

# Reading Drill #10

## Cowboys

The cowhand or cowboy, a famed and colorful figure, was the master of the long drive and the roundup. The first cowhands originally hailed from Mexico. These *vaqueros*, the Spanish term for cowboy, invented almost all the tools of the cowhand's trade, from the distinctive hat and rope lariat to the special saddle. The debt owed by American cowboys to the early Mexican innovators is apparent in such Spanish-derived terms as lasso, corral, and ranch. Even the famed rodeo is derived from the Spanish *charreada*.

The cowhand's life was an arduous one. Cowhands worked sunup to sundown and received lower wages than most factory workers. Their legs became bowed from long days in the saddle, and many developed permanent squints from looking into the glaring sunlight of the treeless plains. Wind, rain, sand, and strong sunlight toughened the skin over time but also caused injury. Because the job took such a physical toll on the body, most cowboys were young men in their teens and 20's, and it was unusual for a cowboy to last more than ten years in the job.

Given the rapid travel and physical exertion required of cowhands in these conditions, every item worn or carried served a necessary function. The wide brim of the "ten-gallon hat" could be turned down to shade the eyes or drain off rain that collected during rides over open terrain. Cowboys also could use their hats to carry water from a stream or to fan a slow-starting fire. The bandanna, a large handkerchief, could be tied over the nose and mouth to keep out all the dust raised by the running of countless cattle or it could be used to protect the neck from sunburn. It also served as a towel, a napkin, and a bandage. Cowhands sometimes wore leather trousers called chaps over regular overalls. They protected the legs from injury if a rider fell from a horse or had to ride through cactus, sagebrush, or other thorny plants.

On a long drive, the central figure who planned the route and led the cowboys was the trail boss. The trail boss also selected his team of riders, so he had to be both a good judge of character and a good handler of various personalities. The figure with the second highest pay after the trail boss, and above the average cowboy, was the cook. The cook was sometimes a veteran cowboy who had been injured and who could no longer ride, or who had simply gotten old and grown weary of the long days in the saddle. **A good cook was essential to a successful drive, as the morale of the men often depended on him, and he was called upon to play doctor, nurse, and even barber.**

The cook rode in a wagon called the "chuckwagon," an innovation attributed to Charles Goodnight. In 1866, Goodnight rebuilt an army wagon and placed a cupboard in its rear. It was usually stocked with non-perishable food items, such as cornmeal, smoked bacon, pinto beans, molasses, and coffee. In addition to transporting food supplies, the chuckwagon also carried a large water barrel, firewood for cooking, and much of the cowboys' gear.

Today, much cowhanging is done from the safety and comfort of a pickup truck, rather than from horseback, so the danger of injury is low and supplies are accessible. But although the life of a cowhand is less picturesque and less romantic than it once was, it still involves the solitude that is so much a part of its traditional image.

# Reading Drill #11

## The Ruins of Angkor

The ruins of the temples of Angkor Wat are among the most impressive in the world. Located in modern day Cambodia near Tonlé Sap, the largest freshwater lake in Southeast Asia, the city of Angkor was the seat of power for the Khmer Empire from the ninth to fifteenth centuries. In their imposing scale, the ruins rival the pyramids of Giza in Egypt. The main complex consists of five giant towers, thought to symbolize sacred mountains. The tallest tower is 215 meters. It also contains the longest continuous bas-relief (a kind of carving) in the world. But even in its details—its galleries, pillars, and moats—Angkor Wat indicates that the empire that created it was highly advanced and powerful. It remains one of the most popular tourist destinations in all of Southeast Asia today.

Why this thriving civilization died out is a question that archaeologists are only beginning to ponder. There appear to be four main reasons. The first has to do with its irrigation system. The temples and palaces of Angkor were constructed around a series of artificial reservoirs and canals, which were annually flooded to capacity by the Mekong River. Once filled, they were used to irrigate the surrounding rice paddies and farmland over the course of the year. Farmers depended completely on this water for their rice crop. Large-scale farming around Tonlé Sap was impossible without irrigation.

Scientists speculate that an increasing population may have demanded greater food production from farmers just as the irrigation system they used was weakening with age. The construction of hundreds of sandstone temples and palaces required an enormous amount of physical labor. This meant that there were workers from the countryside pouring into Angkor, while the city's native population was also growing. The result was that the demand for food skyrocketed so quickly it outstripped the ability of the irrigation system to satisfy it. Efforts by farmers to increase productivity of rice also overworked the soil, leading to erosion and nutrient depletion.

Other factors relate to society and politics rather than physical infrastructure. The building of the massive irrigation system, temples, and other monuments required that the common people be practically enslaved to the ruling family, other aristocrats, and high-ranking priests. The religion they followed was a blend of Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism that, not surprisingly, emphasized submission to authority. However, another branch of Buddhism (called Theravada) began spreading through Southeast Asia, and it preached the individual pursuit of enlightenment. The popularity of this doctrine decreased the incentive to obey the higher classes without questioning. The labor to support massive public works projects became difficult to obtain.

This was true not only within the city of Angkor but in the outlying provinces as well. Fueled partially by the spread of Theravada Buddhism, these provinces began to assert their independence, and some refused to pay their traditional tribute to the king. With less wealth coming into the city, there was lower funding for the maintenance and building of infrastructure just as the existing irrigation systems were showing strain.

But it was external pressure that may have been the death blow for the city of Angkor. The Khmer Empire had the misfortune to lie between the rising Thai and Vietnamese empires. Their power grew as the line of Khmer kings became less dynamic and powerful and its grip on its far-flung provinces slackened. In fact, the city was attacked and looted by the Thai in 1431, but it is known to have returned to use thereafter. In succeeding centuries, however, the city suffered alternating invasions by the Thai and Vietnamese armies, and Angkor's role as a center of civilization was lost.