

Cowboys Taryn Salinas New York City

When most people think of cowboys, they imagine scruffy, rough-hewn men dressed in chaps and boots, straight out of the Wild West. But cowboys and cowgirls are more than sepia-toned characters plucked from the past. Their job of protecting the herd makes them essential to today's beef and cattle economy.

These skilled laborers can go by different names—vaquero in Mexico, buckaroo in the Northwest and parts of Canada, and cowpuncher in Texas and the Great Plains—each with its own cultural nuances. But the term cowboy is universal, as is the work, which includes roping and saddling horses; leading cattle to fresh pasture and water; calving, branding, and ear-marking; doctoring when a veterinarian is unnecessary or unavailable; rounding up the cattle and getting them ready for market; and maintaining the ranch, including doing chores such as mending fences.

Today cowboys have a choice as to how closely they follow tradition. Many dress the part—chaps worn over Levi's or Wrangler jeans, boots with spurs, bandannas around their necks, and brimmed hats to protect them from sun and rain. While some prefer to work as “straight-up” as possible, herding or doctoring cattle from horseback, others appreciate the convenience of pickup trucks and all-terrain vehicles to cover vast expanses of territory. But nearly all carry cell phones and answer to accountants in the ranch's main office.

A cowboy's line of work is difficult, dangerous, and time-consuming. Up and out the door at dawn and often back after dark, they work in all temperatures and weather conditions, often living solitary lives away from their families, usually for meager pay. On the range, cowboys must be equipped to handle a variety of challenges, including fast-changing weather, predators like coyotes and bears, poisonous plants like larkspur, which can kill livestock, and accidents, such as scorpion bites, lightning strikes, wire cuts, and limb-shattering falls. Roping and riding can be fraught with danger. It's not uncommon for a cattleman to lose a thumb while roping a steer or to suffer cracked ribs, a concussion, or broken bones from being bucked off a horse.

Whether cowboys are born into the profession, their families having lived the life for generations, or whether they choose the trade for the freedom and satisfaction it brings, they share a passion for their craft and a great appreciation of the outdoors—just like their predecessors.