



BIOGRAPHY

Nat Love, Alias Deadwood Dick



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The mythical American cowboy has been personified as a tall, lean, white man by actors such as Gary Cooper and Clint Eastwood. In reality, about one in three cowboys was either African American or Mexican. Historians estimate that some 5,000 African Americans joined the ranch crews during the cowboy era. Like the legendary Nat Love, many of them were formerly enslaved and lured to life on the open range by the prospect of regular wages and a new start in life.

As you read the passage below, consider how demanding cowboy work was for range riders like Nat Love.

Nat Love was born in a Tennessee slave cabin in June 1854. He never knew the exact day because, as he wrote later, “In those days no ‘count was kept of such trivial matters as the birth of a slave baby.” Shortly after his family was freed from slavery, Nat’s father died. Nat, who was a young teenager, took his father’s place as head of the family.

His first job prepared him for the life that lay ahead. The owner of a nearby ranch hired Nat to break colts at ten cents a head. He soon proved himself the best colt-breaker around. Meanwhile, hunting rabbits for the family table taught him to be handy with a gun.

By the time Nat was 15, his family was economically stable and he was free to go out into the world. Tales of cattle drives from Texas to Kansas had stirred his boyish dreams, so he headed west. He soon ran across a Texas outfit preparing to drive a herd east. Encouraged because there were several African Americans in the outfit, Nat asked the boss for a job. The boss agreed to hire him on one condition: he first had to break Good Eye—the wildest horse they had. Nat described it as the toughest ride of his life, but he succeeded, and he became a full-fledged cowboy.

Nat Love soon found that cowboy life was short on glamour and long on hard work. Another African American cowboy of the time, Bones Hooks, described it as “working all the time. Lots of times a man would not know what day of the week it was. You lose time . . . out on the range with just a bunch of men for ninety days. It would be just daylight and night.” For all this work, Bones received about \$25 a month and board.

Nat Love reveled in his new life and grew more and more skilled at it. He became an expert at reading cattle brands, a skill that often involved him in disputes. He also became expert at capturing herds of mustangs—wild horses that roamed the range. To capture a herd, teams of cowboys rode down the mustangs for 30 days until the mustangs were exhausted. It took 20 men working day and night to capture 60 horses.

In 1890 Nat Love made a sudden and startling decision. He left his beloved cowboy life and became a Pullman porter on the trains that crossed the Plains! He had recognized “the march of progress” that meant times were changing. He must change with them, he believed. He died about 30 years later.

Questions to Think About

1. Why did Nat Love want to become a cowboy?
2. What skills did he acquire that made him a legendary cowboy?
3. **Recognizing Cause and Effect** Why do you think Nat Love believed “the march of progress” would eventually usurp the life he knew?