

Deadwood Dick: Freedom as a Catalyst to the West for Black Cowboys  
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**Abstract**

This paper challenges popular opinions of the Wild Wild West, putting forth accurate content on this time period. It explores how the Wild West gave opportunity to Black Americans, recently freed from slavery, and how a particular cowhand took control of his life. Nat Love was a famous cowhand who went by the nickname Deadwood Dick. His life is a prime example of how Black people used the lawlessness of the Western world to further their lives and skills and form the world we know today.

## Introduction

When thinking of the Wild Wild West, the first thing to come to mind are cowboys, a lone ranger riding their horse into the sunset. The last thing to come to mind are black and Hispanic cowboys. One in four cowboys were black.<sup>1</sup> Infamous black cowboys like Nat Love have stories paralleling those of more well-known, white cowboys like Billy the Kid. This paper will recount the early life of Nat Love from slavery, emancipation, and his life as a cowboy, noting how his early life pushed him into a life as a cowboy. The enticing idea of freedom after the end of Slavery was a catalyst for many black cowboys, including Nat Love. His belief in freedom influenced his path to the West and his life as a cowboy.

Many slaves in America in the late 1800's had experience with cattle and being a cowhand, working on wealthy, white-owned land. When slavery ended, being a cowhand was one of the very few job opportunities for black people in America. These cowboys took tougher jobs compared to white cowboys of the time. They would herd and protect cattle across the United States and break wild horses.<sup>2</sup> Black cowboys would face discrimination in the towns they passed through. They could not eat at certain restaurant or stay at certain hotels but within their company they found equal levels of respect and camaraderie.<sup>3</sup>

Nat Love was born and raised in slavery, on a plantation in Tennessee around 1854, his father being a foreman in the fields and his mother manager of the kitchen. His father taught him to read. When slavery ended, Love worked several jobs, one being on a farm where he was observed to be skilled in breaking horses. At the age of 16, Love headed West, finding work as a

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, Erica. "Little Known Black History Fact: Black Cowboys," Black America Web.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Nodjimbadem, Katie. "The Lesser-Known History of African-American Cowboys." Smithsonian

cowboy in Kansas. He gained the nickname of Deadwood Dick at a Rodeo where he won several contests.

A possible reason for Black Americans going into a career as a cowboy is the lack of discrimination within the cowhand community. White and black cowboys were nearly social equals, although there was discrimination from others outside of the cowboy community as mentioned before at restaurants, hotels and other places.

It is apparent in Love's story that freedom was a catalyst in him becoming a cowboy. Having worked on a farm and having no particular direction once emancipated from slavery, he saw the opportunity and took it, like many other black cowboys. Because of the lack of opportunities for freed slaves and exposure to stable work, this was seen as a feasible option. Some other notable black cowboys and woodsmen were Bill Pickett, James Beckwourth, and John Ware. John Ware and James Beckwourth were both born into slavery. John Ware later found himself as a cowboy and James Beckwourth found himself a mountain man in the industry of fur trapping, drawing parallels with black cowboys.<sup>4</sup>

### **Nat Love's Early Life**

Nat Love was born on a plantation in Davidson County, Tennessee, June 1854. Like many others born into slavery, Love did not know his exact birthdate. Unlike many other slave narratives, Love does not focus on the terrors of slavery but the lessons it taught. Since his mother was the manager of the kitchen and his father the foreman of the fields, he had to look

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<sup>4</sup> Manzoor, Sarfraz. "Black Cowboys." BBC Magazine - (British Broadcasting Company), Real History. March 22, 2013

after himself at an early age. Once slavery ended, Love being only 11 or 12 years old, his father rented twenty acres of land and became a sharecropper.<sup>5</sup>

When they first started out, they were extremely poor, being “without food or money and almost naked.”<sup>6</sup> His father would make brooms and mats from straw and chair bottoms from cane and reeds to sell, having to walk dozens of miles into town to do so. When the weather allowed, they would work in the field with their crops. Their initial crop being corn, tobacco, and vegetables. Love also discusses that there were no schools for black children to attend. Their father, who could read a little, helped him and his brother with their “A B C’s,” teaching them to read.<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, Love’s father became sick and died soon after and his sister’s husband also died. Although Love was younger than his brother, he was “the most courageous, always leading.”<sup>8</sup> Because of this he took the leadership role and became the head of the family. Love found himself in a very difficult spot, now having to look after his mother and his sister with her children. Though he was downhearted and felt defeated, knowing “there was work to be done,” he continued on taking care of his family.<sup>9</sup>

Soon, Love’s sister died. Seeing how poor his family remained to be, noting his nieces were running around nearly naked and barefoot, Love became determined to find work. “Put[ting] on [his] best rags,” he went out in search of work. He found work with a “Mr. Brooks” at \$1.50 a month (maybe around \$24 present day). He was able to bring home food and clothes after about a week. He earned a ¢50 raise after a month and even earned \$3 in his third month.

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<sup>5</sup> Love, Nat “Life and Adventures of Nat Love” 1907, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 21-22.

However, this did not work out for long. Love had a dispute with Mr. Brooks where he ended up hitting him in the head with a rock.<sup>10</sup>

For leisure, Love enjoyed riding horses. Being friends with some boys whose father owned a ranch, he would hang around there often. The boys said they would give Love ¢10 for every horse he broke to which Love took the opportunity. He broke about a dozen horses.<sup>11</sup> During this time, he continued working on his family's farm. He called it hard work, with him and his mother working from morning to night just to make ends meet. Even with all his hard work, his family still remained very poor. He continued working hard though, continuously citing his freedom from slavery giving him "the courage to continue the struggle."<sup>12</sup>

Around this time, Love said he began thinking about going West. It grew on him more and more, day after day, although he did not want to leave his mother and nieces. And he had not the money or clothes. An unexpected opportunity arose when he heard someone was raffling a horse and you could enter for ¢50. Love caught two chickens and sold them for ¢50 and then entered the raffle. He ended up winning the raffle and the owner of the horse bought the horse back from him for \$50 dollars. The owner raffled the horse again and Love won again. Then again- sold the horse back to the owner for \$50. With this newfound wealth, Love bought some "needful articles" and gave his mother half of the money.<sup>13</sup>

His mother pleaded with him to stay, so he stayed for a month. At the end of this month, his mother begged for him to stay for another month to which he agreed. At this time, his uncle came to live with them. Love asked his uncle to be the head of the household to which he agreed. Since his nieces were older and a source of help and his uncle and brother were home to watch

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 22-23

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid 29.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid 30.

over his mother, he felt he could head west in good heart. So, at the age of 15, on February 10th, 1869, he says goodbye to his mother and “started out for the first time alone in a world [he] knew very little about.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Nat Love and His Life as a Cowboy**

With confidence, Love headed for Kansas, having heard he could find work there. When he arrived in Dodge City, Kansas, he was greeted with that of a frontier city with many saloons, dance houses, gambling halls, and cowboys. He found himself talking to a group of cowboys, several who were colored. He asked the boss for a job as a cowboy who said yes but only if he could ride a wild horse. He rode a horse named ‘old Good Eye,’ while he did hold on until the horse tired out, it was the “worst horse to ride [he] had ever mounted in [his] life.”<sup>15</sup> With this, the boss said he would hire him for \$30 a month and gave him the nickname of Red River Dick. He took him into the city and got him his ‘outfitings’ that being a saddle, bridle, spurs, chaps, a pair of blankets, and a 45-colt revolver. This company was called the Duval outfit and their brand was Pig Pen brand.<sup>16</sup>

Love experienced his first exchange with Native Americans soon after this. He and his crew of about 15 were attacked by about 100 Native Americans, who he said nearly always were harassing travelers and traders. In this moment, Love felt discouraged, which is something almost unbeknownst to him. He feared this may be where he died, but his courage was quickly brought back to him when his fellow cowboys told him to use his gun. Though he never shot a gun before, he said “after the first shot, [he] lost all fear and fought like a veteran.” After this

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 31-32.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

fight, the ‘Indians’ left with nearly all they had. Love stated, with this fight, he lost almost all sense of fear.<sup>17</sup>

After three years with this company, he accepted a better position with Pete Gallinger Company. When he was not moving large herds of cattle or horses to market or to be delivered, he would often find himself moving cattle from one grazing range to another. “Indians” and “white outlaws” gave them quite the trouble, splitting cattle or groups of horses from the herd and running off with them. Love explained, since there is no law respected in the West, it often turned into to ‘the victor belongs the spoils.’ Because of this, it was extremely necessary for a cowboy to understand his gun.<sup>18</sup> Also important to a cowboy is his horse. Without his horse, a cowboy “is like a chicken without a head,” there horse being the “meaning of life and liberty.”<sup>19</sup>

While moving cattle to Deadwood, Love and his company were a mere 60 miles from the Little Bighorn river when the battle of Little Bighorn took place. They did not know at the time but would have gone to General Custer’s assistance had they been aware. Soon after this, the government warned them to not go too far North on the trail or they would risk being caught by Indians. Once they arrived in Deadwood, they gave the cattle to the new owner and went into town. It was July 4th and “[cowboys] for miles around were assembled.” They arranged a contest, where Love and several other colored cowboys competed.<sup>20</sup>

Each cowboy was assigned a wild horse to which they had to “rope, throw, tie, bridle and saddle, and mount” in the shortest amount of time. Love did this in nine minutes, with the next person having done it in twelve. It was winning this competition with such an incredible time that he was given the nickname Deadwood Dick. His record was never beaten in his lifetime. It

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 33-34.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 36-37.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 47.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 75-77.

was also at this competition that they learned of the loss of General Custer, to which the “indignation and sorrow was universal” as many cowboys knew General Custer personally.<sup>21</sup>

On October 4th, 1876, Love found himself alone battling a group of ‘Indians.’ Shot in the leg and his horse shot dead, he put up his best fight but, while he was running away, he ended up in their camp. For some reason, unknown to Love, the tribe spared his life. They dressed his wounds and fed him. This tribe, the Yellow Dog tribe, had a lot of mixed people (Black and Native American), which could be the reason they spared his life. After about three days, Love’s ears were pierced, and he was adopted into the tribe.<sup>22</sup>

As soon as his wounds began healing and he was able bodied, he took part in the traditional dances. As time went on, they wanted him to marry the chief’s daughter. He did not want to but “for prudence sake” he went along with their plans, waiting to find an opportunity to escape. One night, when the “Indians relaxed on their watchfulness” over Love, having all fell asleep, Love took his chance to escape. He made it back to his home ranch where his escape was celebrated. Soon after, he was on the road again moving cattle.<sup>23</sup>

With the influence of a bit of whiskey, Love thought it would be a good idea to ‘rope’ a canon from the military to take back to Texas to fight the Indians. He was captured by the soldiers. The commanding officer asked him what he was doing and why he was here. Love told him he knew Bat Masterson and Masterson let him go in good heart, saying Love was the only cowboy he liked.<sup>24</sup>

Love’s autobiography goes on to tell many more stories of his life as a cowboy and all he experienced. One idea evident in each of these stories is the manifestation and symbolism of

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 77-78.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 81-82.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 82-84.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 89-90

freedom. In his early life, freedom is often his reason and drive to continue in life, even when it was extremely difficult. When he and his mother were struggling to make ends meet and he felt like giving up, freedom is cited as giving him strength.

When captured by the Indian's, Love had no desire to stay even with their kindness and hospitality because he valued freedom. And when caught by soldiers after trying to 'rope' a canon he was let go and it was valued. Even the lifestyle of being a cowboy embodies the idea of freedom, never staying in one place and constantly moving around, being bound to no one and no land.

### **Freedom as a Catalyst for Love**

"Surely war is hell- but slavery is worse."<sup>25</sup> Freedom is such an important and relevant aspect in Love's life because of his roots in slavery. Nat Love choosing to be a cowboy is not entirely without reason. Because he was born and raised imprisoned in slavery, he inherently clings to the idea of freedom. Knowing that he was once enslaved, he views situations he found himself in as better than his original. Being a cowboy in and of itself is freeing. A job where one is constantly moving around and never bound to a single place. Freedom manifests in Love's stories, some more explicitly than others.

When Love was captured by the Native Americans, he wasted no time in escaping, having no desire to stay with them even with their offer. It is wise to say that the idea of being captured and forced to stay with a group, even if he did have freedom to do as he pleased within the tribe and was still a free man, was not appealing to him. The notion of freedom is strong within Love's stories, so much so that he would protect it at all costs.

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid,

## Freedom as a Drive for Others After Slavery

Life after slavery was not easy and brought along new challenges for black people. Brutalities of white prejudice were persistent, and laws made it difficult for Black people to participate in society. Education and wages were often denied to black people and many of them lived in destitute poverty, many being forced by necessity to become sharecroppers to their previous white owners. This left very few options for people of color.<sup>26</sup> However, important to colored folk of this time, as noted in Love's biography, was the importance of freedom and it giving them strength to get through difficult situations.

Freedom was not only a drive for Nat Love but for others who were freed from slavery around this time. Freedom is a natural and inherent idea in all people and when achieved after so long, it will not be let go of easily. While Bill Pickett was not born into slavery, his mother was and so he was familiar with slavery and its repercussions.

Born in 1888, Pickett's heritage was Black and Cherokee. He left school in the 5th grade to work as a ranch hand and soon began riding horses. He is known for inventing bulldogging, a technique where one grabs the horns of cattle and wrestles them down, though this practice lost popularity. Pickett became well known for his tricks and stunts. He toured many areas, performing, and even appeared in early motion pictures like *The Bulldogger* and *The Crimson Skull*. Because of his race, he was sometimes barred from performing in certain rodeos. He often claimed he was of 'Comanche' heritage in order to perform.<sup>27</sup>

Freedom can be seen as a theme in Bill Pickett's life. Having travelled frequently at his own discretion and left home to create a new legacy for his name, this introduces the idea of freedom. Moreover, similar to Love, being a Black man during his time was still difficult

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<sup>26</sup> "Life After Slavery for African Americans." Khan Academy.

<sup>27</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Bill Pickett." Encyclopedia Britannica. 29 March 2019.

although they had access to education. Many opportunities were not available to them. Maybe even unbeknownst to Pickett himself, freedom played a large role in his life.

Though not a cowboy, James Pierson Beckwourth was a mountain man and a fur trapper. The occupations are similar in the sense that the individual moves at their own discretion while working with a company. This is another job some ex slaves might have pursued had there been more opportunities. Beckwourth was mixed, born to a mother who was a slave with his father being her white master. Though the master nearly raised him as his own child, he was legally his slave. Beckwourth was emancipated by his father in 1824. He began working as a wrangler with a Mountain fur company. He is noted for his good fur trapping skills and discovering Beckwourth pass.<sup>28</sup>

Freedom is a theme found in Beckwourth's life. Once free from slavery, similarly to Love, Beckwourth pursued a career where he found the most freedom. He left what he knew and became a mountain man who travelled freely and widely, never settling into one area. Freedom seems to be an important idea for Beckwourth.

John Ware is another notable black cowboy. He was born around 1845 into slavery. After he was freed, he went to Texas where he learned the skills of a cowboy and rancher. He is best known for his ability to ride and train horses. Many of his stories were fictionalized and made popular, becoming a notable figure of the West.

Similarly, to the other individuals discussed, freedom is a common theme found in Ware's story. Having come from slavery, he left the area of his roots and pursued a career of freedom. Like the others he was not bound to any place and could come and go as he pleased.

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<sup>28</sup> "James Pierson Beckwourth." Beckwourth. <http://www.beckwourth.org/Biography/>

Freedom is very apparently a theme not only in the story of Nat Love but also for Bill Pickett, James Beckwourth, and John Ware. Freedom is a common theme found in all of their stories. They followed similar career paths in that the jobs themselves were rooted in the idea of freedom, being able to freely come and go and not being bound to one place or person.

## **Conclusion**

After the emancipation of slaves, most of them had very few opportunities. One option they did have was to go West and work as a cowboy. In the world of a cowboy, whites and black were nearly social equals and they were able to experience a life of freedom. They would break wild horses, graze cattle, and move cattle from one part of the country to another- no easy task. They also frequently dealt with Native Americans and white outlaws.

Nat Love was born into slavery and emancipated at an early age. He claims that slavery taught him a lot, especially how to care for himself since his mother and father were not always available. He gained a strong work ethic from following in his father's footsteps and taking up the responsibilities of his family. The lure of freedom however, pulled him from this life and to the west. The lack of discrimination within the cowboy community was crucial to the pursuit of freedom for a cowboy.

Other notable black figures were Bill Pickett, James Beckwourth, and John Ware. While not all of them were cowboys, they all pursued a career that followed the idea of freedom. Being a mountain man, Beckwourth came and went freely within his job and, like cowboys, was bound to no person or place. Pickett, Ware, and Love's career as cowboys allowed them to live a life of freedom and still take care of themselves and their families.

As noted in this essay, freedom was catalyst for many black people after being emancipated from slavery. Knowing that they were quite in fact free from being shackled

(figuratively and literally) by any man allowed many of them to continue their tough journey's. Moreover, freedom as a theme is found throughout many of Love's, as well as Pickett's, Ware's, and Beckwourth's, stories within their lives. Small things like going to a particular area or eating a particular meal they pleased and big things like having a career that allowed them to move freely contribute to the idea of freedom. It seems apparent once someone is granted freedom, they will hold on to it until death do them part.

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