforcement officials were rare as the U.S. spread westward across the continent. That's not so.

In reality, formerly enslaved and free African Americans accounted for every one in four cowboys back in the day. "No phase of our national heritage has been portrayed...as more typically American than the old West," writes William Loren Katz in his [book](#) *The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History of the African American Role in the Westward Expansion of the United States*. "[Y]et this particular slice of Americana has consistently been pictured as lily-white."

What's more, says Larry Callies, founder of the [Black Cowboy Museum](#) in Rosenberg, Texas, "white cowboys weren't called cowboys [at first]. They were called cowhands and cow punchers, because the word 'boy' meant 'servant.'" Ranches had a Black male "yard boy" who labored in the fields, a "house boy" for inside work, and the Black men who tended the cows were termed "cowboys"—which meant that white men didn't want to be called by the term. "So if you called a white man a cowboy, he'd say, 'I'm not your boy.'"

Remembering and honoring these cowboys of color is Callies' mission. He comes from a long line of cowboys—grandfather, father, and uncles—and their tales of long-ago and modern-day Black cowboys spurred him to start his own career in rodeos and country-western music. A vocal disorder ended his singing profession, leaving him more time to devote to roping, and in 2017, to open his museum.

**“They’ve never heard of a Black cowboy. They want to meet a real [one]. And that is me.”**

Situated in a nondescript strip mall inside the Houston metropolitan area, with a pet grooming and supplies store, a recovery center, and a boutique as neighbors, the compact space houses a variety of artifacts and photos reflecting the heyday of the Black cowboy—badges, rifles, and Stetsons among them, most of them donated. One prized piece is the sword of a Buffalo Soldier, a member of an all-Black regiment. These troops fought in the American Indian Wars and in Cuba during the Spanish-American War and served as the original rangers in western national parks.



Nat Love, who wrote about his exploits in “The Life and Adventures of Nat Love, Better Known in the Cattle Country as Dead Wood Dick, by Himself”

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Callies acts as the museum’s tour guide, enthusiastically relating the stories of cowboys long overlooked by Hollywood and history. People like Nat Love, who wrote about his exploits in *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love, Better Known in the Cattle County as Dead Wood Dick, by Himself*. Asked if the self-promoting cowboy may have stretched the truth about his adventures, Callies chuckles. “I love Nat Love, but I can’t believe he wrote that. He was a real cowboy, but where did he learn to read and write? He never went to school, he couldn’t learn on the trail, but I read his book and he said it was in his words.”

**“The Lone Ranger was Bass Reeves. When they put him on TV, they knew people wouldn’t accept him as a Black man, so they put a white man on with a black mask.”**

Less known is Bass Reeves, whom Callies calls “the best lawman in the world.” He rose from slavery to become the first Black deputy marshal west of the Mississippi River, where he captured 3,000 or more convicts over 30 plus years in eastern Oklahoma and western Arkansas. Fort Smith, Arkansas, salutes his achievements with a 25-foot statue.

What’s most surprising about Reeves is that he was the inspiration for the Lone Ranger. “The Lone Ranger was Bass Reeves,” Callies asserts, backed up by Art T. Burton in his book, *Black Gun, Silver Star: The Life and Legend of Frontier Marshal Bass Reeves*. “When they put him on TV, they knew people wouldn’t accept him as a Black man,” says Callies, “so they put a white man on with a black mask.”

Another Black cowboy dear to Callies' heart is Bill Pickett. "He invented bulldogging, or steer wrestling," the technique of seizing cattle by the horns and taking them down to the ground barehanded. Pickett also appeared in Wild West shows alongside "Buffalo Bill" Cody, Will Rogers, and Tom Mix. The National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum's Rodeo Hall of Fame made him their first Black inductee, and he resides in the ProRodeo Hall of Fame as well. Serious philatelists know Pickett from "one of the most infamous stamp errors in U.S. history," as the National Postal Museum dubs it. Pickett was a subject of a "Legends of the Wild West" stamp—except his portrait turned out to be that of his brother, Ben.

The arts seem to have finally caught up to Black cowboy culture in recent years. Nat Love is portrayed in 1996's television movie *The Cherokee Kid*, and by Michael Kenneth Williams (of *The Wire* and *Lovecraft Country* fame) in *They Die by Dawn*. Love also pops up as a character in fiction, in a graphic novel and in an Italian comic book series. Bass Reeves is featured in several 21st-century literature and movies, while Bill Pickett gets his due in a number of books.

And lest you think Lil Nas X qualifies as a Black cowboy, think again, says Callies. "He's considered a trail rider. There's a whole big difference between trail riding and being a cowboy." But, he acknowledges, "he put the Black cowboy on the map." Donning a Stetson or chaps doesn't make you a cowboy (or cowgirl), he stresses when talking about the so-called Yeehaw Agenda. "Getting on a horse doesn't [either]."

When Callies initially considered setting up his Black cowboy museum, he was warned about who would—and wouldn't—show up. "The Blacks are not going to support you, and the whites are not gonna come because it's a Black cowboy museum." He laughs at the memory. "They were right, at first, about the white people. But the Blacks started coming here in droves," he says of the year he opened. In the second year, though, "half were white and half were Black."

The racial mix continues today. People of all ethnicities still keep arriving from around the country and all over the world to learn about Black cowboys, many hoping to see one in real life. And they do.

"They've never heard of a Black cowboy," says Callies. "They want to meet a real [one]. And that is me."



Bass Reeves

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