

THE EVOLUTION OF WESTERN WEAR

THE FUNCTIONAL SIDE OF COWBOY BOOTS

All the men were well shod in good looking riding boots, except the cook. I learned that the boots were mostly made by a boot maker named Hyer, of Olathe, Kansas, and were generally black in color. All had seventeen inch tops, with a two or two and a half inch heel, slanted well forward, so that the weight of the foot came forward of the heel, and consequently the stirrup was held under the arch of the rider's instep, as it should be."

—JOHN K. ROLLINSON, IN HIS 1941 MEMOIR, *PONY TRAILS IN WYOMING: HOOFPRIENTS OF A COWBOY AND U.S. RANGER*



While still a teenager, John K. Rollinson left his upstate New York home in 1903 to go cowboyin' in Wyoming after seeing Buffalo Bill's Wild West show. Working as a ranch hand, he could see the West portrayed by Buffalo Bill Cody's troupe was already losing its

wildness. He still saw plenty of wide open space, but sedentary herds of cattle grazed where countless buffalo had once roamed. American Indians were confined to remote reservations. Homesteads, ranches, towns and fences broke up the horizon.

lower leg from chafing from stirrup leathers and from prickly bushes and trees a cowboy might encounter while looking for stray beef hiding in Wyoming arroyos.

Cowboy boots are a highly specialized version of the original performance footwear: riding boots. The signature

The boot tops of this unidentified cowpuncher probably reached as high as his knees in front and were cut lower behind the knee. The boot tops are turned down to make walking easier and would have been easier to grip when pulling the boots on. The wrinkles at the ankle indicate these boots were well broken in. They also indicate that the tops are two-piece construction, rather than the four-piece construction commonly seen today.

—COURTESY ROBERT G. MCCUBBIN COLLECTION —

What had not changed much from what Rollinson saw at the Wild West show were the boots Cody and his cowboys wore. In his 1941 memoir, Rollinson briefly described the boots of his cattle country compatriots. The pitch and height of the heels helped the cowboy position his foot in Western saddle stirrups, an important comfort feature when a rider spent long days in the saddle. Rollinson did not explain the tall tops, but they helped protect the



heels and tall tops of early 19th century riding boots were adapted and refined to meet the unique and harsh conditions of riding horses and working cattle in the American West. Many features of the earliest cowboy boots are still evident in the boots worn today by working and rodeo cowboys—even with modifications for specific activities and events, the onslaught of technology and the ephemeral flirtations of fashion.

One constant in working cowboy boots is their tough hides that stand up to the rigors of cowboying. Rugged retan hides were common vamp and shaft leathers early on; oiled and waxed cowhide, muleskin, shrunken bullhide shoulder and even shark are now used. Besides tough leather, traditional cowboy boots today still feature a welt—a strip of leather stitched to the upper and insole of the boot—with a beveled or ribbed metal shank. The result is an arch-hugging design that provides additional support needed with a higher heel. That construction is particularly important in a riding boot, says Jose Sanchez at Champion Attitude Boots. "When they're roping they press the boot against the stirrup and they need something that will

hold, that won't give way," Sanchez says. "It helps hold the shape of the boot."

The design and construction of a working cowboy's boots can indicate what kind of work he does and where he does it. The boot's heel height, toe shape, welt stitching, saddle, spur ridge and even the type of sole reveal a lot about a cowboy.

A two-inch heel with a steep forward pitch—where the back of the heel is angled forward from the top to the bottom—is a riding heel. Lower that by a half inch and lessen the pitch or eliminate it altogether, and you have a walking heel. Lower the heel another quarter inch with a slight-to-sharp pitch, and you have a dogger, or dogging heel—so named because of its popularity with steer wrestlers ("doggers"). The 1½-inch height is also common for a roper heel.

Toe styles on cowboy boots are more about style than function. The pointed toe seen on many classic Western boots is said to help the foot find the stirrup better, but scant evidence—if any—proves that pointed toes were even around before Tom Mix showed up in movies wearing narrow, snip-toed boots. The narrow toe box is difficult to form by

Even cowgirls get the boots. Most of these cowgirls at the Triangle Ranch Rodeo in Cedar City, Utah, circa 1924, are wearing boots with four-piece uppers and a variety of flamboyant stitch patterns and inlays meant to catch the attention of the audience. This line up includes several rodeo hall-of-famers: bronc rider Florence Hughes Randolph (third from left), trick rider and movie star Mabel Strickland (fourth from left) and bulldogger Fox Hastings (third from right). The toe designs run from round to narrow snip toes; all but one or two cowgirls sport spurs on their boots.

—TRUE WEST ARCHIVES —

hand, and the foot seemed to find purchase in stirrups just fine with round or even square toes. Shoemakers produced round- or square-toed boots for the cavalry on both sides in the Civil War. Round toes are common on Ropers. Cutting horse riders have been embracing narrow-to-wide square toes in recent years, so cutter toes are being offered by several bootmakers.

Perhaps the most recognizable genre of cowboy boots worn in arena competition is the Roper. Typically short, with eight-inch tops, Ropers usually have a plain round toe and shoe construction (no shank under the arch and low shoe-like

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heels). They are essentially a classic Wellington but are called Ropers because calf ropers, who dismount and run to tie up a roped calf, like the support and stability of the low, squared-off heel. Ropers, which hit the market in the mid-1980s, were the first full-fledged, rodeo-event specialty boot.

Tall-topped boots are popular in brushy country and mostly associated with buckaroo cowboys in the Great Basin region that stretches from Oregon into Mexico and from Wyoming to California. Besides the tall top, Buckaroo boots often feature an extra layer of leather over the vamp called a saddle. The saddle protects the top of the foot from spur straps. The boot's tall heels feature a spur ridge or shelf to support a spur. Pull holes are common, as the force needed to pull on a taller boot can actually pull off regular pull straps. Yet even short-top Buckaroos often feature pull holes, as well as deep v-cuts, or scallops, in the front and back of the shafts.

Another style with regional roots is the cowboy Packer, a lace-up boot with a riding heel. Packers are named for cowboys who use pack horses and mules in the mountainous back country of the northern Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Northwest. A cowboy who dismounts frequently and has to scramble over rugged terrain might twist an ankle in a pull-on boot; lace-up boots provide additional ankle support.

A signature style for the Quarter Horse crowd is double welt stitching, commonly seen on round- and broad square-toed boots. Double welts offer no performance function, as they were introduced to allow remote boot wearers to resole their own boots, says J.P. "Pat" Moody, president of Rios of Mercedes. "Two soles were stitched together," he says. "When the outer sole wore through, the cowboy would just cut the outer row of stitches off and remove the worn sole, leaving a new sole to walk on."

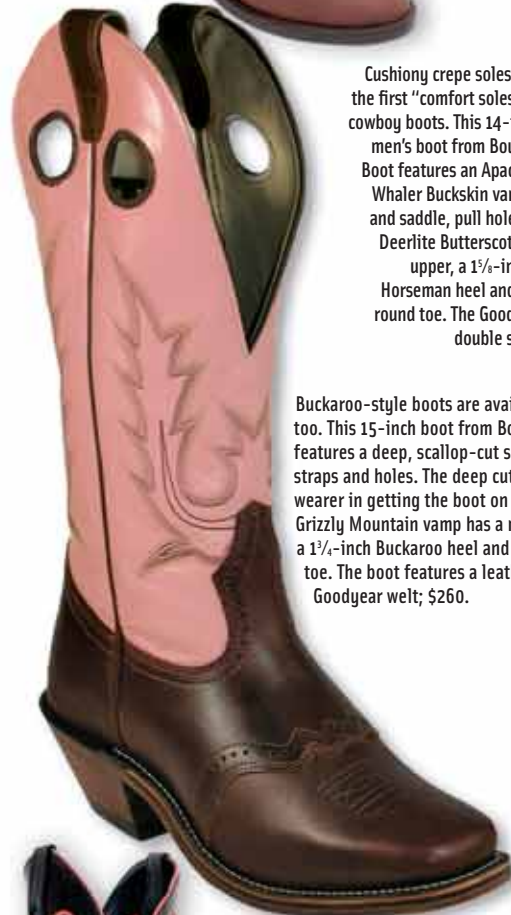
Bottom line, the working cowboy boot is all about protection, safety, comfort and function, from the pull straps or holes at the top, to the bottom of its sole. ❏

FOR BUCKAROO COWBOYS

Boots with Pull Holes, Saddles, Spur Ridges



Extra tall Buckaroo boots can be tricky getting on—the foot has to travel down a long shaft before it makes a right angle into the vamp. Standard ear-style pulls have been known to actually pull off. Champion Attitude Boots solves that problem with extra-long pull straps called mule-ear pulls that are both functional and decorative. This Pistolero boot features a mulehide vamp and saddle; the matching pulls and shaft collar with star cutouts are also mulehide. The 17-inch shaft is kidskin. Shown with a 2 1/4-inch underslung heel and a wide, round "W" toe, this handmade boot has a three-quarter welt construction and leather sole; \$600.



Cushiony crepe soles were the first "comfort soles" on cowboy boots. This 14-inch men's boot from Boulet Boot features an Apache Whaler Buckskin vamp and saddle, pull holes, Deerlite Butterscotch upper, a 1 1/2-inch Horseman heel and a full round toe. The Goodyear welt is double stitched; \$227.



Buckaroo-style boots are available for women too. This 15-inch boot from Boulet Boot features a deep, scallop-cut shaft with pull straps and holes. The deep cut assists the wearer in getting the boot on and off. The Grizzly Mountain vamp has a matching saddle, a 1 1/4-inch Buckaroo heel and vintage square toe. The boot features a leather sole on a Goodyear welt; \$260.



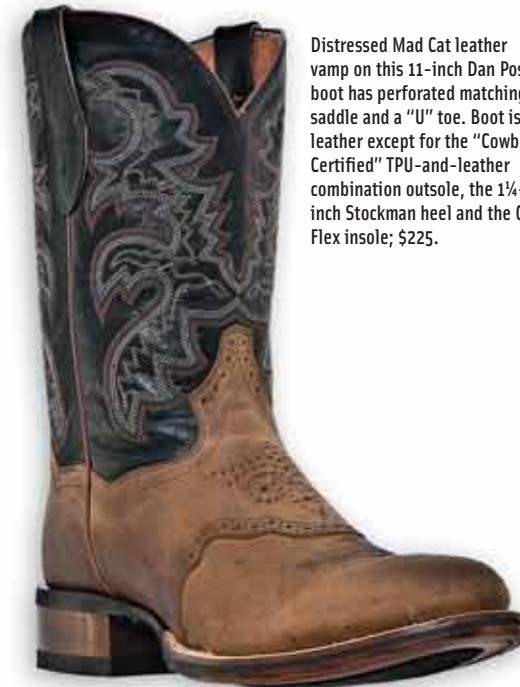
Men's black Buckaroo boot from Laredo Boots has a leather vamp, saddle and 15-inch top with pull holes and pull straps. The cowboy heel is 1 1/4 inches and has a spur ridge; boot is shown with a "U" toe. The boot features a double welt, oil-resistant work outsole and Comfort Cushion insole; \$125.



A classic 17-inch Buckaroo boot from Olathe Boot has a Black Horse butt vamp and saddle in a "U" toe. The red leather shaft has a deep, six-inch scallop with a black collar, pull holes and a six-row stitch pattern. The boot features a full single-stitched welt and leather sole, with single stitching. The heel is a 1 1/4-inch underslung C heel with a spur ridge. This made-to-order boot costs about \$350.

FOR WORKING & RODEO COWBOYS

Boots with Needle Toes, Riding Heels



Distressed Mad Cat leather vamp on this 11-inch Dan Post boot has perforated matching saddle and a "U" toe. Boot is all leather except for the "Cowboy Certified" TPU-and-leather combination outsole, the 1 1/4-inch Stockman heel and the Gel-Flex insole; \$225.



The Adriano Moraes Bull Riding Boot from Ariat is the official boot of the Professional Bull Riders (PBR) and the first signature boot of three-time PBR champion Adriano Moraes. The vamp and counter are black shrunken shoulder (bull hide). The red shaft is full-grain leather with six-row stitching. Geared for bull riders and fans, this boot with a two-inch heel is loaded with Ariat comfort, stability and durability features, including ATS footbed and a Duratread thermoplastic polyurethane outsole with a metallic pop design; \$170.

This 12-inch men's Shenandoah boot by Nocona offers a vamp and shaft featuring Crazy Horse leather—a leather that is "hot stuffed" with oil and wax for a rich, durable patina. The handmade needle toe is paired with a 1 1/2-inch underslung heel and a cushion insole; \$115.



I CAN TELL BY YOUR BOOT HEEL



Riding or Cowboy Heel: Working cowboys and rodeo cowboys often wear a 1 3/4- to 2 1/4-inch heel, with a forward pitch from the top of the heel to a small base.



Walking Heel: Cowboys who spend a lot of time on the ground tend to wear a 1 1/2 inch heel, with little or no pitch, and a broader heel base for support and stability.



Dogging Heel: Steer wrestlers (doggers) are known to wear heels at or under 1 1/4 inches high with a forward pitch.



Roper Heel: Calf ropers like the stability offered by a 1 1/4-inch block heel as they dismount and run to tie a roped calf.

— By G. Daniel DeWeese at Schatzlein's Saddle Shop in Minneapolis, Minnesota —



FOR THE QUARTER HORSE CROWD

Boots with Double-Welt Stitching, Exotic Leather

Oiled black leather vamp on this 13-inch boot from Stetson Boot has a wide, round toe and is paired with a distressed leather shaft. The boot features double welt stitching, leather sole with lemon wood peg and brass nail construction, and a 1 1/4-inch roper heel with a spur ridge; \$223.



Ladies Buckaroo boot from Twisted X Boots offers a London Tan vamp with a wide square toe. Teardrop pull holes, a London Tan collar and elaborate floral stitching accent the 17-inch shaft. The 1 1/4-inch underslung heel has an extended spur ridge. The boot features double welt stitching, a Cowboy Comfort footbed and a proprietary high-tech insole. Boot is shown with a rubber outsole for feedlots; \$224.



Exotic leathers, even tough ostrich skin, aren't often seen on the job, but they are popular in the arena, especially in show horse and equitation events. The soft, durable, full quill ostrich vamp on this Tony Lama is paired with a 13-inch leather top. The boot has an "R" toe and a 1 1/4-inch riding heel. This exotic Western boot features Lama Comfort Technology, a three-quarter welt and a leather outsole; \$411.

Ariat: 800-899-8141 • Ariat.com
Boulet Western Boots: 518-298-8602 • BouletBoots.com
Champion Attitude Boots: 915-544-1855 • CABoots.com
Dan Post Boot Company: DanPostBoots.com
Frye Boot Company: 800-826-3793 • TheFryeCompany.com
Justin Brands: www.JustinBoots.com
Laredo Boots: DanPostBoots.com
Nocona Boots: Nocona.com
Olathe Boot Company: OlatheBoots.com
Rios of Mercedes: RiosOfMercedesBoots.com
Stetson Boot: 303-571-2296 • StetsonApparel.com
Tony Lama: TonyLama.com
Twisted X Boots: 888-894-2668 • www.TwistedXBoots.com

FOR CUTTING HORSE RIDERS

Boot with Cutter Toe

The squared-off toe has been a popular toe style among cutting horse riders, so the style is widely known as the Cutter Toe. This model from Rios of Mercedes has a black shark vamp, a 16-inch Copper cowhide shaft with pull holes and a new diamond quilt stitch pattern. Single welt stitching is white; Fine Line hybrid sole is leather and Neoprene. The 1 1/4-inch heel has a spur rest; \$490.



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FOR COWBOY PACKERS

Boot with Lacing, Tall Riding Heels

Lace-up cowboy boots with tall heels are known as Packer boots. They are designed to provide additional ankle and foot support for cowboys who ride the rough high country with pack horses in tow. The leather "tongue" at the bottom of the lacing is also known as a kiltie; it blocks branches and other debris from going up the lacing. This 11-inch Boulet Boot Packer has Grizzly Mountain leather uppers with a Nitrile outsole on a Goodyear welt. The toe is medium round, while the heel is an underslung riding heel; \$196.



FOR CAVALRY RIDERS

Boot with Civil War Styling

Classic 12-inch harness boot from the Frye Boot Co. has styling ancestry that dates back to the Civil War when Frye made boots for the Union army. Features like the oil-tanned leather, the stovepipe shaft, the square, snub-nosed toe and the two-inch block heel are vintage 19th century. The straps and brass O-rings are biker influences from the 1950s; the Neoprene sole, Goodyear welt and cushioned memory insoles are contemporary technology; \$228.



FOR CALF ROPERS

Boot with Wellington Styling

The Roper—with its short top, round toe and short block heel—is a very slight variant on the Wellington boot, a popular military style boot that dates back to the early 1800s. In the 1980s, the style became popular among calf ropers who were in and out of the saddle roping and tying calves. Ropers like the low heel and shoe last for the stability the boot offers on the ground. This Justin Roper has a Melo-Veal leather vamp with a round Roper toe, a 10-inch Kiddie leather upper and a 1 1/4-inch heel. The boot also features a Nitrile outsole and a removable cushion orthotic; \$175-\$200.

G. Daniel DeWeese co-authored the book, *Western Shirts: A Classic American Fashion* (Gibbs Smith, 2004). Ranch-raised near the Black Hills in South Dakota, Dan has written about Western apparel and riding equipment for more than 25 years.