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Star-gazing Cowboys

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High Voltage
Harold Gaston

STAR-GAZING COWBOYS

When the Great American Cowboy first emerged from the dust of the Old Chisholm Trail, he most likely used the sky as his timepiece; pocket watches would have been an expensive luxury for most of these hired men on horseback.

Telling time during daylight hours would have required little technical knowledge. The workday began when it was light enough to see, and it ended when it became too dark to see: working from “can see to can’t see” was the common expression. That workday would vary from season to season; shorter days in winter, longer ones in summer.

No matter which month it was, however, noon was always the same—when the sun was directly overhead. Breakfast would usually come shortly after sunrise, dinner around noon, and supper around sunset, whether on the trail, during roundup, or at the ranch house. Dinnertime undoubtedly varied more when trailing cattle, whether to a Kansas cattle town or to a new ranch in Montana, for conditions on the trail were more unpredictable than ranch work. Whatever hour it occurred, morning, noon, or night, the sound of the cook banging the triangle signaled both that it was time to eat and also the time of day.

Telling time at night, though, was a different story, one that was more important for a trail driver than for a ranch hand. Usually a ranch cowboy could count on sleeping through the night, whereas on the trail each man (although not the cook, wrangler, or trail boss) normally had a two-hour stint of night herding. Perhaps the

trail boss had a timepiece and could wake a cowboy when it was his turn to ride around the cattle and sing to them, but more likely the two cowboys on night guard would look at the stars to calculate when their shift was at an end. They could then ride into camp to waken their replacements.

As often as not, however, the replacements would already be headed to the herd, their internal clocks having become attuned to rising at the same hour each night. There were even instances when cattle were penned for the night and no guard was needed that sleeping cowboys would awaken at their accustomed night-watch time anyway.

A cowboy on a ranch out late at night had both the sky and a familiar landscape to help direct him home. When trailing cattle in unknown territory, however, the stars were a cowboy's best guide, and of these the North Star and Big Dipper were the most important. By following the swing of the Big Dipper around the North Star, a night herder could judge when his two-hour shift was completed.

It was common practice for the cook to point the tongue of the chuck wagon toward the North Star each night so that should the next morning be cloudy, he

(and the cowboys) would know which direction they should head. During rain or clouds he would also often attach a long lariat to the rear axle of the wagon, glancing back often to see that the rope was not angling off to the right or left, which would indicate that he was driving more to the east or west than he should be.

Cowboy singer Red Steagall wrote a song entitled "The Wagon Tongue," in which the cook tells his young helper why each night he orients the wagon tongue toward the North Star. After several days and nights of clouds and rain when the cook was unable to point the tongue, the herd finds itself headed to New Mexico rather than on the Great Western Trail headed to Dodge City.

Other cowboy poets have also incorporated stars into their art. In "Old Blue's Waltz," for instance, a song about Charley Goodnight's famous lead steer, Andy Wilkinson has the Big Dipper figuratively tattooed inside the steer's eyelids and in the chorus calls on Blue to "point the North Star." One stanza in S. Omar Barker's poem "Jack Potter's Courtin'" draws a comparison in a cowboy's and a sailor's use of the stars as a nighttime navigation aid:



Teaching Astronomy
Harold Gaston



Serenade
Sarah Engle-Barnett

*They rode home late together and the
moon was ridin' high,*

*And Jack, he got to talkin' 'bout the stars
up in the sky,*

*And how they'd guide a trail herd like they
do sea-goin' ships,*

*But words of love and marriage—they just
wouldn't pass his lips!*

Then there is “Riders of the Stars” by Henry Herbert Knibbs, in which 10,000 cowboys in the Great Beyond ask permission of God (which He grants) to herd the stars as they did cattle, to rope and tame the maverick comets, to use the Big Dipper as a watering hole, and use Saturn’s rings for a corral. They tell Him how they know Taurus, the Big and Little Dippers, Mars, and Venus from their night herding on earth. (Thanks to Andy Hedges and Andy Wilkinson for referring me to these poems and songs.)

A cowboy today has a watch on his wrist, a clock on the dashboard of his pickup, a cell phone in his pocket, and a GPS, all of which will help get him where he’s going on time, but for the old-time cowboy a glance at the heavens was all he needed.

Jim Hoy is the author of *Flint Hills Cowboys*, Director Emeritus of the Center for Great Plains Studies at Emporia State University, and former Board Chair of Symphony in the Flint Hills.