

American West – How did the role of Cowboys change?

The term 'cowboy' was used to describe men who worked with cattle on the cattle drives, they were made up of blacks, Indian, Spanish, Mexican and white young men.

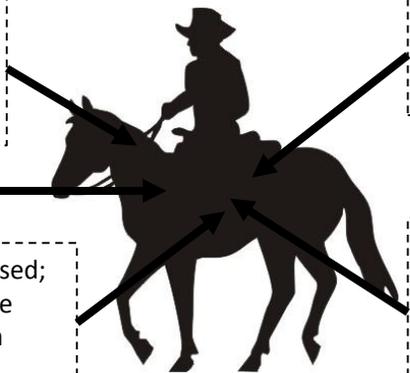
Cowboys were a tough group and had to survive on the harsh plains, they had specialist equipment to aid them.



Six-shooter pistol – cowboys had to be fast and accurate when defending their cattle

Lasso to catch cattle

Bandana which could be used; to protect from dust on the trail, sun on the neck, as a bandage or as a slingshot.



Stetson hat to give protection from sun, raid and cold

Six-shooter pistol – cowboys had to be fast and accurate when defending their cattle

Life on the Cattle Drives

Originally cowboys were hired to work on the cattle drives (e.g. Goodnight Loving Trail) from Texas to Abilene or the Great Plains cities like the Goodnight-Loving Trail.

You worked between 12-24 hours a day, walked 20 miles a day for up to 6 months. You would sleep and cook using campfires out in the open.

Cowboys worked seasonally (part of the year). In spring you round up the cattle and drive them north by Autumn



Your job was lonely, you could be at the front of the cattle drive miles away from others

Cowboys looked after the health and security of the cattle, keeping watch for predators or hostile Indians.

At the end of the drive they would spend their wages in Cow Towns like Abilene. Many would visit saloons and brothels causing problems.

The trail was very hot and dusty in the summer months and was full of dangers such as natural hazards and cattle stampedes.

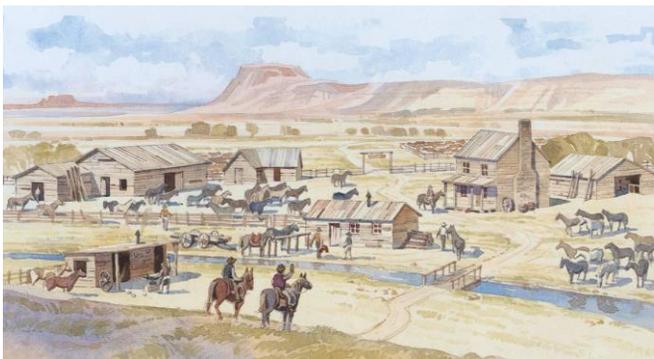
Life on the Ranches

In the 1870s, ranches on the Great Plains were set up causing many cowboys to move onto these. Most of the cowboys were in their 20s whilst the older cowboys moved onto new jobs. These ranches meant a considerable change for cowboys.

Cowboys now slept in bunkhouses with others, they had their own cookhouses

Dangers were fewer but still threat of Indians and rustlers (cattle thieves)

Cowboys had a variety of jobs on the ranches; rounding up the cattle, branding, cleaning and managing the fences.



Ranches banned drinking, gambling, guns and knives. Many struggled to get used to this.

Cowboys now had a full time job all year round, however there are less jobs available.

As the ranches were 'open range' (no fences) you still had to round up the cattle but you only had to drive the cattle short distances to market or railroad

Working in the winter on the Great Plains was dangerous and lonely – you could get stuck in a storm and cattle would struggle in the snow and ice

Exam Question



1. Explain two consequences of cattle ranching on the Great Plains (8 Marks)
2. Explain the importance cowboys in the cattle industry (8 marks)