A Christmas Carol, which appears in Done in the Open: Drawings by Frederick Remington (1902), offers a stereotypical image of the ubiquitous western saloon like those frequented by cowboys at the end of the long drive.
Drunk Driving or Dry Run?

Cowboys and Alcohol on the Cattle Trail

by Raymond B. Wrabley Jr.

The cattle drive is a central fixture in the popular mythology of the American West. It has been immortalized—and romanticized—in the films, songs, and literature of our popular culture. It embodies some of the enduring elements of the western story—hard (and dangerous) work and play; independence; rugged individualism; courage; conflict; loyalty; adversity; cowboys; Indians; horse thieves; cattle rustlers; frontier justice; and the vastness, beauty, and unpredictable bounty and harshness of nature. The trail hand, or cowboy, stands at the interstices of myth and history and has been the subject of immense interest for cultural mythmakers and scholars alike. The cowboy of popular culture is many characters—the loner and the loyal friend; the wide-eyed young boy and the wise, experienced boss; the gentleman and the lout. He is especially the life of the cowtown—the drinker, fighter, gambler, and womanizer.

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The author would like to thank Sara Herr of Pitt-Johnstown’s Owen Library for her efforts in tracking down hard-to-find sources and Richard Slatta for his helpful comments on a draft of the article.
Historians have debunked many of the myths in telling the story of the work and daily lives of the tens of thousands of men (and some women) who went up the trail during the short heyday of the cattle drives. There is a vast historical literature on the origins, development, and impact of the cattle industry and, especially, its cowboy employee—documenting who he was; how he worked; what tools he used in his trade; what songs he sang and games he played; and how he lived on the ranches, on the trails, and in the towns. Historians have given us a clearer picture, not only of the famous cattle industry barons but also of the boys and men—Anglo, Mexican, African American, and American Indian—who drove millions of cattle up the trails to market in the late nineteenth century.¹

Historians have also documented the “woolliness” of the western cattle towns. Although the violence and gunplay of the smoky saloons and dusty streets have been exaggerated, many cowboys certainly drank heartily at trail’s end. The nineteenth-century newspaperman and novelist Alfred Henry Lewis wrote of the cowboy, “Once the herd is off his hands and his mind at the end of the drive … he becomes deeply and famously drunk.”² But what about on the trail? Did the frivolity and indulgence of the cattle towns spill over to the cattle trails? On one of the most famous fictional cattle drives, Tom Dunson, the tyrannical trail boss played by John Wayne in Red River, drank hard and turned mean. He eventually lost his herd to his mutinous adopted son, Matt. Another famous fictional trail boss, Wil Andersen (also played by John Wayne), and his cook, Jedediah Nightlinger, shared some nightly whiskey along the trail. They humored their hungover young


² Alfred Henry Lewis, Wolfville Nights (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1902), 12. One thorough study that concluded that violence, especially gun violence, in the western towns has been overstated is Robert Dykstra’s The Cattle Towns (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968).

Not only did Joseph G. McCoy, the “father of the Texas cattle trade,” create the conditions that gave rise to the myth of American cowboy, he also wrote the first history of the subject: Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade of the West and Southwest (1874).
Drunk Driving or Dry Run?

3. Movies and television have continued to play an influential role in making alcohol a central ingredient in western fiction, from Tombstone to Deadwood.


5. Rorabaugh, The Alcoholic Republic, 20–21. According to Rorabaugh, colleges battled students over out-of-control drinking in the late 1700s and early 1800s, as “drunkenness and rioting had become ways for students to show contempt for institutions that failed to provide them with a useful, up-to-date, republican education” (140).

Photographer Alexander Gardner captured this image of stock cars at McCoy's Abilene stockyard in 1867, the little village's first year as the northern terminus of the long drives from Texas.
whiskey. Whiskey became an important source of income for farmers, distillers, merchants, tavern owners, and municipal governments. It also became a key ingredient in an American diet heavy on corn and pork and for which many alternative drinks, including water, were inferior or more expensive. Americans also believed spirituous liquors (not only whiskey) aided digestion and had other therapeutic qualities. Rapid population growth, social and economic upheaval, the breakdown of social hierarchies, and westward migration into wide-open space outside traditional society contributed to a restlessness and rootlessness that were factors in high alcohol consumption.6

Heavy alcohol consumption eventually had destructive social and even military consequences. Rorabaugh claimed that “during the period of peak consumption liquor induced wife beating, family desertion, and assaults, as well as payments from public funds for the support of inebriates and their families, increased.”7

In the middle of the nineteenth century alcohol consumption began to moderate. European grain markets and cheaper transportation costs undermined the incentive to turn corn into whiskey. Temperance and prohibition movements gained traction. Rorabaugh attributed the gains of the temperance movement to the emergent spirits of materialism and evangelism. The materialist temper emphasized productivity and efficiency and discouraged drinking, which squandered capital and dissipated wealth. Besides its effect on work effort, alcohol consumption was increasingly seen as depraved and wicked, and abstinence was seen as a sign of grace.8

Even as consumption declined in the second half of the nineteenth century, however, communities in which heavy drinking was common persisted—especially in the West, the country of the cowboy. According to Robert Utley, “Everywhere on the frontier, nearly all men drank nearly all the time, which made nearly all men more or less drunk most of the time.”9 Fur trappers and traders, gold miners and prospectors, cowboys and gamblers in the cattle towns, and soldiers stationed at isolated western forts were among the heaviest drinkers. Allan Winkler documented the heavy drinking of many of these westerners. He quoted one gold miner as saying, “You can’t do anything in this country without setting ‘em up first.” In the military, excessive drinking and drunkenness persisted, even after problems with violence, addiction, and dereliction led the federal government to suspend the traditional daily ration of liquor. According to Winkler, for both miners and soldiers, isolation, the harsh elements, and especially a masculine culture with few women were factors in heavy drinking.10

David Courtwright agreed, arguing that the frontier, besides being the “wettest” place in the country, was also “the most youthful and masculine,” with a high ratio of men to women and taverns to population. According to Courtwright, “American frontiersmen came, in the main, from cultures in which men drank a great deal of hard liquor and were expected to be boastful and rowdy as a consequence.”11

Many cowboys were among the “frontiersmen” from such a culture. Courtwright wrote that “the cowboys of the Great Plains were young, male, single, itinerant, irrereligious, often southern-born, and lived, worked, and played in male company.” Of


9. Robert Utley, High Noon in Lincoln: Violence on the Western Frontier (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 176. Utley argued that whiskey was one of the common elements in frontier violence and in a western “code” of violent self-redress and self-defense. According to Utley, this code was ardently embraced in Texas and flowered up the great cattle trails to other parts of the West.


the estimated thirty-five thousand men who went up the trail, the bulk were white southerners, especially Texans. According to Jack Weston, their Texas origins influenced the life, work, and consciousness of cowboys.12

Texans had a long-established reputation for hearty drinking and violence. According to William Hogan, “The rugged generation that maintained Texas as a republic drank heavily and frequently.” An early Texas journalist noted, “Nothing was regarded as a greater violation of established etiquette, than for one who was going to drink, not to invite all within a reasonable distance to partake; so that the Texians being entirely a military people, not only fought, but drank in platoons.”13 After the Civil War, Texas was generally resistant to the increasingly popular national temperance and prohibition movements. An 1887 statewide vote on a constitutional prohibition amendment received only 130,000 votes out of nearly 350,000 cast.14

Texas themes and appeals were prominent in many of the cattle towns. The National Live Stock Association’s 1905 history of the cattle industry reported that “the ‘Lone Star’ stared and shined everywhere in Dodge City. There was a general pandering to the Lone Star sentiment, and lone stars abounded in all sizes and hues.” Texas Street was the main cowboy haunt in Abilene, and the Alamo was among its more prestigious saloons.15

The Texas cowboys, along with their fellow punchers, did a good bit of drinking at the Alamo and the other saloons in the end-of-the-trail towns, and it was not hard to do. Winkler noted that “whiskey was everywhere; it was impossible to stay in Dodge City and be more than a hundred yards from some place of refreshment open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.” According to Richard Slatta, “Cowboys engaged in spree drinking when the rare opportunity presented itself. The end of a long trail drive or of the roundup and branding season provided two such opportunities.”16 In 1870 the Junction City Weekly Union reported of the cowboys, “These herdsmen toil for tedious months behind their slow herds, seeing scarcely a house, garden, woman or child for near 1,000 miles, and like a cargo of sea worn sailors coming into port, they must have—when released—some kind of entertainment. In the absence of something better, they at once fall into liquor and gambling saloons at hand.” Cattleman Joseph G. McCoy described the end-of-the-trail cattle-town visits as “a few days of frolic and debauchery,” when cowboys would get “lit up with excitement, liquor and lust.” For McCoy, the “wild, reckless conduct of the cowboys while drunk … brought the personnel of the Texas cattle trade into great disrepute.”17 Indeed, in the early years of the trail drives newspaper reports described cowboys, in contrast with the rakish cowboy of popular culture, as “drunken delinquents at best and violent criminals at worst,” with one reporter writing, “Morally as a class, they [cowboys] are foul-mouthed, blasphemous, drunken, lecherous, utterly corrupt.”18

12. Courtwright, Violent Land, 88; Weston, The Real American Cowboy, 7. Estimates of the numbers of cowboys and their demographic profile vary. See David Murdoch, The American West: The Invention of a Myth (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2001); Weston, The Real American Cowboy; and Slatta, Cowboys of the Americas. Several accounts estimate that up to one-fifth of cowboys were black and one-tenth were Mexican, and both played important roles in the cattle industry. See Philip Durham and Everett L. Jones, The Negro Cowboys (New York: Dodd Mead, 1965); Massey, Black Cowboys of Texas; and Kenneth W. Porter, “Negro Labor in the Western Cattle Industry, 1866–1900,” Labor History 10 (Summer 1969): 346–374. Toward the later years of the trail drives, some easterners and Europeans became trail hands. Many contemporaneous accounts refer to the cowboys as Texans or to the Texas origins of many cowboys. This is not a claim that the techniques and tools of cattle ranching and trailing have uniquely Texas origins. See Terry G. Jordan, North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion and Differentiation (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993).


17. Junction City Weekly Union, October 29, 1870; and McCoy, Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade, 209–210. See also Wayne Gard, The Chisholm Trail (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 162–163. Will James argued that the reputation of the Texans was unfairly tarnished by the bad behavior of a small minority: “In the early days prior to and some years after the Civil War, Texas offered an asylum or city of refuge, as it were, to the criminal scum of creation.” Will S. James, 27 Years a Materrick, or Life on a Texas Range (Austin, Tex.: Steck-Vaughn Company, 1968), 41.

But what about outside town? Did cowboys’ drinking carry over into work—into drinking while driving? Slatta wrote that “drinking bouts were separated by long dry periods. Liquor was often unavailable outside of towns.” Douglas Branch wrote that, though “the Texas cowboys had known whiskey-drinking as a social pleasantry on their home range,” drinking was not done on drives because “a drink-fuddled cowboy was dangerous as well as useless.” According to Winkler, “There was no drinking on the trails because the work was too dangerous,” and Wayne Gard wrote of “the abstemious life on the trail.” Courtwright claimed that “the nature of their work precluded drinking on the job, but they made up for it in payday binges.”

But drinking on the job, even on dangerous jobs, was not unheard-of in the nineteenth century. William Sonnenstuhl, in analyzing various “occupational drinking cultures,” argued that drinking on the job was traditional among the early railroaders, the first factory workers, sailors, teamsters, and those in the military. He claimed that “intemperate occupational drinking” was often an “intentionally enacted ritual” that strengthened members’ communal bonds. Ian Tyrell argued that in the early 1800s “the use of liquor was intimately bound up with traditional concepts of work” and that, “according to the conventional wisdom of the time, liquor was especially useful in jobs which involved exposure to the elements.” Peter Way argued that “liquor was firmly ensconced in the workplace” in the “rough culture” of early canal construction laborers. According to Way, “Most hands liked to drink and refused to work without it, leading contractors to integrate alcohol into their system of production.” Workers received twelve

drinking figured as part of a ‘rough’ style of masculinity that emphasized ‘manly’ confrontation with the rigors and dangers of the job, defiance of management, and consumption of alcohol.” For railroad workers, long hours of train service blurred the lines between labor and leisure, and, according to Taillon, “if a running trades worker wanted a drink he had little choice but to drink on the job.” Drinking on the job also fostered emotional bonds and solidarity. Way wrote that among the mostly young male canal construction workers, the dangers of the job contributed to “a rough camaraderie reinforced by male bonding, which manifested itself in drinking and roughhousing typical of young men.”

Cowboys were part of a late-nineteenth-century “rough” masculine frontier work culture, in an occupation that was tough, wearying, and sometimes dangerous. Their work was dirty, and the weather was often harsh. They faced dangers from storms, stampedes, river crossings, thieves, Indian attacks, and even snakes. Trail drives could be lonely and boring and required skill, endurance, courage, and a bit of bravado. Cattle driving became an occupation dominated by young men. “The cow country was a man’s country,” wrote David Dary, and, according to Slatta, “cowboying was work for young men.” According to Edward Dale, “One range rider has recorded that during a year’s work he did not see a woman for nine months.” Winkler wrote that married cowboys were the exception, and strong family ties were rare. Courtwright estimated that the average age of cowboys was twenty-three or twenty-four and concluded that “cowboys, in short, were lower-class bachelor laborers in a risky and unhealthy line of work. They were members of a disreputable and violent subculture with its own rules for appropriate behavior.”


23. Lewis wrote eloquently of the cowboy, “His religion of fatalism, his courage, his rides at full swing in midnight darkness to head and turn and hold a herd stampeded, when a slip on the storm-soaked grass by his unshod pony, or a misplaced prairie-dog hole, means a tumble, and a tumble means that a hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of cattle, with hoofs like chopping knives, will run over him and make him look and feel and become as dead as a cancelled postage stamp” (Wolfville Nights, 10). George Duffield’s diary written during an early cattle drive to Iowa referred to frequent heavy rain, hot sun, cold and snow, and constant stampedes. He repeatedly wrote of feeling “gloomy,” “blue,” “heart-sick,” and “discouraged.” George C. Duffield, “Driving Cattle from Texas to Iowa, 1866,” Annals of Iowa 14 (April 1925): 242–262.

no thorough examination of the record to indicate whether theirs was an “intemperate occupational drinking culture” in which alcohol was consumed on the job as part of the work routines or customs.

Some of the ranchers, herd owners, and cowboys who went up the trail recorded their experiences in memoirs, logs, journals, or other written reminiscences. Journalists and writers of the time reported on the lives of the cowboys. These records provide some evidence as to whether alcohol was consumed on the job, and with what consequences. If trail herding was an intemperate occupational drinking culture, the stories told by cowboys and their contemporaries should show on-the-job drinking as one of the practices integrated into the occupational rituals and experiences.

One of the more prolific chroniclers of cowboy life, Ramon Adams, suggested that whiskey might not have been widely available to the trail hands, but it may have been among the provisions for the drive: “Every cook reserved a drawer for a few simple remedies such as quinine, calomel, pills, black draught, and horse liniment, the latter to be used on man or beast. Reserved for the cook’s private use in case of ‘snake bite’ or his own ‘private misery’ was a bottle of whiskey allowed with the wagon. Some ranchmen even forbade this.” But, according to Adams, the cook might not have been the only one carrying whiskey. He tells this story of a wagon breaking loose while crossing the Canadian River on a drive in the 1880s: “Ten miles down the river the raft was washed up on a little island. The cook was riding high and dry. He did not worry. He found a quart of whiskey in the boss’ saddle pocket; he had all the food and beds. All he had to do was sit there and enjoy himself.”

J. Marvin Hunter gathered the reminiscences of some of the men who went up the trail in his thousand-page compilation The Trail Drivers of Texas. The book was compiled decades after the end of the cattle drives, so some of the accounts may reflect faulty or selective memories. Hunter’s purpose was also to “inspire a spirit of reverence and gratitude,” so there may be embellishments or coyness. Indeed, one of the former trail hands, C. H. Rust, wrote, “It might be that the old trail driver has something buttoned up in his vest that he won’t tell. Well, he is not supposed to tell all he knows, but will tell all he can.” And George Gerdes wrote, “I further solemnly swear and affirm’ that I will tell ‘not’ all I saw and heard. Who would?”

Nevertheless, the compilation offers some interesting anecdotes about the life of the trail drivers. Many of the accounts suggest that alcohol was not readily available to the cowboys on the drive. Sam Neill went up the trail in 1880 and remembered: “From the time we started I was not inside a house after we left Frio Town until we reached Ogallala. The last house I was in before I left was Tom Bibb’s saloon in Frio Town, and the next was Tuck’s saloon in Ogallala. This was a mighty long time between drinks.” J. L. McCaleb wrote that at the end of a drive, while the cattle were bedded near Abilene waiting to be shipped, “the boss let myself and another boy go to the city one day … and the first place we visited was a saloon and dance hall. We ordered toddies … and drank them down, for we were dry, very dry, as it had been a long ways between drinks.”

For long stretches of the many cattle drives that crossed Indian Territory, the possession of alcohol was actually illegal. L. D. Taylor wrote of the return trip to Texas after delivering a herd in Kansas, when, on reaching Fort Gibson on the Arkansas River, “the boys chipped in and bought a lot of whiskey at this place, paying twelve dollars a gallon for it. I opposed buying the whiskey because it was a serious offense to convey it into the Indian Territory, but they bought it anyway, and after we started on our way again, some trouble arose among the outfit.” Indeed, a U.S. statute passed in 1834 and amended in 1864 made it a crime punishable by fine or prison term to introduce (or attempt to introduce) any spirituous liquor or wine into Indian country. Enforcing the statute, however, was problematic. The U.S. military worked tirelessly in the 1870s to keep illegal whiskey peddlers out of Indian Territory; yet, according to Robert Carriker, “smuggled liquor flowed freely in Arapahoe and Cheyenne villages,” and “whiskey ranches” dotted the area across the Kansas line.

26. Hunter, Trail Drivers of Texas, 4, 212, 459. In his introduction to Cox’s Historical and Biographical Record of the Cattle Industry, J. Frank Dobie described many of the early accounts of cowboy culture as “orthodoxly Victorian” and the product of a “covering-up age” (297). Obviously, the cowhands telling tales of trail mischief had more than history in mind.
27. Hunter, Trail Drivers of Texas, 257, 486.
28. Ibid., 504.
gests that whiskey may also have been available to passing trail herders.

In fact, some of the accounts do suggest that alcohol may have been at least accessible from stores, houses, or ranches to cowboys along the trail. Taylor wrote of crossing the Arkansas River on a drive in 1869: “Here we found a store and plenty of ‘booze,’ and some of the boys got ‘full.’” Joseph S. Cruze Sr. made a number of drives from Texas to Kansas over the Chisholm Trail. He wrote, “I remember the killing of Pete Owens. ... We had reached the Cross Timbers of Texas, and passed a ranch where booze was sold. There was a row and Pete was shot and killed.” G. H. Mohle, sick from drinking bad water, remembered that an Irishman “carried me to a store and bought me some whiskey and pretty soon I was able to travel.”

Samuel Dunn Houston wrote, “In the spring of 1879 I was on the trail with Len Pierce, but when we crossed the Cimarron, the boys all went to the Longhorn Roundup and got too much whiskey, went to camp, made a rough house and fired Mr. Pierce.” W. F. Thompson remembered a drive with three thousand cattle held up at “Doan’s Store” on the Red River: “Zack Stucker, our boss, had gone ahead to look for a crossing on the river, as it was up very high from spring rains, and when he came back he ordered me to get ready to cross at two o’clock in the evening. I informed him that all the boys were drunk as old man Doan had some wagon-yard whiskey, and that we had better not cross as

30. Hunter, Trail Drivers of Texas, 502, 57-58, 45. If the water was bad, what was available for the hands to drink on the drive? John Wells remem-
the men would have to swim, and a drunken man cannot swim.”

George A. H. Baxter wrote of the Trail City saloons just north of the Arkansas River in Colorado as places that “afforded a liquor-refreshing station for the thirsty residents ... as well as for the cowhands and trail riders, parched with the dust of the cattle trail.” He also noted that trail cutters employed by the state and the Stock Growers Association held up herds crossing the Arkansas River at this point. While the herds were being cut, “the trail riders and cowhands had time to ride into Trail City to drink and gamble, or just to ‘look on.’” Rollie Burns wrote that cowboys had a chance to drink at Fort Griffin, Texas, the “last point where trail outfits could get supplies until they got to Kansas.” In Fort Griffin, “soldiers, Tonks, punchers from passing trail outfits, adventurers, and desperadoes all mingled together and played the saloons and gambling rackets.” Bob Kennon went up the trail from Mexico to Montana in 1896 with a herd of two thousand and remembered that “once in a while some fellow would put up a kick to ride into a near-by town. Though we could hardly spare a rider and they’d always get drunk and into trouble when they did get to town, a few of them managed to go.” During that drive, Kennon said, “we had about five different cooks. ... They would begin drinking at stops along the way and the boss would fire one and hire another.” Ab Snyder (“Pinnacle Jake”) also told of drunk cooks and town visits on a drive of 4,300 head from Wyoming to a Montana range in the 1880s. Passing Camp Crook, where

31. Hunter, Trail Drivers of Texas, 71, 527-528. Thompson reported they had to wait until the next day to cross.
33. William C. Holden, Rollie Burns, or An Account of the Ranching Industry on the South Plains (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1986), 54-55. Frank Collinson, who went up the trail numerous times, also described Fort Griffin as a “thriving frontier town” where passing trail outfits would resupply, although he did not mention drinking. Frank Collinson, Life in the Saddle, ed. Mary Whatley Clarke (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 35.
“the old cattle trail went directly behind the stores and saloons,” Snyder wrote that “all the boys had hit the saloons as we came through town. Only two or three weren’t too drunk to get on into camp for supper, and I was the only man able to work that was left with the herd. I sure had my hands full for a while.”

On a drive across Kansas in the mid-1880s, Oliver Nelson wrote, “after we got to camp, they [two hands] crossed over to Cimarron, got tanked up, and brought back half a sack of bottled beer. They started again to have a little fun at my expense, and I thought if they got boisterous, things might go wrong.”

J. A. Blythe remembered a drive through Kansas when he went into Dodge City on a “night off” to “whoop ‘em up.” According to Charley Hester, although there was no chance for diversion on the Old Cattle Trail, when the boss saw things were “pulling up to a high tension he will shift the men to new duties or send them off to where they could reduce pressure by attempting to stand a town on its ear.”

William Baxter Slaughter wrote that on a drive in 1870 that was stopped at Holland Creek, the trail boss allowed half the crew at a time to take twenty-four hours in Abilene. One of the cowhands “immediately got on a spree … and was killed in a dance hall there and I saw him no more.”

Will Stone helped drive three thousand steers from New Mexico to South Dakota in the early 1880s. At various points when the herd was stopped for the day, he remembered, some men would ride to a nearby town and return to camp “three sheets in the wind.”

Other accounts suggest that alcohol was consumed along the trail. W. B. Foster went up the trail in 1871 with Colonel W. M. Todd and wrote, “At the Trinity River we

35. Albert B. Snyder, as told to Nellie Snyder Yost, *Pinnacle Jake* (Lincoln, Nebr.: Caxton Printer, 1951), 146. Snyder reported that the cook came back to camp drunk but quit the outfit to return to town and continue drinking. He sent two bottles of whiskey back to camp as payment for the horse he had taken.

36. Oliver Nelson, *The Cowman’s Southwest, Being the Reminiscences of Oliver Nelson, Freightier, Camp Cook, Cowboy, Frontiersman in Kansas, Indian Territory, Texas, and Oklahoma, 1878–1893*, ed. Angie Debo (Glendale, Calif.: Arthur H. Clarke Company, 1953), 243. Nelson also wrote that “on the drives … arguing was discouraged, and so was whiskey, because when one boy was put to rest under a fresh mound and the other took a good horse and rode off, it left the herd short-handed” (167).

wound up a wild drive of 100 miles in four days with stock cattle. Col. Todd was drinking all the time and was disagreeable, which caused Colonel Nail to leave us. Everyone in the outfit was sorry to see him leave as he was a fine man." 38 A. F. Carvajal wrote of a drive in 1882 that crossed the Colorado near Austin, when “at this place we fired the cook for getting drunk.” F. S. Millard recorded that, while gathering a herd in South Texas in the 1890s, one of the hands, Frank Hargis, came into camp drunk, and “he slept all that day and night.” 39 After the herd was gathered and moving on the trail, Millard remembered:

Just before leaving Eagle Pass Frank Hargis came to me and said, “Fred, I expect you had better get a bottle and take along, and you can watch me and if you think I need a drink you can give me one.” So I got the bottle, put it in a tin bucket and put it back in the grub box, so nobody but me and the cook knew anything about it. One morning there was a pretty good norther blowing. I came in off of last guard and called them all to get breakfast. I got the bottle and says, “Frank, now would you like to have a drink?” Frank says, “I had forgotten all about telling you to get that bottle or there would not have been any left.” I told him I knew that. 40

James McCauley, a hand on many trail drives, wrote that on a drive to Kansas City:

Everything went well enough until we arrived at Canyon City. As it was my day off from the herd and we was something like a mile from town I concluded


39. F. S. Millard, A Cowpuncher of the Pecos (1928), 26; and Hunter, Trail Drivers of Texas, 840. The firing of the cook indicated that getting drunk was not acceptable, at least for this trail boss.

I would take in the city. I stayed all the evening, took a thin one now and then just to make things merry. I being on the second guard, the other boys wanted to go after supper and I thought I’d go back with them until my guard. ... We started for the wagon. I had one of those square bottles of whiskey in my outside coat pocket. Oh, but we was riding like deputy sheriff when all at once my horse struck a hole and fell on me. I knew I was hurt but I didn’t think very bad. ... ’Twas time to go on guard when I got there, so I just rode on to the herd. ... Oh, but I was sick!41

Hester wrote of a practical joke played by one of the trail hands who came into camp pretending to have been bitten by a rabid skunk: “The disturbance brought out the cook and he too thought the boy was in a real fit and away he rushed to the chuck wagon for a remedy. Imagine our surprise when he immediately returned with a pint bottle of likker and proceeded to pour it down the throat of the suffering man.”42

Ab Blocker wrote of his 1878 drive: “When we crossed the Red River, [John] Golden told me one evening to look out for the herd, as he and Ben Biles were going back to the other side of the river. I thought they were going back for whiskey, but the next morning just at daylight they drove up with forty head of fine four-year-old steers.”43 In this instance, although Golden and Biles did not return with any whiskey, Blocker’s expectation suggests that it would not have been surprising.

Yet these recollections of alcohol on the trail are drawn from a large body of memoirs and histories that rarely mention drinking on the trail. Several classic histories of the cattle trade, written during or soon after the cattle-drive era by participants or close observers, provide an encyclopedic amount of information about the origins of cattle and cattle drives; locations of trails and ranches; the development of tools and techniques for herding cattle; descriptions of life in the camps, ranches, and on the trails; and biographies of prominent cattle-industry found-

41. James E. McCauley, *A Stove-up Cowboy’s Story*, with introduction by John A. Lomax (Austin: Texas Folklore Society, 1943), 23. McCauley’s being sick turned out to be due to broken ribs sustained in his fall.
43. Hunter, *Trail Drivers of Texas*, 506
ers and shapers. Some of these describe heavy drinking in the boomtowns that emerged where cattle trails met rail lines and herds were sold and shipped. Most do not mention drinking on the cattle drives, and some assert that herd owners or trail bosses forbade it. John Clay rode the northern ranges extensively and wrote in My Life on the Range, “Looking back it seems worse than wicked to think of the amount of bad whiskey and very poor beer that we managed to drink and digest in those days,” but he does not mention drinking on cattle drives. James H. Cook wrote in his memoir, Fifty Years on the Old Frontier as Cowboy, Hunter, Guide, Scout, and Ranchman, “The majority of the cowboys of the West were not a drunken, gambling lot of toughs. A drunken man riding about one of those great herds of wild cattle was a sight I never witnessed.” In Riding the High Country, Patrick Tucker described his experiences as a cowboy who made many trail drives and spent a good bit of time on northern ranges. His stories included lots of drinking, mostly in towns and camp. During one winter camp, he remembered, “Our Christmas lasted six days, and we had a rollicking time. We had whiskey in our coffee, whiskey in our mince pies, hot whiskey, cold whiskey, and none of us were feeling bad.” He did not mention drinking on the drives. “Teddy Blue,” in We Pointed Them North; Recollections of a Cowpuncher, admitted that the old range law “no whiskey with the wagon” was occasionally violated, but on the trail “everybody knew that drinking and cattle didn’t mix.” The Wyoming Stock Growers Association published the memories of many trail drivers in Letters from Old Friends and Members of the Wyoming Stock Growers Association. Some reiterated that alcohol was not uncommon at the ranches or in camps. Lee Moore wrote of working for I. P. Olive in 1876, “They furnished coffee, corn meal, salt, whiskey and beef, provided you didn’t kill one of theirs. We would sometimes get out of coffee or meal or salt but never out of whiskey or beef.” The letters did not mention drinking on the trail.

Clifford Westermeyer compiled accounts by close observers of the cowboys from dozens of newspapers, magazines, old books, and other documents in Trailing the Cowboy: His Life and Lore as Told by Frontier Journalists. A chapter was devoted to high jinks in the cowtowns, but the compilation did not mention drinking on the trail.

A review of the record shows that the cattle drives of the late nineteenth century were not always dry runs. There is evidence of drinking and driving, with consequences. This seems especially the case later in the trail drive period, when trails passed more closely and regularly near towns and farms. Herds were delayed, crew members were fired or quit over conflicts, there were occasional fights and even killings, and there were injuries. This is not surprising. The West was “wet,” and cowboys were mostly young men who lived and worked in a male-dominated culture in


44. The histories include Cox, Historical and Biographical Record of the Cattle Industry; National Live Stock Association, Prose and Poetry; McCoy, Historic Sketches of the Cattle Trade; and Nimmo, The Range and Ranch Cattle Traffic. Reminiscences or memoirs by prominent ranchers or others involved in the cattle industry, most of whom participated in roundups or trail drives, that do not mention drinking on the drives include Edgar Beecher Bronson, Reminiscences of a Ranchman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962); John Pratt, Trails of Yesterday (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1921); Sam P. Ridings, The Chisholm Trail ( Guthrie, Okla.: Co-Operative Publishing Company, 1936); Paul C. Phillips, ed., Forty Years on the Frontier, as Seen in the Journals and Reminiscences of Granville Stuart, Gold-Miner, Trader, Merchant, Rancher and Politician (Cleveland, Ohio: Arthur H. Clarke Co., 1925); and John Clay, My Life on the Range (1924; reprint, New York: Antiquarian Press, 1961).


47 Westermeyer, Trailing the Cowboy.
which alcohol consumption was common. Many were anxious to get “lit up,” not just at the end of the long drive—and found opportunities to do so.

However, the majority of the published accounts of the cattle drives did not mention drinking on the drive or asserted that it did not happen. Although alcohol may have been accessible at points along the drive, from stores, peddlers, or towns, drinking on the drives—drunk driving—does not appear to have been common. The reminiscences about on-the-job drinking are often told in ways that imply that “drunk driving” was deviant as opposed to normal or expected.

Cowboys constituted a masculine work culture but do not appear to have created an intemperate occupational drinking culture. Why not? The organization of the trail herd often reflected the interests and dominance of the herd owners. Cattle on the trail represented capital at risk, and herd owners insisted on strict discipline in the trail outfits. Many cattlemen and their trail bosses prohibited drinking and were able to maintain this rule. The trail boss was often granted control likened to that of a ship’s captain; he “exercise[d] complete authority and receive[d] loyalty and cooperation.” One of the pioneering cattlemen, Charles Goodnight, was “an almost feudal figure, backing his men all the way and demanding complete obedience and loyalty from them. At the start of every drive he ordinarily drew up a contract stating each man’s responsibilities, forbidding gambling, drinking, and cursing, and providing that any man committing a crime would be tried on the trail and punished on the spot.” The leverage of herd owners was also enhanced by the fact that cowboy labor was often plentiful enough that dependable hands could usually be found, enhancing the ability of trail bosses to maintain discipline.

It is also the case that the nature of the work on the trail made regular drinking risky. Although some dangerous occupations did incorporate on-the-job drinking, "perhaps in no other occupation of men was the theory of the 'survival of the fittest' more plainly demonstrated in practice than in the quick weeding out of the weaklings, of the visionary, and of the inherently deprived, among those who undertook the cowboy life."

Finally, in the occupational drinking cultures of the nineteenth century, drinking on the job was an aspect of defining masculinity. For cowboys, this may have been true in the towns at the end of the trails, but on the trail the cowboys’ identity seems to have been produced more through the demonstration of skill, courage, loyalty, and teamwork than through drinking.

48. Durham and Jones, The Negro Cowboys, 37, 99. Slatta argued that, especially toward the end of the trailing days, cattle raising had become big business and the cowboy employees had come to be more like “other regimented workers” (Cowboys of the Americas, 49).
50. See Nancy Quam-Wickham, “Rereading Man’s Conquest of Nature: Skill, Myths, and the Historical Construction of Masculinity in Western Extractive Industries,” Men and Masculinities 2 (October 1999): 135–151, especially 147. Quam-Wickham argued that in the western extractive industries, qualities such as ability, resourcefulness, and inventiveness, or skill, separated the men from the boys and were part of the process through which workers identified themselves as men.