

COLORADO FARMERS & RANCHERS – RANCH WORK & TOOLS

Cattle Ranches

What do these photos tell you about how cattle ranches looked like?

XYZ Ranch Near Trinidad

This photo was taken at the XYZ ranch near Trinidad. In front of the adobe house are seven ranch hands or cowboys. One of them is wearing an apron.



XYZ ranch near Trinidad, Colorado

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Raising cattle was mainly men's work. There were more men than women on the cattle ranches of Colorado. As you can see in this photo, sometimes men even served as cooks.

Their Own Words

"I started to work [at age 21] for Jared L. Brush July 15, 1882, and continued for four years. He employed from eight to fifteen men. [At] certain times of the year, [he] would have more men working than at other times--and I was one of the cow hands. . . . Mr. Brush would buy cattle and turn them in on the range to graze and feed until they were ready for market. I remember of him buying ten thousand head of yearling [one year-old] steers at Ogallala [Nebraska] and helping to brand them at Julesburg with the crew. I also remember the year I came here, 1882, that the LF ranch branded over eleven thousand calves during the summer."

Source: [Unidentified person], CWA Interviews (1934), Doc. 341/40, Colorado Historical Society

Ranch Hands

This photo shows men and women standing near a bunkhouse on a Colorado ranch.



Men and women near a bunkhouse on a ranch in Colorado

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Women also lived and worked on cattle ranches. Most were either wives of the ranch owners or were ranch owners themselves. Other women worked as hired housekeepers and cooks.

Their Own Words

“My mother . . . did everything, inside and out. She wasn’t the cowboy type, really, but she took care of the cattle and she would do the chores such as milk cows, take care of chickens. . . . [She] raised a monstrous garden. Canned an abundance of garden produce and fruits that were available. Well, it was an ‘able’ job—you got going as soon as you were able, and you went as long as you were able. The people of today would not do it. . . .”

“And, of course, the men of that day weren’t as many men [are] today. That wasn’t a man’s job to come in and assist with the meal. You [women] may work in a hay field all day . . . but you also came in and you got the meals, not just for you and your family [but] for whatever men there were—say, my father [and] any hired men they may have.”

Source: CeCelia Sullican Knott quoted in Julie Jones-Eddy, ed. Homesteading Women: An Oral History of Colorado, 1890-1950 (New York: Twanaye, 1992): 60.

Herd Of Plains Cattle

The cattle in this photo are grazing on the plains. They are gathered around a pond. Behind the pond is a windmill used to pump water.



Herd of cattle

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

The grass on the Great Plains provided year-round food for cattle, just as it had for the bison. The grass remained nutritious even after it withered and turned yellow in the fall.

Their Own Words

"This part of the country in the early days was a vast expanse of territory which contained no fences except at a few homesteads adjoining the Platte River, the cattle grazed quietly, chuck wagons bounced on their way to roundups, cowboys singing to their stock, calves being roped and the pungent odor of burning cow hair as it came in contact with red hot branding irons, this was the picture in 1882. It was a cattle country and the cattlemen were the persons of importance."

Source: [Unidentified person], CWA Interviews (1934), Doc. 341/40, Colorado Historical Society.

Cattle In a Holding Pen

This photo shows cows and calves in a corral. The rancher on horseback is inspecting the herd.



Rancher inspecting the herd of cattle

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

The first cattle in Colorado were Longhorn cattle driven up from Texas. These rugged animals could easily survive the winter on the open plains. But they produced tough and stringy meat. Ranchers later brought in European cattle breeds that produced more and better meat.

Their Own Words

“I remember the old Longhorns. Put a bunch of them in the corral and you could hear a grinding noise from the rubbing of their horns. We took up Shorthorns later, while others went in for Herefords, and for a time there were quite a few Aberdeen-Angus cattle in the country.”

Source: Interview with Edward in Alvin T. Steinel, History of Agriculture in Colorado (Fort Collins: State Agricultural College, 1926): 132.

The Roundup

What do these photos tell you about how cattle were rounded up?

An Early Wake Up Call

This photo shows cowboys like those who took part in roundups. They are sitting in their bedrolls. Bedrolls were blankets used like sleeping bags at night.



An early wakeup call

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

During most of the year, cattle were left to graze on the open plains. Cowboys from different ranches came together each spring and fall to round up the cattle. They separated the cattle that belonged to the various ranches, branded the new calves, and drove steers to market. For several weeks during the roundups, cowboys slept and ate in the out-of-doors.

Their Own Words

"There were generally two roundups, one in the spring about May 10-15 when the grass started, and one in the fall, generally in September. Cattle were allowed to drift all winter and shift for themselves. Naturally they would drift south with the storms. In the spring some of them would be found as far south as the Arkansas river. . . . The spring roundup was mostly for the purpose of branding the calves. Cows dropped their calves mostly in April or May though they dropped some late in the fall. The calves would be caught and branded, then let loose to run with the cows until fall. . . ."

"The fall roundup in September was called the beef roundup. It was then that the beef steers would be cut out for market, the sucking calves taken from their mothers and put in a separate pasture, and the cows allowed to range for the winter. Steers were generally sold when they were three or four years old. They brought about \$30.00 per head."

Source: Frank Loustalet (1934), CWA Interviews, Doc. 343/41, Colorado Historical Society.

Branding Range Cattle

The cowboys in this photo are rounding up and branding cattle. The men standing behind the cow is holding a branding iron.



Branding range cattle

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

At the roundups, the cowboys branded the young cattle born on the open plains that year. The brand was a mark burned onto the hide of each animal. Each ranch had its own brand so that everyone knew who owned each animals.

Their Own Words

“There were hundred of head of cattle that roamed the prairies of open range in the early days. Everyone’s cattle roamed the range together, and it was an ordeal to sort them out, and could not have been accomplished if not for the brands on them.”

Source: Ormal Humburg testimony in Roleta D. Teal, Kiowa County (Kiowa Co. Bicentennial Commission, 1976): 32-33.

A Chunk Wagon

This is a fully loaded mess wagon or chuck wagon. The photo shows the cowboys’ bedrolls piled on top of the wagon. The man behind the wagon is standing beside an iron stove on wheels.



Fully loaded chuck wagon

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

The mess wagon or chuck wagon was part of every roundup. (In cowboy slang, the word “chuck” meant food.) The roundup cook drove and took care of the wagon. The man standing beside the stove in this photo probably was the cook. Most chuck wagons did not have a stove. Many cooks prepared meals over an open fire.

Their Own Words

"Very few people now living know what an old time Roundup was like. A cow outfit would consist of a mess wagon to carry out the beds and food, a cook, about eight riders (each rider had about four horses to ride -- a different horse for different kinds of work), a foreman, and a horse herder. The outfit would start to work about May 1st down in Kansas, east of the present state line. When all of the outfits got together there would be sometimes thirty or more wagons and 200 or more riders with five to eight hundred horses. "

Source: John P. Dickinson, "Life in Eastern Colorado," Colorado Magazine, 19 (1942): 193.

Eating During Round Up

This photo shows cowboys eating beside a chuck wagon. The cook prepared the food in pots over the open fire shown on the left of the photo.



Cowboys eating beside a chuck wagon during round up

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

The cowboys who rounded up cattle ate at chuck wagons like this one. This cook stored the food in the “chuck box” at the rear of the wagon. He cooked it over an open fire.

Their Own Words

“The chuck wagon had a box built on the back with compartments of all sizes built in so the cook’s supplies didn’t rattle around on the trip. The front dropped down to make a table. One side of the box was for storage for pots and cookers, flour and potatoes. The cook had a set of pot racks he set up over the campfire. A good cook could fix a complete meal over a campfire, including sourdough bread.”

Source: J. E. “Shorty” Chronister testimony in Roleta D. Teal, Kiowa County (Kiowa Co. Bicentennial Commission, 1976): 97-98.

Eating a Late Dinner During Round Up

This photo shows cowboys eating dinner at night during a roundup.



Cowboys eating dinner during round up

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

Cowboys spent long days rounding up cattle. The men in this photo did not stop for dinner until after dark.

Their Own Words

"Each outfit [during the roundups] consisted of a mess wagon, bed wagon, cook, about twelve men (these being cow hands and bosses) and each cowboy had from seven to eight horses."

Source: Frank Tanberg, "Cowboy Life on the Open Range of Northeastern Colorado," Colorado Magazine, 12 (1935): 23.

North Park Horse Round Up (1888)

This photo shows horses in a corral. It was taken in 1888 during a horse round up on the North Park area of Colorado.



1888 horse round up in North Park, Colorado

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

In some places in Colorado, cowboys rounded up horses instead of cattle. The horses in this photo were wild horses that lived on the open grassland of North Park. Cowboys like the ones sitting on these fences would break or tame the horses and train them to herd cattle.

Their Own Words

“Before the branding season started it was a job for every rancher to train his string of saddle horse to work with a rope, and to hold a cow. When branding calves it was the responsibility of the roper to bring the calf as near to the men who were doing the branding as possible, throw the calf and call out the brand to the men who held the calf down. These men released the rope immediately, so that the roper could get another call.”

“This whole responsibility of placing the proper brand on a calf rested with the roper. It was he who must read the brand on the mother of every calf he roped. Such work required skilled men with a rope and also men who could quickly and accurately read brands. It was the practice to round-up the cattle in the morning and brand all unbranded stock in the hard in the afternoon.”

Source: Frank Hodgson, 1934, CWA Interview Doc. 33/343, Colorado Historical Society.

Cutting Hay

What do these photos tell you about the way ranchers would cut hay?

Cutting Alfalfa Hay

This photo shows men cutting hay in an alfalfa field. They are riding horse-drawn mowing machines. The photo was taken in June 1910.



Cutting alfalfa hay

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Hay has been an important crop in Colorado ever since the Gold Rush. Farmers cut hay from the natural meadows along the rivers and creeks and hauled it to the mining camps. Cattlemen cut hay to feed their livestock during the winter. Alfalfa was a good grass for making hay because it added minerals to the soil.

Their Own Words

"Every farmer who has not a patch of alfalfa clover, should look at his neighbor's, and the sight of its rich, green stems, ten inches high and full leaves at this early date, will convince him of its value. In two weeks it may be cut for hogs and even for horses."

Source: Greeley Tribune, May, 1877.

Loading a Hay Wagon

The men in this photo are loading hay into a wagon.



Loading hay into a wagon

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

After the alfalfa, clover or other grass was cut, it was left on the field to dry. When the hay was dried or cured, men with pitchforks loaded it into wagons like the one in this photo. It was then hauled out of the field and stacked.

Their Own Words

"We used to cut from 200-300 tons of hay on the river bottoms in the early days. Father would haul a load to Denver and trade it for flour. Often a load would bring but one sack of 100 pounds."

Source: Frank Loustalet, CWA Interviews, Doc. 343/41, Colorado Historical Society.

Stacking Alfalfa

This photo shows ranchers stacking hay. The horses are pushing the load of hay up the wooden frame to the top of the stack.



Ranchers stacking alfalfa hay

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

A field of alfalfa or other grass could be cut 2 or 3 times during the summer. The dried grass or hay was used to feed livestock during the winter. It was stored outdoors in haystacks like the one in this photo.

Their Own Words

"Fanny [a horse] was used for plowing and cultivating the garden and for pulling the hay up on the stack.... Stacking hay was one of the big operations on the farm, requiring a crew of eight or ten men--two men for each wagon to load the hay in the field and two or three men on the stack.... A farmer took great pride in having his stacks uniform and straight and his hay still green and sweet-smelling after a winter in the field."

Source: Hazel Webb Dalziel, "The Way It Was," Colorado Magazine, 45 (Spring 1968): 104-105.

Stacking Hay Near Walden (1908)

This photo shows ranchers using a wooden elevator device to stack hay. Some of the ranchers are driving two teams of horses to supply the power to lift the hay to the top of the stack.



Ranchers stacking hay near Hayden, Colorado

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

There are also people on top of the hay stack to spread the hay around on top. This photo was taken in 1908 on the Dawson Ranch, near Hayden, Colorado.

Woman Working Hay Lift (1890)

This photo shows a young ranch woman holding a rope connected to a hay lift. She is helping the other people on the ranch with the harvest of hay. The men to the left in the photo are driving horses to supply the power to lift the heavy hay.



Woman working the hay left in 1890

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

Notice the young woman's work clothes. It is likely that she did a lot of different kinds of chores, including heavy work, around the ranch. This photo was taken in about 1890.

Ranch Women

What do these photos tell you about the kind of work ranch women did?

Branding a Steer (1884)

This photo shows ranch women branding a steer. The photo was taken in 1884 on a cattle ranch in the San Luis Valley.



Ranch women branding a steer

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Women, as well as men, lived and worked on cattle ranches. However, very few women worked as cowboys during a roundup. Examine this photo closely. Are these women dressed for roping and branding cattle? Do you think they roped and tied the steer in the photo?

Their Own Words

“Never did wear pants, and I haven’t yet! I leave that to the men. I did—I wouldn’t wear them. You know, my legs feel like they’re smothered. I’d be out there at our ranch, and in the wintertime [my husband] was always gone up to Mt. Harris to work, because we needed the money. I stayed home, took care of the cattle, horses, and everything. Pumped water for them and all. Well, after we had a few head of cattle, I had to hook up our team of horses and haul the straw out—we didn’t have hay; it was straw—and pump the water and slop the pigs and take the kids to school when they started. . . .”

Source: Julia Biskup Kawcak quoted in Julie Jones-Eddy, ed. Homesteading Women: An Oral History of Colorado, 1890-1950 (New York: Twayne, 1992): 64.

Raking Hay

The woman in this photo is sitting on the seat of a hay rake in a hay field.



Woman raking hay

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

Putting up hay usually was a man's job. The woman in this photo must have been helping out in the field during the busy haying time.

Their Own Words

"Well, there were chores the boys did and chores that the girls did too, but it always seemed to me like I wasn't considered a boy and I wasn't considered a girl! I worked in the hay field, and I would go out and buck-rake hay or rake hay all day long. Then at night when we came in, why, the boys got to sit down but I had to help with the dishes; I had to help the girls do these too."

Source: Audrey Ruchman Oldland quoted in Julie Jones-Eddy, ed. Homesteading Women: An Oral History of Colorado, 1890-1950. (New York: Twanye, 1992): 87.

Two Colorado Ranch Women

This photo shows two women standing beside horses on a ranch in Colorado. They may have been out for a Sunday ride. Both the women and the men are dressed in good clothes.



Two Colorado ranch women standing beside horses

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

On the ranches of Colorado, women as well as men rode horseback. Some rode on special saddles made for riding while wearing a skirt. These were called sidesaddles. The saddles on the women's horses in this photo are ordinary western saddles.

Their Own Words

"Of course, cowboys used to stop in to Mrs. Miner's [the place June was staying during her first teaching job] for lunch or something, and I thought, 'Well, they stopped in to see the new school-teacher!' One cowboy that stopped in was Henry Sweeney, who, the following June, I married. I had saved my money . . . to go back to college. My husband . . . let me go back to Greeley for the spring quarter . . . and he came after me the first of June. Then I taught that next year at Lay. I rode horseback seven miles to Lay, on a beautiful big palomino stallion that Henry brought to the door every morning and put me on."

“And Mr. Menninger over at Lay . . . was always there to help me off and to take my horse and put him in the barn. He never failed to have that horse ready for me to go home at night, and help me on.”

Source: June O’Connell Sweeney quoted in Julie Jones-Eddy, ed. Homesteading Women: An Oral History of Colorado, 1890-1950 (New York: Twayne, 1992): 188.

Ranch Women among Cowboys

This photo shows two women and several men on a Colorado ranch. The building on the right is the ranch bunkhouse.



Ranch women among cowboys on a Colorado ranch

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

The women in this photo probably were the wives of ranchers. The men who worked on the ranch slept in the bunkhouse at the right.

Their Own Words

“June [Oma’s husband] was a good hang with a team [of horses], and [Mr. Dunn] said, “I’ll give you \$5 a day to come up and skid logs and Oma can run the cattle. Oh, man—we thought we were on top of the

world! I took care of the cattle, and June skidded logs. Well, we both liked to dance; we both liked to ride horseback; we liked the same things. We run the cattle then. And then that fall we brought them back, because you have to feed in that upper country [in winter]. We had \$80 to go into the winter with. We lived in a cabin about the size of that carpeted place [gestures]: 12 by 14 [feet], let's day."

Source: Oma Jensen Graham quoted in Julie Jones-Eddy, ed. Homesteading Women: An Oral History of Colorado, 1890-1950, (New York: Twanye, 1992): 68-69.

Sawing Fire Wood

This young farm woman is sawing a log. There are several things you should notice in this photo. Notice that there are very few trees to be seen. These ranchers probably had to haul logs a long way, which meant hard work. Notice also the size of the saw. Working a saw this large was extremely hard work.



Woman sawing firewood

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

Another thing you might note is that the log is resting in a saw horse that is probably too high for this young woman to saw easily. Finally, the young woman is wearing bib overalls, which probably means that she did many kinds of chores around the ranch. This photo was taken about 1890.

Their Own Words

"In the summertime I'd help hay. And, of course, we had our chores. We had to help carry in the water, get the wood, feed the chickens and gather the eggs, and sometimes milk the cows. . . . Well, when [my

Dad] cut [fence] posts he'd make me snake them with a horse. . . . You take a log chain and hook them around two or three or four posts, usually from a saddle horn. And then you'd get on the horse and snake them to where you could get to the wagon to load them on the wagon."

Source: Ethel La Kamp Chrisler quoted in Julie Jones-Eddy, ed. Homesteading Women: An Oral History of Colorado, 1890-1950, (New York: Twayne, 1992): 83-84.

Women On a Hay Rake

These ranch women are posed with a horse and a hay rake. Both women are wearing bib overalls and long sleeve shirts. The strings around their neck suggests they are wearing hats to shade them from the sun. [The hats are hanging behind their backs.]



Women on a hay rake

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

Working hay—whether cutting it, raking it, or stacking it—was hard, hot and dusty work. Work clothes like these protected ranch women (and men) from both the sun and hay dust. This photo was taken about 1890.

Their Own Words

“Seems like we always had to work together—boys and girls. I was the oldest—of course, I always had to take the boy’s part. . . . We always had to be out and take a man’s place. . . . Oh, yes. That was our job, to mow hay. . . . Well, you had an old mower—a horse mower, with two horses on it. You pitched it onto a wagon with a fork. Mother and I and all of us would all get out and pitch hay, load it onto a wagon, and haul it to the stack, and you stacked it.”

Source: Hilda Shelton Rawlinson quoted in Julies Jones-Eddy, ed. Homesteading Women: An Oral History of Colorado, 1890-1950, (New York: Twanye, 1992): 88.