

# NEBRASKA TRAILBLAZER

Nebraska  
STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



No. 08

Ranching

Cattle ranching was almost unknown in Nebraska until the Union Pacific built the railroad across the state in 1867. Before this settlers had often raised a few cattle on their farms, but the beef was for their own use or for sale at a nearby town. A very early ranch was operated by Joseph Robidoux (pronounced ROO-bih-doo) at his trading post on the Oregon



Trail near Scotts Bluff. He raised oxen, which he sold to overland travelers to replace their travel-weary stock.

About the time the railroad was being built, there was a surplus of cattle in Texas, but no market existed for them

there. Trail drives brought hundreds of thousands of these Texas longhorn cattle to the railroad in Nebraska where they were shipped to markets in eastern cities. These longhorns also stocked Nebraska's first big ranches. One of the earliest was operated by M.H. Brown. In 1868 he brought 800 from Texas and started a ranch southeast of North Platte.



The original American cowboy was the Spanish *vaquero* (pronounced vah-KAY-ro) who worked on ranches in California. Much of the equipment he developed is still in use, and some of the vocabulary of the American cowboy comes from Spanish words. The Spanish "*la reata*" (lah-ray-AH-tah) became the lariat, "*mesteno*" (may-STANE-yo) became mustang, and "*chaparreas*" (chah-pah-RAY-ahs) was shortened to chaps.



The Newman Brothers' Ranch was a big "spread" on the Niobrara River east of Rushville. A few of these early ranches covered hundreds of square miles, but most of them were small, family operations. Nearly all of the early ranches were located either in the Niobrara Valley or in Custer County or between the North and South Platte rivers.

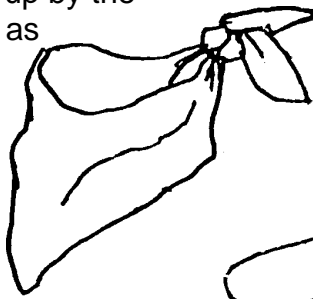


The Texas longhorns were lean and bony, so ranchers imported pure-bred bulls from England to improve the breed. Shorthorn Durham bulls were used first, but by 1900 Herefords became the most popular breed.



Men like the cowboy above were responsible for the welfare of valuable herds of cattle. When they traveled far from the ranch, cowboys had to carry or wear everything they would need to live in the outdoors.

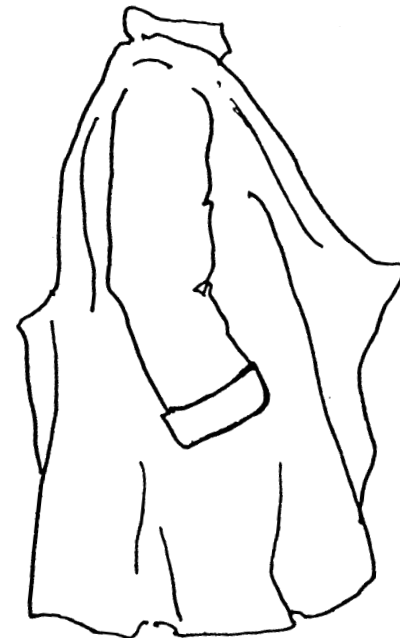
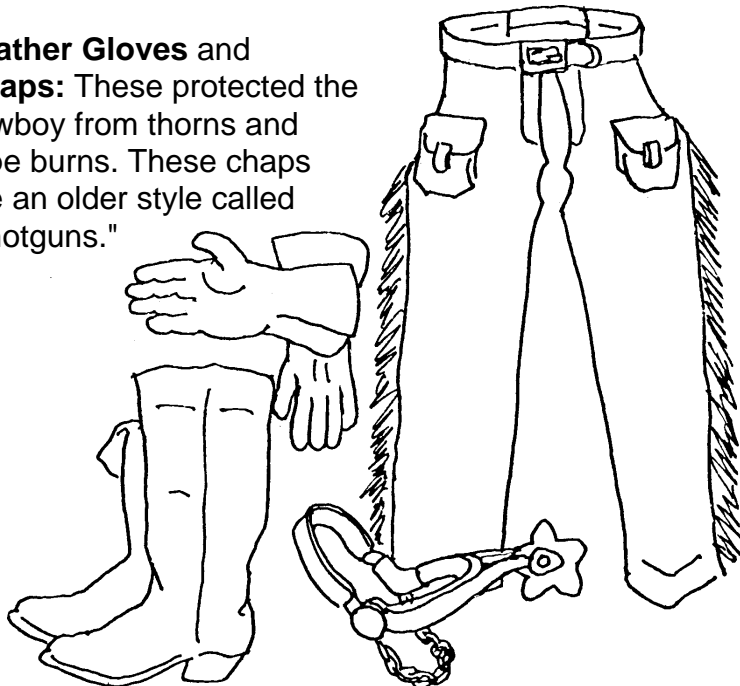
**Scarf:** His handkerchief or scarf, worn up over his mouth and nose, kept him from inhaling the thick dust often kicked up by the cattle or the wind. It was also used as earmuffs in very cold weather (The scarf was tied loosely around the cowboy's neck with the knotted ends to the back, not to the side, as shown in many illustrations).



**Hat:** This was one item that every cowboy wore. It protected him from sun, rain and snow, and even hailstones.



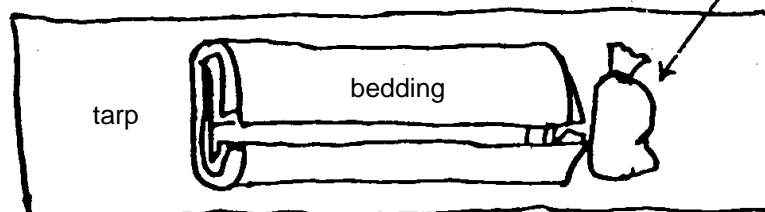
**Leather Gloves and Chaps:** These protected the cowboy from thorns and rope burns. These chaps are an older style called "shotguns."



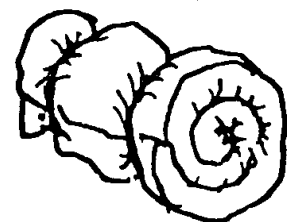
**Saddle Slicker:** This is a raincoat designed for riding. It covered both rider and saddle and was great protection in stormy weather.

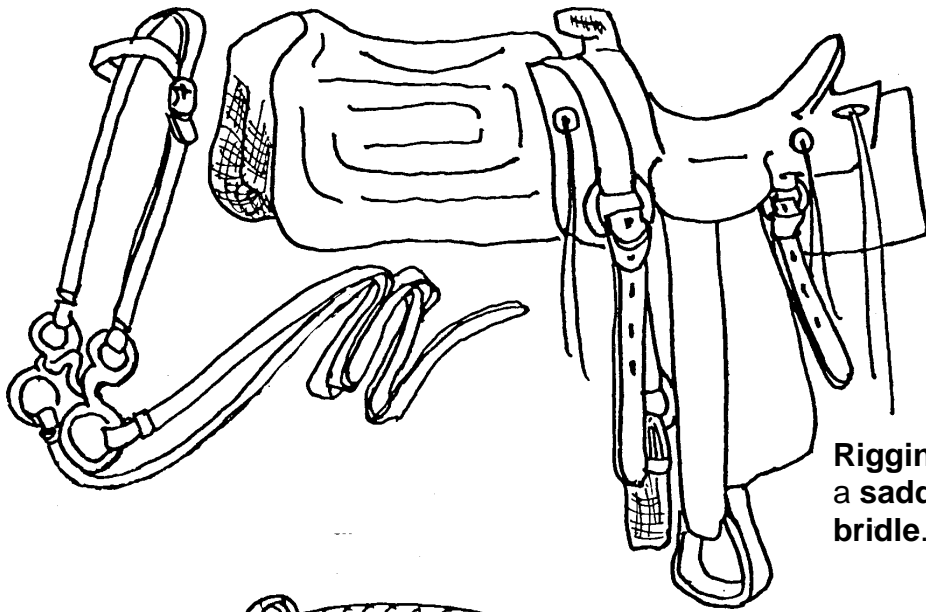
**Boots and Spurs:** Sturdy boots protected his feet and ankles during the rough and sometimes dangerous work. His spurs, if he wore any, were usually a plain work spur with a gentle star-shaped rowel.

war-bag containing personal items

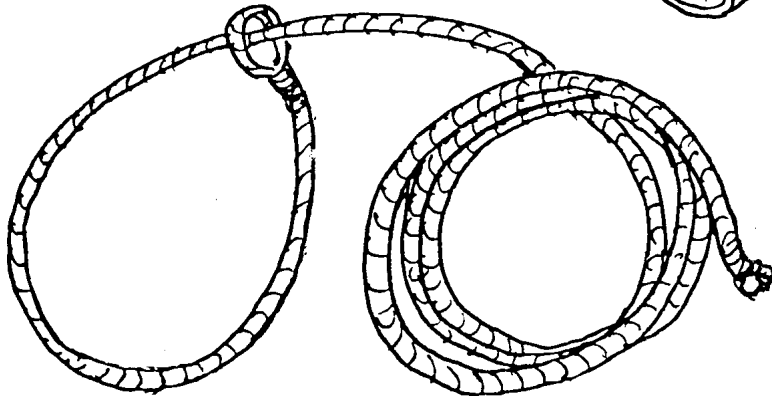


**Bedroll:** Bedding and a "war-bag" or "war-sack" containing extra clothing and personal items rolled in a tarp might also be tied to the saddle for longer trips.

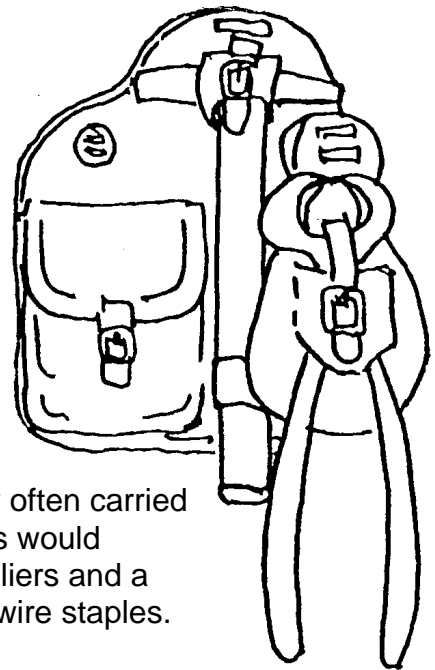




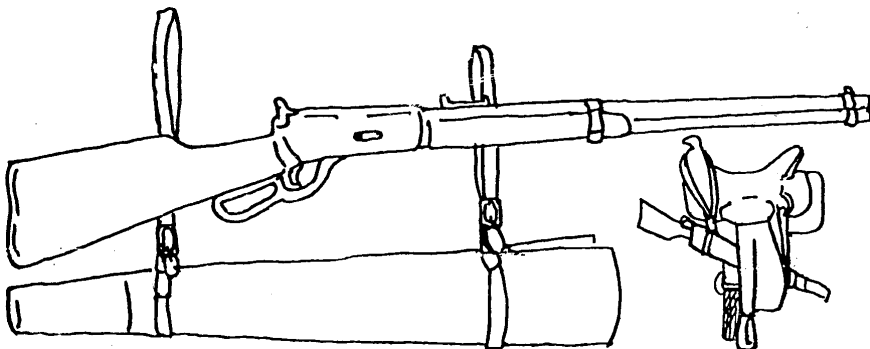
**Rigging:** This included his **saddle**, a **saddle pad or blanket**, and a **bridle**.



**Lariat:** His rope was usually made of twisted fibers from the hemp plant.

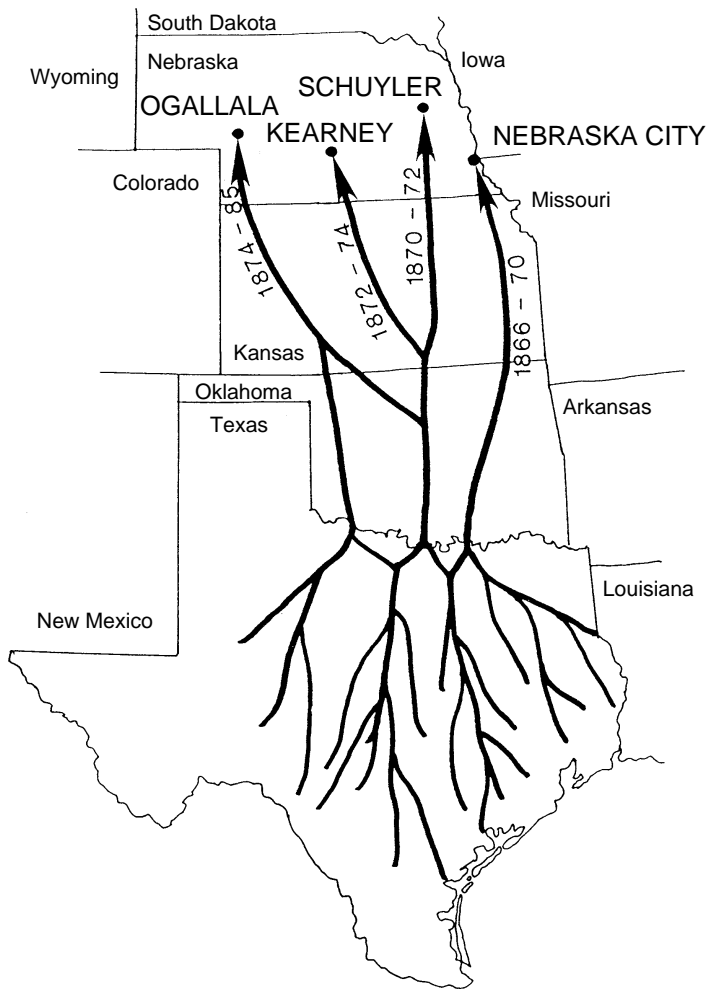


**Tools:** A working cowboy often carried tools for fence repair. This would include wire cutters and pliers and a hammer with a supply of wire staples.



**Gun:** Unlike TV and movie cowboys, the working cowboy seldom carried a gun because it could easily snag his reins or lariat.

# TEXAS CATTLE TRAILS



It took about four months to drive a herd of cattle on one of the trails from Texas to Nebraska. These trails were pushed west as settlers moved in from the east and homesteaded the land. Nebraska had several "cow towns," but Ogdallala became the most famous.



Early ranchers believed cattle could not be raised in the Sand Hills. In 1879 they discovered how wrong they had been. A spring blizzard drove the Newman Brothers' cattle into the Hills. After the storm ranch hands rescued the herd. They also found an extra 1,000 in prime condition that had been living in the Sand Hills for several years!

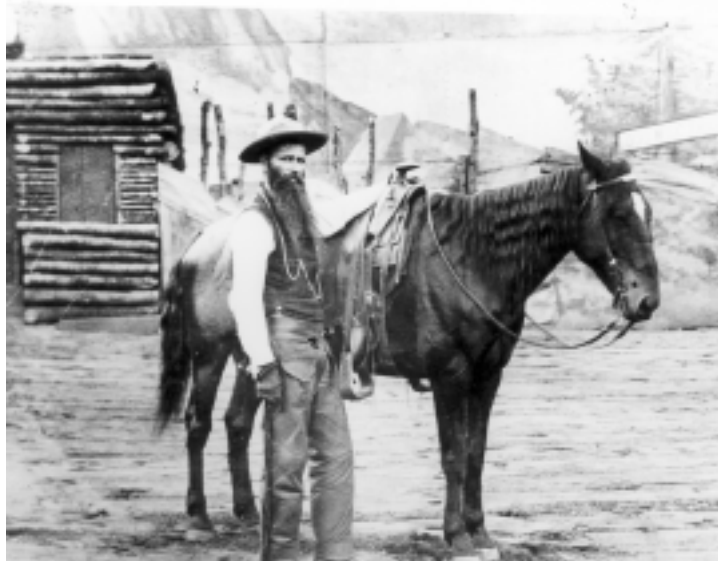


Cattle ranching was never a safe business. Ice storms and blizzards in 1880-81 and again in 1886-87 killed so many cattle that some ranchers went bankrupt. Unexpected drops in the price of beef was another, more common cause of financial losses.



Early ranchers grazed their cattle on public land. When the first practical barbed wire was available, they began to fence huge areas in an attempt to discourage the farmer-homesteaders from settling on the range. This posed picture shows the range wars between the ranchers and farmers. Gun battles were uncommon, but property was often destroyed. In the end, lawsuits, not pistols, forced the big ranchers to give up their ranges on public lands.

Because it was so easy to steal cattle on the open range, rustling became a serious problem. David "Doc" Middleton was perhaps Nebraska's most infamous rustler until his arrest in 1879. After he served his prison sentence, he briefly worked as a deputy sheriff in Sheridan County.



Calves were branded during the spring roundup. Branding was usually done in a special pen like this one that securely held the animal. A fall roundup of cattle to be shipped to market was also held.



During a roundup or on a cattle drive a cook prepared meals in a chuck wagon. Ham, bacon, bread, and dried vegetables were the usual fare. Beef was seldom used because so much would spoil before it could be eaten by a range crew.

Each rancher had his own brand, or mark of ownership, so that stolen or strayed animals could be identified. Edmond J. Shelborn of Pawnee City recorded Nebraska's first brand in 1857. The "77" brand (shown at the right), from the Hanson Ranch, is the oldest brand still in use. In 1899 the State of Nebraska began registering all the brands, and the State Brand Recorder still does this job.

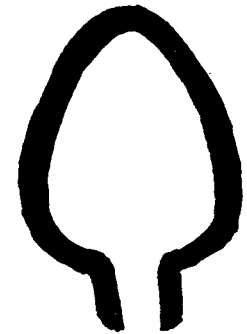
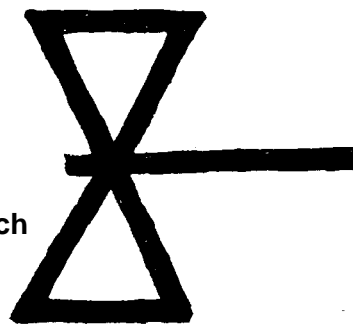


The **Seventy-seven** brand



The **Seven-H-L**, the first registered brand in 1899

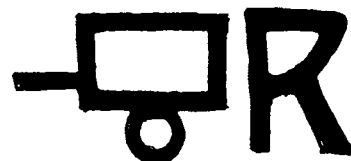
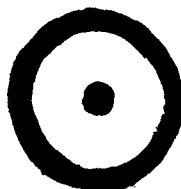
The **Tomahawk** Ranch



The **Spade** Ranch in the Sand Hills

The **Waggoner** Family

The **Circle Dot**, a well-known brand today







Between 1880 and 1900 sheep ranching became very important in Nebraska. Stock was brought from New Mexico and Oregon. This is Leroy Hall's ranch near Crawford.

The cowboy's life began to change in the 1880s. The days of the Texas cattle drives ended, pastures were fenced, and expensive purebred stock was introduced. Instead of herding cattle, the cowboy spent more of his time fixing fences and stacking hay.
















Early rodeos (another Spanish word) tested a cowboy's skills in ordinary ranch tasks, such as breaking horses to ride. These events became popular in larger cities, and soon some cowboys became professional rodeo stars.

James Dahlman became one of Nebraska's most famous cowboys. He was on the Newman Ranch crew when the 1,000 Sand Hills cattle were discovered. Later he moved to Omaha and was elected mayor in 1906. He held the job for twenty years.















# HOW TO READ A BRAND

1. Brands are read from top to bottom and from left to right. Often the initials of the owner are used in a brand. Below are a few of the symbols used in brands.

- |   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
|  In a horizontal position, it is called " <b>lazy</b> ."             |  With a rocker underneath, it is called " <b>rocking</b> ." |  A long horizontal line is called a " <b>rail</b> ."    |
|  In a slanting position, it is called " <b>tumbling</b> ."           |  If suspended, it is called " <b>swinging</b> ."            |  Two horizontal lines are called " <b>two rails</b> ."  |
|  With little wings, it is called " <b>flying</b> ."                  |  A diagonal line is called a " <b>slash</b> ."              |  Three horizontal lines are called a " <b>stripe</b> ." |
|  A square or a rectangle is called a " <b>box</b> ."                 |  A large O is called a " <b>circle</b> ."                   |  A short horizontal line is called a " <b>bar</b> ."    |
|  A wide O is called a " <b>mashed O</b> " or a " <b>goose egg</b> ." |  |   |

2. Can you read these brands?

- |  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| 1.    | 5.    | 9.     |
| 2.   | 6.   | 10.    |
| 3.  | 7.  | 11.  |
| 4.  | 8.  | 12.  |

3. CLASS PROJECT: Make your own brand. Use the symbols above and include one or more initials from your name. Have one person write the class members' brands on a chalkboard to see how many you can identify.

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