“Stampede!” Nat Love shouted to the men nearby. It was June 1873. Love and other cowboys had been guiding 2,500 cattle on a trail. Now, a lightning storm had scared the cattle. The animals began running off. Love might lose the whole herd! The cowboys burst into action. Riding their horses, they chased after the cattle. They zipped past big rocks and steep cliffs.

Finally, they guided the herd back to the trail. This may sound like a scene from a movie. But it’s a true story. Nat (nayt) Love was one of thousands of African American cowboys who worked in the Wild West. They helped shape our nation’s history.

On the Trails
Cowboys had big jobs to do from the 1860s to the early 1880s. Many people in Texas and other parts of the western U.S. had cattle ranches. But they didn’t have strong fences to keep their cows and steers close to home. So cowboys rode around on horseback to keep cattle from roaming off.

Most ranch owners sold

**WORDS TO KNOW**
- **steers**: type of male cattle
- **era**: a period in history
cattle to be eaten as meat in the eastern U.S. Cowboys had to get cattle to railroad stations in Kansas and other places. They’d guide herds of cattle along rugged trails. These adventures were called cattle drives.

While most books and movies show only white cowboys, one out of four of these hard workers were black. Many, like Love, had once been enslaved. They were freed once the Civil War ended in 1865. Working on the trails was a chance at a new life.

A Tough Life
Cowboys worked all day. When it was time to rest, they slept on the ground—or even on horseback. They ate beans, biscuits, and rabbits that they trapped on the trail.

Cowboys faced many risks. For example, they often herded cattle across rivers. If the cowboys weren’t careful, they and the animals could drown.

“It was dangerous work,” says history expert Larry Callies. “There were wolves and snakes. People were out to steal your cattle.”

Times of Change
By the late 1880s, barbed wire fences were common. That made it far easier to control cattle. And trains began reaching more of the West. Ranch owners didn’t have to send cattle along the trails. Fewer cowboys were needed.

Then a new era began. People became fascinated by cowboys and how they lived. Cowboys started events called rodeos. They showed off the skills they used on ranches and trails, like riding horses and doing rope tricks.

Modern cowboys still perform in rodeos today. They remind us of the role that cowboys from different backgrounds played in America’s past.

—by Karen Kellaher

Larry Callies is a rodeo cowboy who runs the Black Cowboy Museum in Texas. He teaches kids the history of African American cowboys. He also gives kids classes in cowboy skills—like throwing a lasso, a rope with a loop, to stop a pretend runaway cow!