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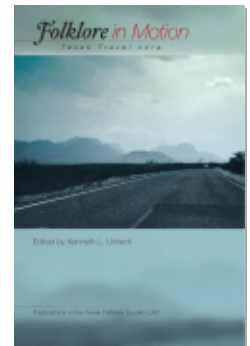
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THE LANGUAGE OF THE TRAIL DRIVERS: AN EXAMINATION OF THE ORIGIN AND DIFFUSION OF AN INDUSTRY-ORIENTED VOCABULARY

by W. C. Jameson



INTRODUCTION

There exist in this country, and quite likely throughout the world, numerous examples of industry-oriented vocabularies. It can be argued, for instance, that the defense industry in the United States has a unique vocabulary oriented toward specific goals and projects. The baseball and football industries, both professional and collegiate, have their own specific vocabularies and terminology. Even academicians, depending on their specific areas of concentration, have a jargon peculiar to their interests and professional activities.

The vocabulary addressed herein is associated with the ranching and livestock industry as it evolved and thrived in South-Central Texas from the late 1830s to approximately the mid-1880s, a vocabulary which, in much the same form, is still in use today.

Several aspects of this vocabulary beg discussion. One critical element is concerned with how it came into existence as a result of the juxtapositioning of certain critical events and several different cultures. Another relates to the diffusion processes involved in disseminating the vocabulary throughout a portion of the United States and even the world—a diffusion process which has gone through at least two phases and, to some limited extent, continues today. Finally, some comments will be offered relative to the endurance of this vocabulary and what specific factors might have enabled it to remain in use for well over a century, even though the trail drives and the specific cattle ranching operations of the last century no longer exist.

CULTURAL MIX

Prior to Anglo settlement in the central and southern parts of Texas, the region was minimally populated by scattered tribes of Native Americans and a few Spanish friars and associated followers who entered the area to establish missions and, in part, to deliver Christianity to the Indians. Among other things, the missionaries encouraged agricultural pursuits, particularly cattle husbandry. In order to accomplish this goal, the church leaders brought with them hundreds of the durable Moorish cattle from Spain, animals that were the predecessors of the Texas longhorns.

During the 1830s, a different type of settler began moving into Texas—Europeans other than the Peninsular variety. As a result of the impetus provided by the establishment of the Austin, Dewitt, and other colonies in central and north-central Texas, many Europeans, mostly Germans and Czechs, sailed from the old country to begin a new life in this new land. In addition, in 1835 a promotional booklet entitled “Guide to Texas Emigration” was compiled by one David Woodman and distributed throughout much of the eastern United States, enticing many to consider a move to Texas to take advantage of the abundance of available land, gentle climate, natural resources, and the numerous “wild” cattle living in the dense brush.

These new arrivals settled into the established colonies and, logically, undertook farming and ranching. Before long, these new citizens of Texas began gathering up many of the feral longhorns left over from the Spanish missionary farms and ranches, and using them for barter as well as for beef. As the ranches evolved and prospered, an obvious need for qualified handlers of both bovine and equine livestock was generated. It became well-known very quickly that the Mexican *vaqueros* from south of the Rio Grande were among the continent’s most expert horsemen and cattlemen, and many of them were lured north of the Rio Grande to work on the new Anglo-operated cattle ranches.

As more and more settlers arrived in this part of Texas, a growing labor force evolved. Many of the newcomers secured jobs on

the area cattle ranches and immediately began learning the herding and livestock techniques of the Mexicans. Represented in this new wave of migrants to Texas were Upper and Lower South Anglos, some Blacks, and even a few Cajuns from southern Louisiana. These were joined by a small number of Comanche and Kiowa Indians from the Texas and Oklahoma plains, themselves highly skilled horsemen.

It has been observed that during this era the Mexican *vaqueros* clearly dominated relative to livestock handling and horsemanship skills, and they soon became a major influence on techniques used. It is understandable, then, how easy it was for much of their livestock-oriented language to be incorporated into the rapidly expanding terminology associated with the ranching industry.

There was a strong Anglo influence on the growing vocabulary, but the dominance of the Spanish language was apparent. Much of the Mexican terminology was misunderstood and mispronounced by the Anglos, Blacks, Indians, and Cajuns, and there eventually evolved a kind of *lingua franca* unique to this specific geographic region that became, in effect, a hearth area relative to the development and evolution of the vocabulary.

For example, the word “lariat,” a common word for a rope, is still used today. The word is derived from the Spanish *la riata*, meaning a rope used for roping horses and cattle. The word “buckaroo,” generally used to identify a young cowboy, comes from the Spanish *vaquero*. *Vaca* means cow, and a *vaquero* is one who works with cows. A *caballero* is one who works with *caballos*, or horses. A “hackamore” is a rope halter and comes from the Spanish *jaquima*, which means the same thing.

The term “mustang” is derived from the Spanish *mesteño*, which in turn comes from the word *mesta*, which means “a group of stock raisers.” The horses that escaped from a range controlled by the *mesta* were called *mesteños*. The suffix *-eño* means “belonging to.” A man who chased the mustangs was called a *mesteñero*, or, in the Anglicized version, a mustanger. The term “mustang,” which is normally associated with wild horses, originally referred to cattle.

DIFFUSION

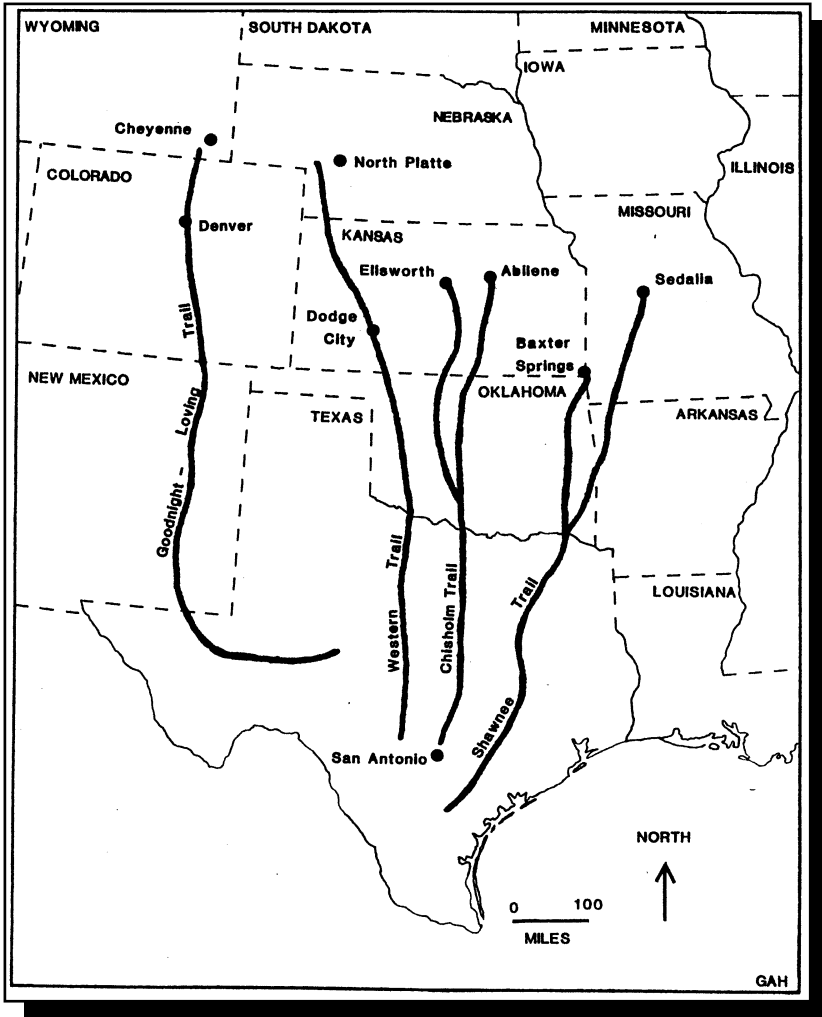
Around the mid-1860s, Texas ranchers began to notice that the prices paid for beef in New York and other eastern markets ranged from twenty-five to thirty-five cents per pound, considerably higher than local rates. The cattlemen wanted to take advantage of this new market, but the problem was how to get the cattle currently residing on the South-Central Texas ranges to the prime beef-consuming centers in the east. The nearest railheads were hundreds of miles away, so the trail drive was employed to deliver the cattle to the railroads, which in turn would transport them to the viable markets in the east.

The concept of the trail drive was neither new nor unique to this particular situation. In fact, trail drives had been utilized many times in the American South, the Middle Atlantic States, and even in Europe long before they were ever perceived as a process for getting Texas cattle to the northern railheads.

Exclusive of some early deliveries of cattle to the New Orleans market, the first serious trail drives to emanate from the South-Central Texas region journeyed northward to railheads at Abilene and Dodge City, Kansas, as well as other places in Colorado and Nebraska, and involved thousands of head of cattle and sometimes dozens of cowhands. Some of the more famous cattle trails include the Chisholm, the Goodnight-Loving, the Western, and the Shawnee.

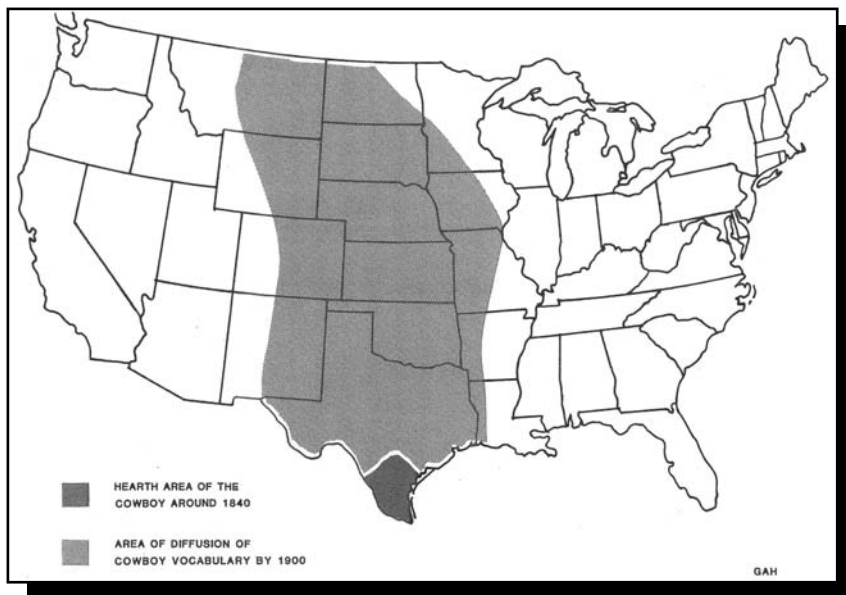
The trail drives employed many of the ranch hands who worked on the Texas ranches, and as the drives moved northward, these cowhands carried with them the elements of that unique cultural package that evolved from working with the cattle: the herding and roping techniques; the mode of dress; and, of course, the vocabulary. Despite what is seen in movies and on television, or read in novels, many of the early trail drivers were Mexicans, Blacks, and even Indians.

The trail drives brought hundreds of cowhands to new and different parts of the country. At trail's end, as well as at various points along the way, many of them encountered opportunities not available to them in Texas—occasions to work on one of the many growing cattle ranches in the area, as well as chances to start their



Cattle trails of the late 19th Century

own stock-raising operation. Consequently, many of the cowboys remained to ply their trade and apply their skills. Virtually all of them continued to use and perpetuate the industry-oriented vocabulary that evolved earlier in South-Central Texas. In this manner, the vocabulary, as well as the herding methodology, were diffused into areas outside of the hearth area of the so-called “diamond” region of Texas. This new area of diffusion is herein referred to as the “cattle-drive shed.”



The “spread” of the cowboy and his language

Around the mid-1880s, the trail drives began to slow down and were soon to cease altogether. When they finally did stop, the effective diffusion of this specialized vocabulary slowed down along with it. Even though there was some leakage through and across the natural barriers of the Rocky Mountains and the Mississippi River, the vocabulary, with some exceptions, was largely confined to the shed area. One major exception was Southern California, which experienced a parallel evolution of language use, derived primarily from the *vagueros* who came north from the Mexican state of Sonora.

There followed a period of relative dormancy until the 1930s. At that time two things occurred on the American cultural front which further stimulated diffusion of the language: Western movies and the growing commercialization of rodeo. The western movie captured the fascination of the American public in the late 1930s and throughout much of the 1940s like nothing ever had before, and because so many of the original western movie actors and extras had been real-life cowhands, much of the original trail drive and ranching vocabulary was incorporated into the films which were

shown coast to coast and even in Europe. As a result of the appeal of the early manly western heroes and the popular action-adventure pace of their films, many people outside of the original diffusion area (the cattle drive shed) were exposed to the vocabulary, and the American language was becoming spiced with words like “buckaroo,” mustang, and “whoopie ti-yi-yo,” even though many people had neither the vaguest idea of the origin of those words and phrases nor even, in many cases, what they actually meant.

The popularization of rodeo also helped diffuse the trail drive vocabulary, although with a somewhat more limited efficiency. Most of the early rodeo participants were commonly ranch hands that possessed exceptional livestock-handling skills like roping and riding, and some of them discovered they could earn a good living utilizing these skills via competitive sport. Because of the acceptance of the cowboy image through popular films and an increasing number of western novels, it was a relatively easy thing for the “new” sport of rodeo to make significant inroads into the American culture. Rodeo is at the same time an athletic competition, which strongly appeals to most Americans, as well as a legitimate descendant of the wild west show and Mexican *charreadas*. The subsequent sophisticated commercialization of rodeo created growing markets for the sport, and by the end of the 1930s they were even playing in Madison Square Garden.

CONCLUSION

The American cowboy which is, in fact, the Texas cowboy, has been a remarkably enduring icon for well over a century. Along with this powerful image, other iconic elements, both real and imagined, include the cowboy’s implied ruggedness, his sense for justice, his mode of dress, and, of course, his vocabulary.

Thus, via film, television, novel, and rodeo, the diffusion of this special industry-oriented vocabulary was effective and relatively rapid, and the language itself was and is quite enduring. Even today, most of the original terminology employed by the early cowhands is still used in much the same manner that it was over a century ago.