



Back in the Saddle Again Stonehenge to Stonewall

By Charlie Emond

Cowboys would probably shoot you if you hinted that they might be gay, yet they formed intimate relationships with other men.

The Willie Nelson standard "Mamas, Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up To Be Cowboys" includes the line "They're always alone, even with someone they love." This country song about a guy and gal may be on to something. Cowboys, both the real kind and the movie kind, typically do not give their hearts to women.

The early Hollywood movie moguls used this sure-fire formula with great success. Give the star a white hat, a smart-ass horse, a brave dog, a funny sidekick and a girl (in that order) and you have a winner at the box office.

That the loyal male companion might carry gay overtones was also not lost on them, so sidekicks were generally weird and/or cantankerous. Imagine Smiley Burnett or Gabby Hayes as someone's boyfriend! On the other hand, you have to admit that Clayton Moore and Jay Silverheels (as the Lone Ranger and Tonto) look like they wandered away from the rest of the Village People.

Like Gene Autry, Roy Rogers (on whom I had a terrific crush as a kid), and all the other celluloid cowboys, they were far removed from the men who actually lived on the range. Those popular Western movies also bear the blame for creating many other misconceptions. The Indians, of course, were always the bad guys, and Mexicans still suffer from their movie stereotypes. One estimate I came across indicates that a quarter of all cowboys were black, yet you never saw any of them singing around the campfire with the Sons of the Pioneers.

Home on the Range

In creating that heroic cowboy myth, the moviemakers also got cowboy romance wrong. Walter Williams, in *The Spirit and the Flesh*, observes that in reality, there were no women on the frontier to speak of, and the choices for men were few. The only things moving on that range were horses, buffalo, cattle, and your partner. You figure it out.

Real cowboys worked hard, rode the range (and each other)

and led rough lives. Some men, Williams adds, certainly moved west from the repressive cities of the East just because it would be easier to have sex with other men.

True, the movies featured "showgirls" hanging out at the saloon, but the saloons were in towns, and the cowhands were out riding the range most of the time. When Kinsey did his research, he found the highest rates of homosexual behavior in the remotest isolated Western outposts. "These are men who have faced the rigors of nature in the wild. They live on realities and on a minimum of theory," he concluded. "Such a background breeds the attitude that sex is sex, irrespective of the nature of the partner."

Don't Fence Me In

There are tantalizingly few poems and diaries from the period. (Cowboys were not great shakes at writing, after all.) But one poem, entitled "The Lost Pardner," reads in part: "We loved each other in the way men do/and never spoke about it Al and me/but we both knowed, and knowin' it so true/was more than any woman's kiss could be."

Williams also discusses instances of interaction between native American berdache and cowboys. In one interesting example from 1880, four cowboys on a drive came across a young Blackfoot Indian wearing beads and fur and "riding a cream-colored pony." They couldn't figure out whether the Indian was male or female. One of them made advances that included touching the young Indian's long braided hair, thinking to be rejected. But when the cowboy asked if the Indian wanted to be his "squaw," the young man smiled broadly and answered in English, "Me buck."

Cowboys would probably shoot you if you hinted that they might be gay, yet they formed intimate relationships with other men. Real cowboys just didn't talk about it.

Happy Trails to You

A beautiful story called

"Brokeback Mountain" by Annie Proulx first appeared in *The New Yorker* and is included in her collection of stories *Close Range, Wyoming Stories*. It is a deeply moving story of two rugged Western men. Neither admits to being gay, but their intense life-long love for each other far surpasses all else, including marriage. I highly recommend it.

I have always felt that the potential for love and understanding is greater between two men (or two women) than between people of the opposite sex. That "battle of the sexes" thing is eternal, and men and women often seem to struggle to understand each other. Only in a same-sex pair is it possible for each to feel exactly what the other feels. Add to this the shared dangers and challenges of life on the American frontier, and you have a bond between two cowboys that reaches the depths of the human heart. It is a bond known to the ancient Romans and to the Sacred Band of Thebes. It is a bond understood and celebrated by men throughout history.

Next time: We'wha in Washington

Charlie Emond has a bachelor's degree from Queen's College and master's degrees from both Dartmouth and Keene State. He teaches college history courses in Springfield and White River Junction. Stonehenge to Stonewall is distributed by Above the Fold, LTD, www.abovefold.com

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