

Ride & Tie

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN COWBOYS WORKED AND ROPED IN NECKTIES. IT'S A STYLE THAT FOR SOME SEEMS TO HAVE COME AROUND AGAIN.

By William C. Reynolds

VANITY AND UNIQUE DRESS KNOW NO CLASS distinction. For the cowboy of the late 1800s, vanity was tough to trot out—especially since there were few mirrors around—but many managed to pull it off. In his book *Trails Plowed Under*, Montana artist and writer Charles M. Russell gave a classic and colorful description of these peacocks of the plains. He wrote:

“Cowpunchers were mighty particular about their rig, an’ in all camps you’d find a fashion leader. From a cowpuncher’s idea these fellers was sure good to look at... of course a good many of these fancy men were more ornamental than useful, but one of the best cow-bands I ever knew belonged to this class. Down on the Gray Bull, he went under the name of Mason, but most punchers called him Pretty Shadow. This sounds like an Injun name, but it ain’t. It comes from the habit some punchers has of ridin’ along, lookin’ at their shadows. Lookin’ glasses are scarce in cow outfits, so the only chance for these pretty boys to admire themselves is on bright sunshiny days. Mason’s one of these kind that doesn’t get much pleasure out of life in cloudy weather.”

My point in quoting Kid Russell is to put to rest the

idea that cowboys and punchers cared little about their appearance. Nothing could have been—or is—further from the truth. Consider the fact that stockmen are constantly at the mercy of Mother Nature’s timing and are therefore on the job all the time. Their ability to stay kempt and presentable is always being tested by the elements.

During the last years of the 19th century, encroaching civilization, along with a growing Victorian influence from the East, began influencing the ways of Westerners. After the Civil War, the ribbon or string tie became an accessible vehicle for gentlemen to express their fashion sense. The ties required little fabric and were relatively easy to make—although they gave little protection from the elements. Contrast that with the broad and colorful bandanas or neckerchiefs worn to protect riders from sun, dust, and sweat; it was only natural that as the West became more and more a part of the “civilian” world neckties became appropriate wear—even replacing the bandana in some instances.

During the era of the pulp Western novel and the begin-



Stylin' bucking horse rider, ca. 1915, by R.R. Doubleday.

ning of the motion-picture era in the teens and early twenties of the last century, the heroes of those stories and their larger-than-life images on the silver screen heavily influenced the evolving cowboy dress code. Stars of rodeos and Wild West shows, dressed in all their showy finery, silver saddles—and neckties—affected the dress of many a working puncher. As Russell said:

“When the sun hit Mason with all his silver on, he blazes up like some big piece of jewelry. You could see him for miles when he was ridin’ the high country.”

Pride in one’s appearance and one’s work was not alien to the working cowboy—then or now. For the serious, it has always been prideful work. And as the 20th century wore on, along with the evolution of the necktie and its design came the advent of unique accoutrements and accessories to help hold the tie down and keep it from flapping—an advantage for those working horseback and throwing loops. Genre tie bars and tie chains were all the rage in the '30s, '40s, and '50s, with many becoming collectables of the era. But like any fashion trend, styles do

come and go. After the 1960s—a decade that marked the end of the classic period of television Westerns—the Western-themed necktie almost disappeared.

Today, there is a renaissance of sorts occurring in many aspects of the Western horsemanship world—a return of respect, if you will, for some of the old ways in working and training fine bridle and using horses. Along with that has come an increased interest in ranch ropings and classic vaquero-style roping techniques. It is only natural, then, that an interest in certain aspects of classic Western dress would follow. Re-enter the necktie. Today, at many ranch ropings and competitions—from the Californios Ranch Roping and Stock Horse Contest held every April in Bed Bluff, California, to the Jordon Valley Big Loop Rodeo each spring in Jordon Valley, Oregon, among many others—“Western gentlemen” can be seen roping in neckties. Is it a fashion trend that will catch on, or will it remain a style for only the purist? Time will tell. One thing’s for sure, it’s a style that is “tied” to the West.



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