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Real Life Cowboys

Movies about cowboys and the Wild West were popular especially in the 1950s and 1960s. Americans liked exciting tales of traveling by stagecoach or a drama about a cattle drive. In the mid to late 1800s much

of the west, especially Texas, was open range for sheep and cattle. Open range was owned by the federal government and there were no fences. Sheep ranchers and cattlemen could graze their livestock on the open range. There were many conflicts between sheep ranchers and cattlemen, sometimes on the scale of small wars.

Twice a year cattlemen would round up the cattle from the open range, sort them by owner and bring them to cattle markets in Kansas or Missouri by the thousands. Famous cattle towns included Dodge City, Wichita and Abilene, Kansas as well as Kansas City, Sedalia and St. Louis, Missouri. The cattle round-ups occurred in the spring and the fall.

Skilled cowboys would bring or "drive" the cattle from the open range to cattle markets up to 1,000 miles away. There was no other transportation available. The railways of that era traveled mostly east and west across the nation, not north and south. It was worthwhile to drive cattle long distances. In Texas



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a cow would get \$4 and the same animal was worth \$40 in the Midwest.

Usually a cattle drive northward would require a crew of about 12 men. The trail boss was in charge of the cattle drive, the horse wrangler cared for the horses the men rode, and the cook and his assistant kept all the men fed. There were lots of horses that made the long journey. A cowboy rode a horse for a few hours and then moved to a fresh horse that was not tired. The rest of the crew was made up of cowboys who worked to keep the cattle moving and together. No one wanted a cattle stampede. A stampede happened when something frightened the cattle and the whole group would begin running together. Cowboys could get killed under thundering hooves of cattle.

Cowboys moved the cattle herd around 15 to 20 miles per day no matter what the weather. They ate whatever the cook fixed for food and slept outdoors every night. At the end of the cattle drive the cowboys celebrated with the money they earned.



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Name: _____ Date: _____

Multiple Choice Questions

Circle the correct answer.

1. Open range in Texas was used by
 - a. Cattlemen
 - b. Sheep ranchers
 - c. Both a. and b. above
 - d. None of the above

2. How often did cattle drives to markets in the Midwest occur?
 - a. Once a year
 - b. Twice a year
 - c. Three times a year
 - d. More than three times a year

3. Major cattle markets existed in
 - a. Kansas
 - b. Texas
 - c. Both a. and b. above
 - d. None of the above

4. Who was in charge of a cattle drive?
 - a. The owner of the cattle
 - b. The cowboys
 - c. The wrangler
 - d. The trail boss

5. We can infer from the reading that the cook fed about
 - a. 4 people
 - b. 8 people
 - c. 12 people
 - d. 16 people

6. How far did the cattle herd travel in a day?
 - a. 5 to 10 miles
 - b. 10 to 15 miles
 - c. 15 to 20 miles
 - d. 20 to 25 miles



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Short Answer Questions

1. Do some research and explain why sheep ranchers and cattlemen were in conflict over open range.
2. The reading states that twice a year cattlemen would round up the cattle from the open range and sort them by owner. Cattle were branded to show who owned them. Do some research and explain what branding is.
3. Pretend that you are a cattle rancher. Come up with a name for your ranch and design a brand for your ranch.
4. Describe the duties of the horse wrangler on a cattle drive.
5. What is a cattle stampede and why is it dangerous?
6. The cook made biscuits every day. One cook claimed the men on his cattle drive ate 11 biscuits each every day. If there were 13 men on the cattle drive how many biscuits did the cook make in a week?
7. If the cowboys traveled 15 to 20 miles per day to a market 800 miles away, what is the smallest number of days the trip could take?



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Answer Key

Multiple Choice

1. c.
2. b.
3. a.
4. d.
5. c.
6. c.

Short Answer

1. When sheep graze they naturally eat the grass down very near to the roots. It takes the grass a long time to recover and be useful again as grazing land. Cattle don't eat the grass so close to the ground and it recovers quickly, becoming available for grazing again within a short while. That was the basic conflict between sheep ranchers and cattlemen.

2. Individual response

3. Individual response

4. The horse wrangler cared for the horses the men rode. There were lots of horses that made the long journey. A cowboy would ride a horse just for a few hours and then moved to a fresh horse that was not tired.

5. A stampede happened when something frightened the cattle and the whole group would begin running together. Cowboys could get killed under thundering hooves of cattle.

6. $13 * 11 * 7 = 1001$ biscuits per week

7. $800 \text{ miles} / 20 \text{ miles per day} = 40$ days minimum time

