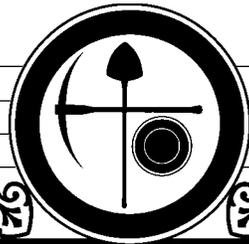


This month's theme:
Cowboys on the Open Range



Contents

Feature	1	Fun page	6
Famous People	3	Next month	8
From the Attic	4		

The Newsletter of the Idaho State Historical Society's Junior Historian Program

PROSPECTOR

January, 2004



The Open Range

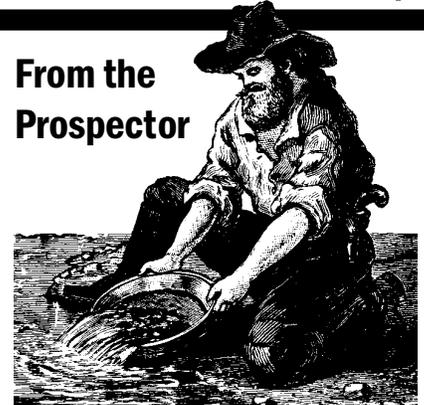
Sitting high in the saddle, with a tall hat to block the harsh sun, the image of a cowboy riding across an endless plain has been repeated so often in books, movies, and television that it is familiar to most of the world. It seems as though there has never been a western landscape without a cowboy passing through it. But, like much of western history, there is a lot of myth mixed in with the truth. Cowboys have been around for at least 150 years, but the era of

the open range, where men on horseback could move cattle freely across the land, only lasted for about thirty years.

Although most people associate cowboys with the western United States, their origin is much further south. While the British were founding colonies on the Atlantic Coast of North America, the Spanish were settling in what is now Mexico. Early on, they introduced cattle and horses to the grasslands of Central America. Managing a

Continued on next page

From the Prospector



Howdy Prospectors!

I hope everybody had a good holiday season. I made a New Year's resolution to strike it rich this year. Unfortunately, my mule isn't interested. Apparently, he prefers sitting in our warm office to climbing through the frigid mountains. He made a resolution to spend more time relaxing and less time working. Sometimes I wish I had a horse.

Speaking of horses, this month's issue is about a group of people who felt more comfortable in the saddle than walking on the ground. Hope you enjoy the story of cowboys and the open range.

See you next month.

The Open Range Continued

large number of animals across great open spaces was new to the Spanish colonizers and Indian residents of the country. These first cowboys, or *vaqueros*,



needed to develop new skills, equipment, and words to help them deal with life on the open range. Many of the tools that we think of as being unique to the western cowboy, like lariats and chaps, actually came from the Mexican *vaqueros*.

The western cattle business didn't really take off until the 1860's. During that time, Texas was the center of cattle ranching. Influenced by the nearby *vaqueros* and with lots of open land, the Texans raised herds of cattle that were shipped to the eastern states. This all came to an abrupt end during the Civil War. As part of their plan to cut off supplies to the southern armies, the North blocked the cattle from leaving Texas. With nowhere to sell their beef, the Texas cattlemen watched as their herds quickly grew and grew. When the war finally ended in 1865, the Texas plain was covered with cattle.

Extra cows meant extra money if the businessmen could find somewhere to sell them. Although they continued to sell their beef to the eastern states, the cattlemen also began to look to the West. Many gold

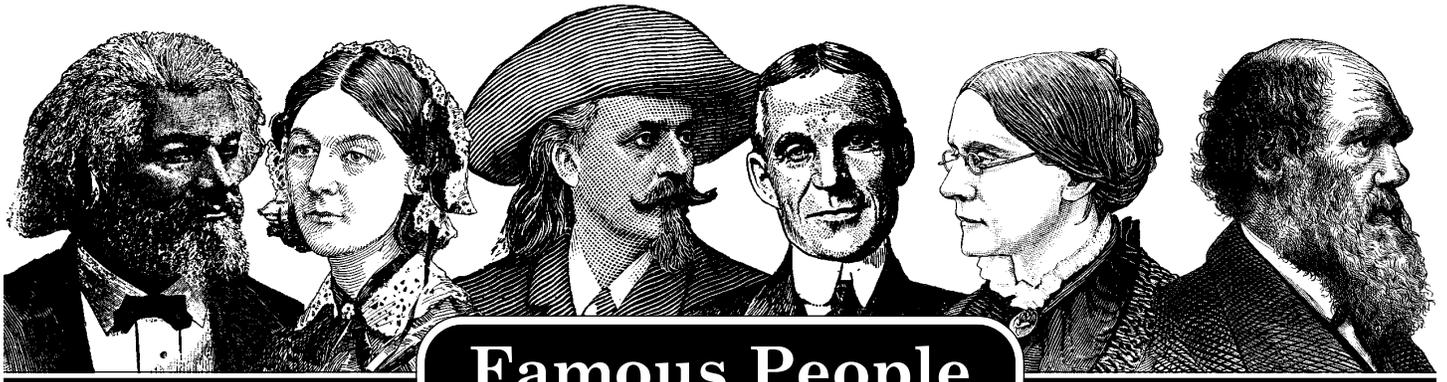
miners and pioneers had recently moved westward in the hopes of finding a better life. These settlers needed a steady supply of food. If the cattlemen could move their cattle to the new territories they could make a large profit.

Moving huge herds hundreds or even a thousand miles was risky. With no railroads connecting the west yet, the cowboys had to drive the cattle across the plains themselves. A few years earlier, this would have been impossible. Gigantic herds of buffalo and many Indian nations blocked the path to the western cities. Now, with the bison quickly being slaughtered for their skins and the Native Americans being forcefully removed from their land by the military, the cattleman could try their luck at moving the Texas herds.

Moving large herds from place to place was called a cattle drive. It was tough work. Cowboys were in the saddle ten hours a day, seven days a week, sometimes for months. Very cold or very hot weather along with dust and wind could make life on the move miserable. It was also very dangerous. Accidents, treacherous river crossing, and cattle stampedes could seriously injure a cowboy who wasn't careful.

One of the destinations for these great cattle drives was Idaho. Gold was discovered on the Clearwater River in 1860 bringing a huge number of prospectors to the area. As more gold

Continued on Page 6



Famous People

Kitty Wilkins, the Horse Queen of Idaho

Cowboys came from many different backgrounds. Low wages, long hours, and hard labor made it a job available to almost anyone who was willing to work. Many early cowboys were soldiers fresh from the Civil War, but freed slaves, Mexican vaqueros, Native Americans, and women were also employed in the cattle trade.

One of Idaho's most famous woman ranchers was Kitty Wilkins. Kitty wasn't a traditional cowboy. Although her family kept a small stock of cattle on their ranch, the Wilkins were mostly horse dealers. She was born in Oregon in 1857 and came to Boise as a young girl. Eventually her family bought a large ranch near the town of Bruneau where

she learned her trade.

Many wild horses roamed free in the nearby Owyhee mountains. Buckaroos employed by the Wilkins family would capture

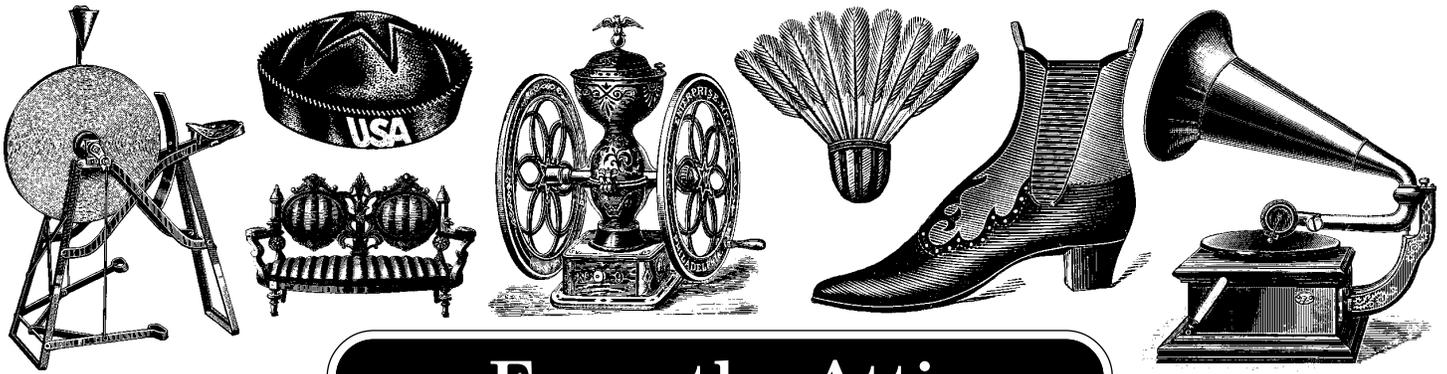
these horses and tame them on the ranch. The horses would then be sold across the country.

Known for her riding skills as well as her immaculate clothing,

Kitty traveled the nation by train, bringing her horses wherever they were needed. She was a smart businesswoman, sometimes selling as many as 500 horses on one trip. By the time she had taken over the family business in the late 1800's, Kitty was known as the Horse Queen of Idaho.

Although she was very successful for most of her life, her business fell on hard times when the automobile began to replace the horse as the standard form of transportation. Kitty Wilkins died in 1936 in Glens Ferry at the age of 79. ●





From the Attic

Branding Irons

In the early days, most cattle country in Idaho and the West was open range. With abundant grass everywhere, cowboys simply released their cattle into the hills and collected them when they were ready for slaughter. Of course, with cows roaming everywhere, some way was needed to prove which cattle belonged to which rancher. The way to claim ownership of an animal on the open range was with a brand.

Brands are simple, unique designs that have a language all their own. A good brand quickly identified cattle but was difficult to transform into another mark by a rustler.

Every spring, the cowboys would ride through the hills and plains gathering all of the cattle in the area. This event, called a round-up, was used to mark all of the new calves that had been born that year. Once corralled, the cattle would be grouped by brands. Since new calves didn't yet have brands it was difficult at

first to decide to whom they belonged. While a young cow was pulled out of the group, the cowboys would watch the rest of the herd. Usually the calf's mother, worried about her child's safety, would begin making noise. The cowboys would brand the new calf with whatever mark its mother already had.

Brands were applied with a long metal rod called a branding

iron. Branding irons would be heated until red hot and then placed against the skin of a restrained animal. Because the mark was actually burned into the calf's skin, it would stay visible for the animal's life.

Although brands are still used today, many ranchers use less painful methods, like hanging a tag from a cow's ear, to identify their cattle. ●

Two Cowboys brand a horse in this picture from the 1800's



The Open Range Continued

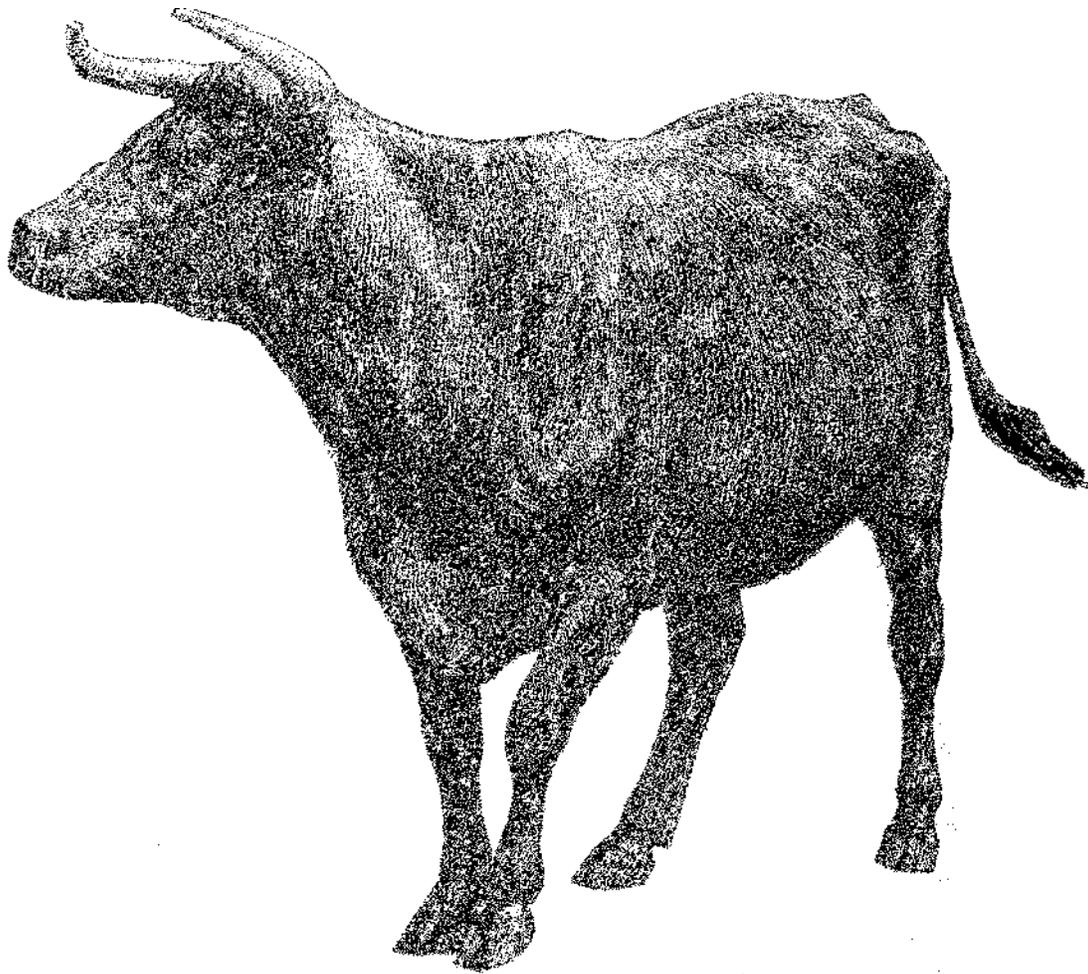
and silver was found in nearby mountains, the population began to grow. In 1863 there were enough people living in the area to make Idaho a territory. In order to feed all these new residents, cattle were driven north from Texas to establish herds on the Idaho grasslands.

The era of the open range did not last long in the West. As more people moved from the East, cattle ranchers, sheep ranch-

ers, and farmers often fought over the available land and water. Finally, in the 1870's a new invention, barbed wire, began to criss-cross the western landscape. Barbed wire was a simple invention that had a big impact. Inexpensive to make and easy to string over miles of open land, the new fences started to change the way cattle moved. Instead of being able to roam wherever they wanted, the cows were confined

to smaller and smaller areas by the fences. The days of the open range were coming to an end.

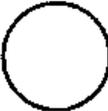
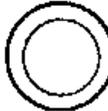
Although many things have changed in the last hundred years, cattle ranching is still a very important way of life for many residents of Idaho. Today's rancher is a cowboy and a whole lot more. Part businessman, part veterinarian, and part land manager, a cattleman or woman has a very complex and difficult job. ●





The Fun Page

Brands have a language all their own. A cowboy had to learn this new language so he could identify the owners of the cattle he came across on the range. Letters, numbers, shapes, and pictures were all used to distinguish different ranches. Below is a simple key of a few of the symbols used for brands. Take a look at the key and then see if you can figure out the mystery brands on the next page. Careful, they get harder as they go on.

RR	Double R		Bar
RRR	Triple R		Double Bar
R	Tumbling R		Circle
Я	Reverse R		Double Circle
Б	Crazy R		Square
℞	Lazy R		Triangle
Ⓜ	Rocking R		Diamond
Ⓜ	Swinging R		Spur
Ⓜ	Flying R		

Brands are always read from left to right, top to bottom, or outside to inside. For example an X inside a square is read as “square X” not “X square”.



1.



2.



3.



4.



5.



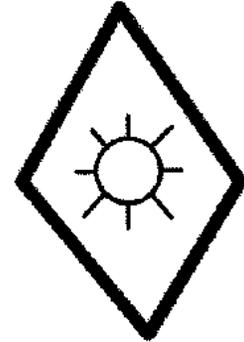
6.



7.



8.



9.



10.



11.



12.

Answers 1. Circle Y 2. Rocking Double K 3. Bar Crazy A 4. Flying Triangle 5. Double Diamond X 6. Triple tumbling M 7. Rocking Chair 8. Swinging Double J 9. Diamond Spur 10. Lazy Dollar 11. Flying Heart A 12. Broken Arrow



Next Month's Activities

Now it's your turn prospectors. We've given you a good introduction to cowboy culture in Idaho, but there's a lot more information out there. Pick from one of the activities below or make up your own project about the open range. We'll take some of your best work and print it in next month's magazine. Remember to include your name, school and town where you are from, and the name of your prospector chapter.

Interview a Rancher: Many of you prospectors live in areas of the state where cattle ranching is important. In fact, some of you might be members of a cattle ranching family. Find a neighbor, friend, or family member who has worked on a cattle ranch and interview him or her for our newsletter. How long has the person been ranching? When did he or she learn to ride a horse? Think up some good questions and report back to us next month.

Your Own Brand: Cowboys use brands to prove ownership of their cows and horses. Each brand has a distinct shape that identifies a specific ranch. Sometimes the

home. Then write a few sentences explaining why you chose the pictures and letters in your brand.

Home on the Range: At night, there wasn't much cowboys on the open range could do for entertainment. One of the ways they relaxed after a long day in the saddle was to sing songs and play music. Write a short song about life on the open range and share it with the rest of us.

Send it your work by Feb 13th, 2004 to

Prospector Club
 Lucky Noah
 Idaho State Historical Museum
 610 North Julia Davis Drive
 Boise, ID 83702

Or email it to us at
kzwolfer@ishs.state.id.us



brands are simple, with just the rancher's initials, and sometimes more complex, with a picture that represents an object important to the ranch. Pretend that you own a large cattle ranch. Design and draw a brand to represent your

Resources for Teachers

Books

- Byers, Chester
Cowboy Roping and Rope Tricks
Dover, 1966
Your guide to learning lariat tricks
- Ducan, Emrich
The Cowboy's Own Brand Book
Dover, 1995
An introduction to the language of cattle brands
- Forbis, William
The Old West-The Cowboys
Time-Life Books, 1973
A great overview of the history of the cowboy
- McLoughlin, Denis
Wild and Woolly-An Encyclopedia of the Old West
Doubleday and Company, 1975
An extensive encyclopedia of the old west
- Penson-Ward, Betty
Idaho Women in History, Volume 1
Legendary Publishing Company, 1991
A brief biography of Kitty Wilkins and other important Idaho women

Web Sites

- The Cowboy Hall of Fame
<http://www.cowboyhalloffame.org/diamondr/index.html>
An interactive kid's site Sponsored by the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma
- The West-Cowboys
<http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/program/episodes/five/cowboys.htm>
A short review of cowboys based on a PBS series on the West
- The First Cowboys
<http://www.unm.edu/~gabbriel/>
An extensive look at Mexican vaqueros.
- Branding
<http://www.barbwiremuseum.com/cattlebrandhistory.htm>
A short history of cattle brands
- Library of Congress-Cowboys
<http://www.americaslibrary.gov/cgi-bin/page.cgi/sh/cowboy>
An overview of cowboy culture with audio and video clips

Lesson Plan

Goal of Lesson

It is often difficult to separate historic myth from historic fact. Most children spend more time with mass media than they do with history books. Consequently, they adapt a “Hollywood” view of history. One of the places that this is evident is in the perception of cowboys and the Old West. In this lesson, students will learn to recognize the difference between cowboy fact and cowboy fiction.

Inventory

Copies of dime store fiction covers, paper, drawing supplies (crayons, colored pencils, markers).

Activity

- 1) By the 4th grade, most children have a preconceived notion of what cowboy culture was like in the old west. Start by brainstorming a description of what a cowboy and his lifestyle were like back in the 1800’s. Make a list on the board of the ideas and concepts the students come up with. Some of these ideas will certainly be valid, but inevitably, others will be tainted by television and movies.
- 2) Have the students read this month’s newsletter.
- 3) Now, ask them if their perception of the cowboy has changed. Explain to them that sometimes our view of history is tainted by myth and storytelling. Make a new list on the board of realistic aspects of a cowboy’s life that were missed in the other brainstorming activity. Help the children with some leading questions to get them started (examples: Were the cowboys always fighting with Indians? Did cowboys settle arguments with gunfights?). Some things you might come up with are:
 - Cowboys worked very hard for low wages (on the trail they might only get 4-5 hours sleep a night)
 - Cowboys had very diverse backgrounds (Mexicans, African Americans, Native Americans, and

occasionally women all worked on the open range)

- Cowboys were often very young (some of them no more than teenagers)
- Cowboys were often uneducated and possibly illiterate
- Accidents (like being dragged by a horse or trampled by a cow) and sickness were more likely to hurt a cowboy than gunfights or Indians
- A cowboy’s lifestyle was very dirty and dusty
- Being very poor, most cowboy’s couldn’t afford their own horse, let alone fancy boots, hats, and clothes.

4) Discuss how historical myths are made. Books, television, and movies have a very strong influence on how we perceive the past. Most of the time, the truth does not make for an exciting “story.” One of the earliest historical distortions came in the form of the dime paperback. These books, later reinvented as pulp westerns in the 1940’s, featured larger-than-life characters and often ridiculous plots. These mass produced, inexpensive books went a long way in making myth out of history in the west.

5) Pass out copies of the dime store and pulp covers. Ask the students if these books realistically portray the lives of the cowboys. What would a cover look like that told the truth about the West? Would it feature a cowboy mending his clothes because they have worn out and he doesn’t have money for new ones? Should it show someone getting injured falling off his horse? Should it feature vaqueros? Using the old covers as a guide, have the student create covers for imaginary books telling the truth about the cowboys in the old west. Encourage them to be creative and humorous, creating titles that fit the historic truth rather than myth (examples: *The Empty Pocket Kid-Adventures of an Underpaid Cowpoke* or *Tales of the Stinky Boot-How One Cowboy Went Three Months Without a Bath*).

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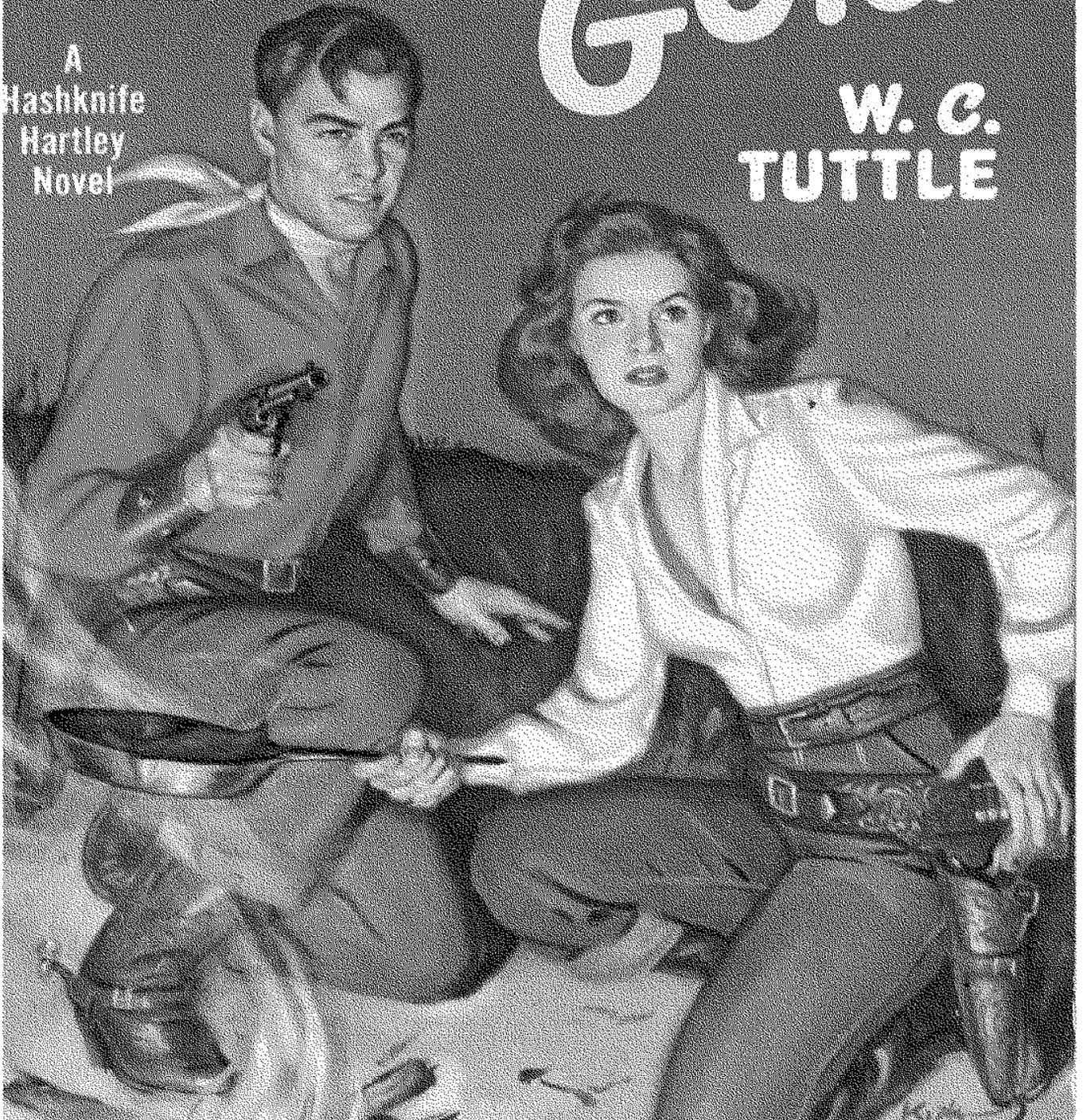
Her Kisses Started A Range Feud

297

Shotgun Gold

A
Hashknife
Hartley
Novel

W. C.
TUTTLE



STEEL RAILS BUCK THE OUTLAW WEST

185

Whispering

SMITH

THE PARAMOUNT FILM WITH
ALAN LADD
ROBERT PRESTON
BRENDA MARSHALL
DONALD CRISP
WAS BASED ON THIS NOVEL

