



TRUE STORY

Just like cowboys of the Old West, David can lasso a steer.

Vocabulary

steer: a young male cow

federation: a group joined together by an agreement

stampedes: sudden, wild movements in one direction made by a large group of animals, usually because something has scared them

admired: liked and respected

traditions: ways of doing things that are handed down over many years

Teen Cowboy

David follows in the footsteps of black cowboys of the Old West

“Come on, boy!” urges David McSwain. His horse, Soldier, breaks into a gallop, raising a cloud of dust.

Just a few years ago, David had no experience with horses. Then his mom heard about the Muddy Water Ranch in Cincinnati, Ohio, and enrolled David in riding lessons.

David, 15, is now an accomplished horseman. He has garnered numerous riding awards—and he’s even

mastering a classic cowboy trick: lassoing a **steer!**

In addition to developing exceptional equestrian skills, David has become a historian of sorts. At the ranch, David has begun studying the fascinating history of African-American cowboys.

History on Horseback

Clarence Clemons, the owner of the ranch, is one of David’s instructors. He looks

like an authentic cowboy and is generally known by his Western-sounding moniker. “Everybody always calls him ‘Solo,’” says David.

Solo is a member of the **Federation** of Black Cowboys, an organization that endeavors to pass on cowboy skills to kids and teens. Members are also dedicated to publicizing the history of African-American cowboys.

Entertainment media rarely spotlight African-American cowboys. However, approximately one out of every four cowboys in the Old West was black.

“Back then, it was a job,” explains David. “It was what a lot of people had to do.” With Solo’s encouragement, David has acquired considerable knowledge of the subject.

Life After Slavery

In the late 1800s, slavery had recently been abolished in the United States. Many newly freed African-Americans were in need of paid employment.

“After the Civil War, black people couldn’t get many

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David learns roping skills from the ranch owner, Solo.



David gallops across a barn on his favorite horse, Soldier.

The ranch is like a second home to David.



jobs,” David explains. “Some joined the Army, and a lot of others became cowboys.”

Cowboys rode all across the West, picking up cattle from ranches and herding them hundreds of miles to be sold in cities. The work was demanding and backbreaking; cowboys endured long days on dusty, desolate trails before finally bedding down on the hard ground.

In addition, the work was perilous; cowboys risked their lives in ferocious storms and **stampedes**. Some were even captured by Native Americans who resented the cowboys’ presence on their land.

Famous Cowboys

Some African-American cowboys, like Nat Love, became famous for their skills. Love wrote a popular memoir recounting his adventures.

Another African-American cowboy, Bill Pickett, invented a new way to wrestle steers. He also performed in one of the most famous rodeo shows of his time. People traveled from all over to see him perform.

In the Old West, black soldiers were also recognized for their impressive equestrian abilities. During the late 1800s, the U.S. Army frequently clashed with Native Americans. Although they

were adversaries, the Native Americans **admired** the African-American soldiers’ bravery and strength. They nicknamed the African-American fighters “the Buffalo Soldiers.”

Modern-Day Cowboy

Today, the Muddy Water Ranch has become like a second home to David. In addition to taking riding lessons at the ranch, David does volunteer work there. He cleans up, exercises horses, and prepares the animals for trail rides. “It’s gotten me used to working a lot,” he says.

Unlike the black cowboys of the Old West, David doesn’t need to earn his living by riding horses. But by developing skills that sustained people 100 years ago, he’s helping to keep those **traditions** going for future generations.

—Christy Damio

