

Horseshoe Crosses and Muddy Boots: Material Culture and Rural Masculinity in Cowboy Churches

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Introduction

In a large pasture in West Texas, thirty-five men and women sit mounted on horseback and forty more stand around them. Sitting astride a horse in front of them is their pastor, next to another man holding a large American flag. He reads to them from the Bible of the wondrous changes brought by the Lord and then invites them to church the next day. With this simple invocation, the pasture roping at the local cowboy church is now underway.

“Cowboy church” is the preferred term for Protestant churches that utilize cowboy culture as an outreach tool to minister to unchurched members of the community who connect with western heritage. Typically located in rural areas, these churches exist in rustic settings, such as roping arenas and stockyards. Church events frequently incorporate rodeo culture and take the form of pasture ropings, arena events, or cowboy play days. While cowboy-centered ministries have existed since the late 1890s, contemporary cowboy churches experienced a notable resurgence in the early 2000s with the establishment of the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches (AFCC) in Texas. There are upwards of 200 churches affiliated with this organization, which, at the time of my fieldwork, maintained loose ties with the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT). These ties may explain their presence in Texas as well as other states in the American South.¹

The cowboy church movement depends heavily on cultivating an identifiably masculine culture in order to reach their target demographic: men. The masculine element of cowboy churches is especially apparent in the material culture of the movement, which draws from mythic perceptions of what it meant to be a cowboy. Cowboy churches are located in rural and semi-rural environments, and are constructed from the same materials often used to build barns and warehouses. The interiors are similarly utilitarian, with hard surfaces rather than carpet and other comforts. However, cowboy churches are not plain. Instead, decorations recall the daily experiences of congregants, incorporating elements like horseshoes, hay bales, cattle skins, and watering troughs.

In his critique of material religion, Russell McCutcheon argues, “what we see in the material religion domain” is the tendency “to reaffirm the view that images themselves *do* things to people” rather than “making the shift to see the agents and structures that make discourses, and their effects, possible.”² McCutcheon bases this claim on his argument that scholars “do not easily give up the assumption that religion, like the proverbial unseen tree falling in the forest, is there regardless of how we observe the world.”³ Studying the construction of cowboy churches offers scholars the opportunity to explore the motivations of “agents and structures” that inspire members of the Christian community to draw from the various interpretations of western heritage. By doing

this, cowboy church leaders create church spaces that are materially distinct from the traditional “feminine” churches they reject while serving the same purposes: to act as spaces of Christian worship and convert individuals to Christianity.

These churches, which may at first appear to be unique because of the emphasis on cowboy culture, should be discussed in the context of other historically male-focused religious outreach programs including Promise Keepers, Power Team, Mixed Martial Arts Ministries, and the Muscular Christianity movement of the early-twentieth century. Cowboy churches differ, however, from these other movements because they exist as their own permanent structural entities rather than as ministries rooted in or working in conjunction with established churches. This difference requires scholars to assess the manner in which cowboy culture, broadly understood, is portrayed in the areas where these churches exist. While the cowboy may be primarily associated with the American West, cowboy churches appeal more broadly to rural populations because they place particular emphasis on individualism, self-sufficiency, and traditional values.

Cowboy churches are theologically consistent with other examples of masculine Christianity. However, rather than focusing on improving the body (like Muscular Christianity) or the need for men’s accountability groups (like Promise Keepers), cowboy churches aim to recruit rural, unchurched men to become service-attending Christians by presenting a materially masculine church environment. In doing so, they consciously construct churches that eschew soft colors and feminine portrayals of Jesus. In other discussions of cowboy churches, masculinity in cowboy churches is discussed at length.⁴ However, I argue that in order to fully understand the cowboy church movement, scholars need to pay significant attention to the aesthetic material choices made by church leadership. The material culture of cowboy churches illustrates how leaders and parishioners shape their ideas of masculinity.

This article is divided into four interrelated sections, which, together, offer insight into material culture’s role as one of the central identifying and functional features of the cowboy church movement. First, I address the cowboy both as a historic figure and a malleable popular culture icon. Then, I discuss the origins of the cowboy church movement before looking at how AFCC churches cultivate their masculine culture. Third, I focus on how the material culture of cowboy churches is an attempt to lower barriers of attendance among men and rural individuals. Last, I provide a brief summary of masculine Christianity in the United States to demonstrate why cowboy churches should be classified as such.

Of the 208 churches affiliated with the AFCC during the time of my fieldwork, my research focused on two: Cowboy Fellowship located in Pleasanton, Texas which was established in 2003, and Big Bend Cowboy Church located in Alpine, Texas which began in 2006. Cowboy Fellowship, located an hour south of San Antonio, serves as an example of a larger cowboy church with regular attendance over 1,000 people. Big Bend Cowboy Church, on the other hand, is a smaller church where 100–125 people attend weekly. It is located in rural West Texas about 100 miles north of Big Bend National Park. Based on differences in congregation size, length of time serving their respective communities, and varied proximity to major cities, these two churches serve as two

distinct representations of AFCC affiliated churches within Texas. All quotes from interviews are from leaders or attendees of these two churches.



Fig. 1. Member brands at a cowboy church. Creating a visual marker of membership in this manner explicitly links the culture of the church with the lived cowboy experience of many parishioners. Photo taken by author at Big Bend Cowboy Church, Alpine, Texas, 10 June 2012.

The Cowboy as a Popular Culture Trope

To understand the cowboy church, we first need to understand the role of the cowboy in American culture. From the hardworking man on the open range to the morally upstanding loner trying to preserve good in the lawless Wild West, the word “cowboy” evokes a variety of images. As a historic figure, the cowboy raised cattle on the open range of the West. Following the closing of the range in the 1880s, cowboys were romanticized by Wild West shows and dime novels alike, thus ensuring their transformation from a respected historic figure into mythic entities in the heroic pantheon of the dominant American myth.⁵ Despite the changing of cattle raising

conditions in the American West, individuals continued to work cattle throughout the country, and “cowboy” continued to be a category of cultural identification. However, following the end of the “open range,” the term “cowboy” broadened in scope to encompass those who associate themselves with western heritage as well as rodeo culture.

The historic cowboy, as opposed to the mythic cowboy, tended cattle from the 1840s to the 1880s. Early cowboys, called *vaqueros*, were Hispanic men charged with taking care of the herds of cattle that roamed parts of Mexico and America, including states as far east as Florida.⁶ As Americans moved west and new landowners began to develop a cattle culture, white and African American men also became cowboys. This was the time of the great overland cattle drives prior to the fencing in of the West with barbed wire, which effectively partitioned and divided the open range.⁷ These historical cowboys were working men. The title of “cowboy” denoted an individual’s inexperience in the profession, which separated them both socially and economically from the higher paid trail bosses and ranchers.⁸ The clothes they wore were practical for the physically demanding tasks they had to perform on a daily basis and were a far cry from the glitzy outfits worn by later performers such as Roy Rogers. It is fair to say that the cowboy of popular culture is only remotely based on his historical predecessor. Because cowboys could be found throughout the US, cowboy culture is not homogeneous. Regional differences in style between Texan, Californian, Montanan, Floridian, and Hawaiian cowboy cultures can be observed.⁹ However, for the purposes of this article, I will address the unifying aspects of cowboy culture as they are presented in cowboy churches.

It is nearly impossible to determine the individual religious backgrounds of the historic nineteenth-century American cowboy. However, Ramon F. Adams, author of many books on cowboys who conducted informal interviews with aging cowboys during the early-twentieth century, addresses both “the cowman’s religion” and the “cowman’s ethics” in his work. He claims that, despite the fact that many cowboys did not regularly attend church, they were still religious. When discussing religion specifically, Adams found that “the average cowhand had been raised in a Christian home and taught by a Christian mother. . . . But religion to ‘im wasn’t somthin’ to be fanatical ‘bout, it was somethin’ to use practically—to be lived instead of preached.”¹⁰ This was compounded by the fact that the cowboy’s work not only hindered the possibility for church attendance but, when he was able to go to town, he “didn’t want to spend this rare freedom listenin’ to psalm singin’ and exhortations on sin.”¹¹ Despite this, Adams emphasizes that during the heyday of the cowboy, itinerant preachers were prevalent and brought the community together for sermons due to the lack of established churches.

In addition to itinerant preachers, American Protestant groups ministered to cowboys at cowboy campmeetings—annual, geographically-based Christian gatherings intended to reach individuals who lived in areas without churches or whose jobs prevented them from engaging in regular church attendance. The first of its kind was the nondenominational Bloys Cowboy Campmeeting, which was established outside of Ft. Davis, Texas in 1890. Later campmeetings began in the 1930s and 1940s and include Lenapah Cowboy Camp Meeting in Lenapah, Oklahoma; Colorado Cowboy Camp

Meeting in Kiowa, Colorado; and Hill Country Cowboy Campmeeting in Mountain Home, Texas. These examples attest to the perceived need among American Protestant groups to evangelize and minister to those affiliated with cowboy culture.¹²

Once a lowly working ranch hand, the cowboy has been re-imagined countless times. The West in which some American cowboys lived has been changed to reflect, as Richard Aquila puts it, “the American experience not so much as it really was but how Americans would like it to be.”¹³ When and how, then, did the myth of the cowboy emerge? The general consensus seems to be that it arose from the Wild West shows produced by William F. Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill, which toured the United States and Europe from 1882–1916.¹⁴ The way Buffalo Bill’s Wild West helped create the mythic cowboy is twofold. First, it played a role in the development of the rodeo culture that emerged after the close of the range. Since the cowboy profession was seasonal, during the off-season some men opted to compete and show off their cattle handling, roping, horsemanship, and other skills in Buffalo Bill’s show.¹⁵ Second, although advertised as being historical, Buffalo Bill’s shows introduced the eastern United States and Europe to a constructed history of the West that reflected Buffalo Bill’s writing of, as Richard Slotkin puts it, “‘history’ by conflating it with mythology. The re-enactments were not re-creations, but reductions of complex events into ‘typical scenes’ based on the formulas of popular literary mythology.”¹⁶ Although people acting in these shows mostly came from the sort of western background that these shows promoted, it is more truthful to refer to them as actors than by any other title. The manner in which events were portrayed, actors were dressed, and the values of the characters were represented both reinforced and created regional cultural stereotypes. In shaping how individuals who had never witnessed the cowboy and the West first-hand viewed it, Buffalo Bill’s portrayal of life in the West became the foundation for popular culture depictions of the West in the twentieth century throughout the United States.

By the end of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West shows, Americans had developed a taste for the fictional West and the figures who inhabited it. The cowboy as a cultural trope can be seen in works of literature, film, television, music, and art, and has also shaped the political identity of Americans.¹⁷ In *Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries*, David Dary concludes his detailed history of the cowboy by relegating the figure to the realm of myth and, in a nod to historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 frontier thesis, declares that legitimate cowboy culture ended when the range closed. According to Dary, cowboy culture that exists today, from clothing to the use of trucks rather than horses, is nothing more than “grabbing for bits and pieces of this mythical cowboy culture.”¹⁸ However, when visiting rural areas of Texas to conduct my fieldwork, I realized that cowboy culture is thriving in parts of the United States. Their culture, which now includes four wheelers as well as horses, is part of what fuels the success of the contemporary cowboy church in an area of the country that, scholars argue, is culturally located at the intersection of the American West and American South.¹⁹

Today there is little consensus about what defines cowboy culture, and authenticity is often in the eye of the beholder. Despite the so-called “closing” of the West, in the past century the term “cowboy” has broadened in scope to encompass those who associate with western heritage as well as rodeo culture. To some, it means working directly in or

with the ranching industry, while to others it incorporates larger cultural markers such as participation in rodeos. The broadest definitions go so far as to encompass rural, self-sufficient culture and include oil-field workers, those whose jobs require manual labor in isolated locations, or farmers. Of course, some individuals also base their ideas of what a cowboy is on the popular culture icon. In the contemporary age, it is difficult to define a cowboy, even within churches that strive to attract individuals who identify with or are attracted to this heritage. Instead, attendance at these churches tends to hinge on self-identification or affiliation with broadly defined “western heritage culture” regardless of whether the churches themselves are geographically or culturally located in the West.



Fig. 2. Pulpit at a cowboy church featuring hay bales and a cow skull. It is made of weathered, possibly reclaimed, wood. This intentional design choice demonstrates how cowboy churches develop a rustic aesthetic by using easily acquired objects. In this sense, churches are decorated in a similar style to many congregant homes, ranches, or workplaces. But presented in this context, near the pulpit, the leadership of the church is intentionally mixing quotidian objects with those that are ritually significant for this church. Photo taken by author at Big Bend Cowboy Church, Alpine, Texas, 10 June 2012.

Texas and the Twenty-First Century Cowboy Church Movement

In his introduction to *Rough Country: How Texas became America's Most Powerful Bible-Belt State*, sociologist Robert Wuthnow states, “Texas is a location in which these complicated relationships among religion, race and ethnicity, and politics repeatedly came into sharp relief.”²⁰ While Texas as a whole may appear to have a strong cultural identity and boisterous personality to outsiders, the sheer geographic size of the state,

as well as the fact that it has been governed by six different nations, necessitates a willingness to critically explore how people living in the state define themselves and others.²¹ Spatially and historically, Texas exists at the intersection of the American West, American South, and the Mexican-American Borderlands. These intertwined identities are often strategically articulated to serve the interests of specific groups throughout the state. William Lindsey's work on the region titled "Southern Crossroads," which includes Texas, echoes Wuthnow's argument. In his work, Lindsey states, "the religious history of the Crossroads is replete with examples of the process of adaption-exchange and culture clash that occurred as Eastern religious bodies moved west."²² AFCC cowboy churches, I argue, are an example of religious expression born out of adaption-exchange.

For the purposes of this article, it is necessary to emphasize that while the cowboy is typically associated with the American West, ties between contemporary AFCC cowboy churches in Texas and the Baptist General Convention of Texas link a large number of them to the historical and cultural legacy of the Southern Baptist Convention. It is here that we truly see Texas functioning as a cultural crossroads replete with adaption and exchange. Texas and Texans played an important role in the theologically rightward shift of the SBC in the late-twentieth century and, as Darren Dochuk asserts in *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt*, evangelicals who moved West brought with them "Texas theology," a key feature of which is certainty in "the absolute rightness of their doctrine," while being "unwilling to compromise this doctrine but always open to new ways of proselytizing it."²³ The adaptive nature of cowboy churches, which draws from both southern theology and western material cultures helps explain the development of cowboy churches in a contested area like Texas.

Cowboy churches seek to create environments that attract twenty-first-century men who are affiliated with or attracted to cowboy culture and western heritage. Churches accomplish this through the careful presentation of the rustic material culture of the church and activities that relate to cowboy life in order to create a link between secular life and church culture (see Fig. 2). While these churches craft spaces that are distinctively western, they do so knowing that the word "cowboy" will attract a variety of individuals who have differing levels of affiliation with the culture. Therefore, I define cowboy churches as churches that seek to attract individuals associated with or who feel an affinity to one or a combination of the following identities: western heritage culture, rural life, masculinity, self-reliance, and individualism. The cowboy churches I have encountered are all Protestant and are located in the United States, although cowboy churches do exist in Canada, Mexico, and Australia.

By the 1970s, cowboy fellowship organizations began to emerge. These Christian groups, such as the Fellowship of Christian Cowboys, formed in Canon City, Colorado in 1973, and Cowboys For Christ, created in Ft. Worth, Texas in 1970, are community fellowship groups that do not have their own church buildings. Cowboys for Christ's website asserts that they are "not a substitute for the local Church or Assembly, nor is it in competition with any denominational group. It seeks, rather, through God's enabling grace, to be a helper to all local churches, denominations and groups to the extent that they are in harmony with the will of the Almighty God."²⁴ Similarly, Fellowship of Christian Cowboys is made up of chapters rather than churches, reflecting that they grew out of

the relationship between rodeo culture and the broader Fellowship of Christian Athletes concept.²⁵ Although they do claim to help put on cowboy church services, they do not exist as churches in their own right.²⁶ Additionally, during the 1970s, more itinerant cowboy-focused ministries developed. Examples include the work done by Glenn Smith, an ex-rodeo clown and author of *Apostle, Cowboy Style* who later founded both the International Western World Outreach Center and the Cowboy Ministers Network.²⁷

Although it is difficult to determine exactly when and where the first contemporary cowboy churches began, news of their existence emerges by the 1980s. In 1987, the *New York Times* reported on one such church that, at the time, held its services at Billy Bob's Texas Honky-Tonk in Ft. Worth, Texas. It was led by Rev. Jeff Copenhaver, a "former world champion calf roper" who "began preaching on the rodeo circuit around the time he quit full-time rodeo competition in 1979" and felt compelled to start a full-time church in 1986.²⁸ The article does not mention the church's denomination. Rather, the focus is on how the church differs from traditional churches, including its lack of dress code or "pews, vestments or other signs of traditional worship."²⁹ Limited publicly available information exists on late-twentieth-century expressions of cowboy church culture, and research on this topic requires scholars to depend on privately held documents and oral histories. Fortunately, Marie Dallam was able to secure interviews with individuals involved in these movements, and a more thorough discussion of cowboy-centered religious movements can be found in chapter three of her book, *Cowboy Christians*.

Regardless of the origins of the modern cowboy church, the religious history demonstrates ongoing efforts among Protestants to minister to individuals who consider themselves to be cowboys or part of the rural culture to whom traditional church culture feels unwelcoming. Thus far, I have outlined historically nondenominational and interdenominational efforts to evangelize cowboys. Now, I turn to examine more explicitly Baptist efforts to reach the cowboy through the emergence of the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches (AFCC) and its role in expanding previous efforts to reach this demographic in the western and southern regions of the United States.

In 2012, the AFCC's mission statement described itself as an organization intended to create a network of cowboy churches that subscribe to Baptist theology, as well as associational affiliations in order to reach the unchurched members of western heritage.³⁰ It was affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas (BGCT), which, in turn, is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). Although the AFCC is not directly affiliated with the SBC today, the financial and social affiliations of AFCC churches with established Southern Baptist organizations create an indirect link between the groups.³¹

Ron Nolen, founding pastor of the Cowboy Church of Ellis County, Texas had a considerable influence on the contemporary cowboy church movement. His church, founded in 2000, is considered to be the first associated with what would become a wide-reaching Southern Baptist movement.³² Nolen found the inspiration to start a cowboy church "from attending team roping events with his son."³³ He felt there was a widespread misunderstanding at these events of the role religion played in culture,

but he also recognized a significant overlap between the values of western heritage and Christian living. This belief prompted Nolen to “figure out what are the barriers to get the gospel a hearing amongst these Old West Culture people.”³⁴ His solution to lowering these perceived social barriers was to start a cowboy church that combined the material and cultural aspects of western heritage with a Southern Baptist theological message.

As an employee of the BGCT, Nolen was able to create an outreach ministry specifically dedicated to planting and growing cowboy churches in Texas. In 2006, Nolen left the BGCT to head the newly formed Texas Fellowship of Cowboy Churches (TFCC). The TFCC, the predecessor to the nationally focused AFCC, was still affiliated with the BGCT, and the new organization was intended “to resource this western heritage church-planting movement and to help unify the BGCT cowboy churches and harness the resources for kingdom expansion.”³⁵ These resources were so effectively harnessed that the organization was able to plant cowboy churches outside of Texas. This proliferation prompted the creation of a parallel organization, known as the AFCC, which was established in 2007 and was dedicated to churches in other states.³⁶



Fig. 3. Roping Arena at a cowboy church. This is the site of many outreach activities and where rodeo ministries occur. Photo taken by author Cowboy Fellowship, Jourdanton, Texas, 5 August 2012.

In August 2012, the AFCC reported that there were 208 churches affiliated with their organization.³⁷ While most of these churches are in Texas, 49 are in other states including Florida, Alabama, Tennessee, Oklahoma, Kansas, and New Mexico.³⁸ Since the TFCC was formed in 2006, other major changes have taken place. Most notably,

Ron Nolen was removed from his leadership position in 2010 for undisclosed reasons. Around this same time, the TFCC and AFCC were incorporated into one body, the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, to better reflect its nationwide mission.³⁹ Despite changes in leadership and organizational consolidation, the AFCC continued to plant cowboy churches in rural areas of the United States. Although it is important for scholars to understand the origins and inner workings of cowboy churches and associated organizational bodies, the central identifying feature of these churches is how they intentionally utilize material culture associated with the cowboy to consciously create a masculine church environment.

Cowboy Churches: Masculine Theology and Material Culture

The cowboy, as a historical and mythic figure, has a strong connection to the concept of masculinity in the United States. Part of the transformation of the legendary cowboy involves shaping cowboys into heroes and icons of masculine, American independence in the face of modernizing or feminizing forces. According to Michael Kimmel, American masculinity, especially notions of freedom and independence, have long been tied to the West.⁴⁰ Like Slotkin, Kimmel focuses on the role that fictional accounts of the frontier played in shaping the lives of men who were able to “escape through fantasies of identification.”⁴¹ Throughout Kimmel’s book, *Manhood in America*, both the West and cowboys repeatedly appear. Typically, the cowboy reenters the narrative at times in which masculinity is perceived as being threatened by domesticity and feminization, and is used as an example of a force that cannot be fenced in or made to conform.

Kimmel maintains that during periods when men were attempting to reclaim and assert their masculinity, the cowboy served as the ultimate example of “rugged outdoor masculinity.”⁴² Focusing on the cowboy’s mythic development and the role it served in shaping masculinity, he hints at aspects of cowboy culture that these modern cowboy churches attempt to emphasize:

As a genre the western represented the apotheosis of masculinist fantasy, a revolt not against women but against feminization. The vast prairie is the domain of male liberation from work-place humiliation, cultural feminization, and domestic emasculation. The saloon replaces the church, the campfire replaces the Victorian parlor, the range replaces the factory floor. The western is a purified, pristine male domain.⁴³

By bringing religion to the forefront, cowboy churches contend that the church can be part of this masculine domain.

Today, cowboy churches strive to capture the role the West plays in the lives of men with one central exception: the saloon has been abandoned and the role of the church as a masculine institution has been established.⁴⁴ By catering explicitly to men via doctrine, myth, material culture, and church ministries, cowboy churches, like other masculine Christian movements, portray “the Christian life as the manly life, a heroic quest for spiritual manhood.”⁴⁵ The emphasis on rural men, symbolized by the use of the cowboy as a figurehead, is one way in which cowboy churches differ from other masculine

church movements. Rather than focusing on men overall, cowboy churches seek to reach unchurched rural males. Cowboy churches believe these men are not as receptive to the messages of traditional religious institutions because they perceive them as being feminized and overly formal.

The discipline of religious studies has seen a turn toward studying the city, because it is the site of meeting, mixing, and multiple identities. Robert Orsi asserts that a “challenge of studying urban religion generally,” lies in the fact that scholars must “read through and across the fantasy of the city as it has emerged over the last two centuries.”⁴⁶ In doing so, he argues that the city is the Other while the rural is the commonplace, the quotidian. Contradicting this perspective, members of cowboy churches feel that the city, not the countryside, dictates traditional church culture. The construction of the rural (identified as the American West and South) and the construction of the city (tied to the Northern United States) in both popular culture and history reinforce the idea that spaces are never static in their identity. Rather, they are imbued with concepts drawn from a variety of sources, which can vary from person to person and among groups. While the focus on the city is important, the study of cowboy churches demonstrates that there is also a need to turn towards contemporary non-city cultures and how they navigate identity in the globalized world.

Focusing on rural men through the use of the masculine cowboy trope is directly tied to the theology of cowboy churches, a theology that situates men at the head of the household. While all unchurched western-heritage individuals are the broader demographic that cowboy churches seek to reach, men are their central targets because church leaders believe that the rest of the family will follow if the head of the family can be convinced to attend. The idea that men play a pivotal role in the religious lives of their families is important to other Christian masculine movements, including Promise Keepers.⁴⁷ The pastors at cowboy churches acknowledge that reaching men is their goal, and they place this goal within a larger societal framework. The assistant pastor at one of the churches I studied declared that they “specifically do things that are not feminine. We specifically don’t tell people, ‘Hey, let’s get in a circle. Let’s hold hands.’ We’re conscious of that, and we specifically try to reach men. That’s our target audience.”⁴⁸ Similarly, the head pastor at the same church stated that cowboy churches are:

Really trying to work on the men’s role in the family because I think the men in our society have really dropped the ball. I think they’re really working on getting the men to be strong in the home again, and getting men to take responsibility in our society.⁴⁹

From a theological and cultural perspective, the masculinity cultivated within cowboy churches is intended to appeal to unchurched men by encouraging both individual and familial attendance. For men with families, it is expected that they will exhibit top-down leadership, begin bringing their entire family to church services, and encourage regular church involvement from all family members. Reaching men necessitates that churches provide messages and events intended to capture the attention of men without alienating women of the community. To accomplish this, cowboy churches seek to send messages to men through sermons, outreach activities, and western music while also offering some activities for children and women, such as children’s summer Bible

programs and specific women's or cowgirl ministries. Utilizing the figure of the cowboy as an example, pastors of cowboy churches are able to link rural life to contemporary Christian living.

The rustic material culture and relaxed dress code of cowboy churches are visual indicators that set these churches apart from their more traditional counterparts. This material culture is presented in tandem with the masculine theology of the cowboy church. One of the essential components of a cowboy church is the linking of cowboy and masculine material culture with rituals and church space. Examples of the masculine material culture can be seen most explicitly in Figures 2, 4, and 6. Descriptions of both churches will further emphasize the masculinity in the cowboy churches' material culture.

Cowboy Fellowship is located in Pleasanton, Texas about an hour south of San Antonio. The parking lot is made of crushed limestone, and to the left of the sanctuary and church offices is a deer-proof garden run by members of the church that provides free produce to those in need. The church building is a large, two-story structure made out of corrugated metal. The church offices, although carpeted, are decorated in dark tones, with leather chairs and desks made out of worn, repurposed wood. A taxidermy buck graces Pastor Pete's office alongside crosses made out of metal. The foyer of the church is painted faux-rust and cow skins line the walls along with paintings of rodeo scenes, hat racks made out of deer antlers, and a cross made out of horseshoes. Inside the doors of the sanctuary, there is a metal statue of a cowboy on a horse, as well as the church's shop where people can buy hats and shirts with the Cowboy Fellowship logo, CDs of previous sermons, books, and bibles. An information table is set up where people find reminders and sign-up sheets for upcoming events.

The sanctuary is a large, open room with concrete floors and docking doors so that the sanctuary can be opened to the outside. At the front of the sanctuary, there is a large wooden cross above the stage. Around this area, there is a wooden "fence" with cow skins that keeps the backstage hidden from the front of the church. The band performs on the upper level, and the lower area is where sermons are delivered. There is no podium. Fake prickly pear bushes line the sides of this front area, adding to the rustic nature of the interior. There are flags to the far right and far left of the front—to the left is the American flag, and to the right is a flag known as the Christian Flag. Rather than pews, congregants sit in rows of white folding chairs that can be moved when other events take place in the church. Near each of the exits to the church, there is a table with free Bibles, other free Christian literature, and large unmarked milk cans where individuals can leave their tithes and donations if they feel so inclined.

In the back left corner of the church sits a large industrial kitchen. On Sunday mornings, the women involved with the kitchen ministry serve coffee, tea, and water in addition to donuts and kolaches (Czech sausage breakfast pastries) that are donated by a member of the church. To the left of this, there is a digital milk bucket where the technologically savvy can manage their donations using credit cards. The audiovisual booth is also in the back and is decorated with a large map of the world that emphasizes the church's global mission work by locating the cities, states, and countries where the church has

done missionary work. A red, digital clock is above the AV booth to ensure that services run on time, which they always do. The idea behind this is that the church should be respectful of people's busy schedules, and should offer punctual, short messages.

At Big Bend Cowboy Church, located in Alpine, Texas, the building and grounds are also intentionally rustic. Visitors drive up a crushed limestone driveway and park in the grass or on the rocks outside of the church. On Sundays, the American and Texas flags fly on the flagpole to the right of the church, which is a partially finished warehouse. The front of the building—including the foyer, kitchen, bathrooms, and what will become the classrooms—is decorated and air-conditioned. The right wall of the foyer features a bulletin board with upcoming events, a large six-foot by ten-foot piece of wood with the brands of the families who attend the church, and an area with an American flag placed to remind attendees to pray for members of the community who are serving in the armed forces. On the left side of the foyer is a large mural of a desert landscape painted by one of the congregants. Under this mural is a table that holds the refreshments. The front wall has a large piece of wood with the word 'Welcome' and a picture of two people on horseback with a cross between them. Under this is a table with various literature and a miniature wooden church where people can donate money. To the right of this table is another table with three small crosses on it, and a larger cross made out of horseshoes above it. To the left is the kitchen which, although large, is residential in style rather than commercial. Past the kitchen is a hallway with bathrooms and classrooms. To the right of the foyer is another hallway with classrooms. Both hallways end in doors that lead to the sanctuary. These doors have signs requesting that they be kept shut since the sanctuary is not air-conditioned.

The sanctuary is large and unadorned. The walls are uninsulated corrugated metal, and there are large industrial dock doors on three of the sides. This allows for a breeze to flow through the church and provides a scenic view of the mountains behind the church. The floor is made of polished concrete. At the front is a small stage where the cowboy band plays traditional country western tunes with a Christian message. In front of that, there is a semi-circle of hay bales around a wooden and rustic looking podium with a small cross on the front. There are no pews, rather, there are plush and comfortable individual chairs. In the back left corner, there is a CrossFit gym which is unaffiliated with the church, but whose owners make regular donations. Behind the chairs, there is a large open space with a tall wooden table where many people congregate. The back wall of the sanctuary is lined with tables and another half dozen picnic tables sit in front of those along the wall. Some congregants, mainly men who attend unaccompanied by women, opt to sit at these tables rather than in the chairs during the service, and community meals are eaten at these tables.

These examples emphasize the cowboy church's material culture, a further iteration of Colleen McDannell's argument that "experiencing the physical dimension of religion helps *bring about* religious values, norms, behaviors, and attitudes."⁵⁰ Cowboy churches seek to bring about these attitudes by presenting a material church culture that refashions cowboy work implements into Christian symbols. The use of common cowboy objects such as hay bales, crosses made from horseshoes, and pulpits made of reclaimed wood, while unique to these particular churches, fits within the long-standing

tradition of “the scrambling of the sacred and profane.”⁵¹ The material culture and construction of cowboy churches, therefore, echoes McDannell’s statement that such mixing is “common in American Christianity.”⁵²



Fig. 4 Sanctuary at a cowboy church. While laid out like a traditional church, note the individual chairs rather than pews. This seating configuration is thought to allow men elbowroom and the space to be reconfigured for different events. Photo taken by author at Cowboy Fellowship, Jourdanton, Texas, 14 July 2012.

Upon arriving at the grounds of a cowboy church, it immediately becomes apparent that these churches are constructed in a manner that is intended to be different from that of traditional churches. Cowboy churches typically feature gravel parking lots, and the buildings themselves are often built out of industrial materials, featuring metal walls and cargo doors, some having once actually served as warehouses or barns (See Fig. 4). The reason behind this, I was told, was that creating rustic environments for spiritual purposes helps individuals feel as if the space is an extension of their daily cultural environment. Decisions to include or exclude certain features, such as the choice to have a gravel parking lot rather than a paved lot, are deliberate. A self-described “greenhorn” shared a story about an exchange he had with his pastor about possibly paving their parking lot because of the unevenness of the surface. The pastor responded to his suggestion by saying:

‘Oh no, this is a cowboy church. We drive on dirt roads and we’re not putting down

any blacktop.’ So I took a pick out there and I dug up eight layers of concrete so the road would be flat. But I was really surprised at his reaction, ‘Oh no, we drive on dirt roads. We don’t need no blacktop around the church.’ (laughs) That’s against our religion: we don’t believe in blacktop.⁵³

This sparse, masculine, utilitarian environment continues in the interior spaces of cowboy churches. For example, cowboy churches typically do not have any carpet. One woman revealed to me that the reason for this is “so when cowboys come in off the range they can walk in and not have to worry about manure or whatever they bring in with them.”⁵⁴ In an environment like this, church attendees who go straight to services from their morning farm or ranch duties will not need to feel self-conscious about dirtying the church space because it is not the type of space that is intended to be spotless. Practicality, as much as culture, influences the material components in the cowboy church and reinforces the concept that these churches are in place to serve a rural, working population whose responsibilities do not cease on Sunday.

The open spaces within these churches, the rustic decorations, and use of common cowboy objects (such as the bales of hay and horse trough baptismal tanks at both churches) are intended to appeal to the sensibility of men who spend significant amounts of time working outside (See Figs. 2 and 3). Planters try to avoid a feeling of confinement when building cowboy churches. For example, the churches I studied had chairs instead of traditional pews, which are perceived to bring people who may not know one another into uncomfortable proximity (See Fig. 4). A female congregant offered an unprompted explanation for this decision saying that chairs allowed for “elbowroom. You can move around a little bit.” Her husband then elaborated: “A man will sit next to another man, or a woman, in a chair, and not feel uncomfortable. In the pew, it’s not that way. It’s like [makes an uncomfortable sound] ‘I don’t want to get too close.’”⁵⁵ It is not surprising, then, that many men, especially those who attend church on their own, opt to stand in the open spaces in the back of sanctuaries rather than to sit. When I spoke with the pastor of one of the churches about this topic, he tied male comfort to the way cowboy churches were decorated by saying:

It’s the building. The building’s not brick and mortar and carpet and cushioned pews. The building is steel and tin and plastic chairs, you know? I mean, what guy doesn’t like that? . . . There’s barn wood for the stage instead of a \$400,000 pulpit it’s just barn wood and plywood and it [sic]. I think just the atmosphere of it is manly and makes men feel comfortable.

He continued by saying that, in his opinion, this separates cowboy churches from other churches because:

Most other churches are women oriented. They’re decorated in the ways women like them because women are usually the ones that did the decorating. They’re painted colors that women like, because women are probably the ones that were up there painting. A lot of preachers are pretty soft and stuff because they’re trying to please the old ladies, because that’s primarily who’s in their congregations.⁵⁶

Cowboy churches are decorated so that they are distinctly different from traditional

houses of worship and appeal to rustic men who participate in cowboy culture. Since cowboy churches are intended to lower perceived material and cultural barriers to church attendance, developing church spaces that subvert traditional understandings of what a church looks like fits into the larger goal of normalizing church attendance among a rural population. Ultimately, in contrast to the common evangelical claim to be “in the world but not of it,” cowboy churches are very much in the world and a part of it, with cowboy culture dictating the material choices made within the church spaces.



Fig. 5. Baptistry made from a cattle trough with a Christmas tree. Photo taken by author at Big Bend Cowboy Church, Alpine, Texas, 24 December 2014.

The worldly nature of cowboy churches is apparent in the quotidian nature of the decorations and tools in the churches. Cowboy churches do have pulpits, and, for all intents and purposes, have traditional church layouts. Unlike traditional church décor, many of the decorations in cowboy churches are simply objects that can be found at the average feed store and have been repurposed to serve the needs of the church. For example, both churches I studied opted to use cattle troughs for baptisms (See Fig. 5). However, unlike a permanent baptismal font, these troughs were brought out when

needed and stored against a wall when not in use and, ultimately, were not treated differently from any other horse trough. Similarly, on the rare occasion one of the churches I studied held a service which involved communion, they chose to use store-bought flour tortillas for the sake of convenience.



Fig. 6. A cross made of horseshoes of the style found in cowboy churches. The cross uses old, worn-out horseshoes that have been welded together to create a new object. Photo taken by author at Cowboy Fellowship, Jourdanton, Texas, 14 July 2012.

Crosses made out of old horseshoes, reclaimed wood, and barbed wire are also common sights in cowboy churches (See Fig. 6). Since cowboy churches often emphasize their informal nature, it may be surprising that they choose to decorate their spaces at all. However, as David Morgan articulates, “materiality is a compelling register in which to examine belief because feeling, acting, interacting, and sensation embody human

relations to the powers whose invocation structures social life.”⁵⁷ The brand wall (Fig. 1) is an example of this because while the brands in this context represent church membership, they are also a manner through which members identify themselves and their property in their working or ranching lives. The choice to place the brand wall in the front entrance provides a visual indicator that these individuals have entered into a relationship with a power larger than themselves that extends beyond the walls of the church. Cowboy churches are intended to have low barriers of entry, reflected in their sermons where preachers portray Christian living as something so uncomplicated that even a humble cowboy can do it. This emphasis on simplicity and the everyday is reiterated by repurposing discarded tools and found objects to serve as symbols of Christian worship. If a simple, but tough, horseshoe can be remade into a Christian symbol, then a coarse and unrefined man can be made into a Christian. Nonetheless, the first step to this process is to make him feel comfortable in a church space, and a rugged cross is perceived to be more likely to do so than a more conventional or embellished version of the Christian symbol.

Beyond the material culture of church buildings and spaces, the people I interviewed almost always brought up the topic of clothing when discussing what separated cowboy churches from traditional congregations. Individuals who attend cowboy churches attribute part of the success of the movement to the freedom to wear practical clothing to church. Cowboy church members feel dress codes are economic barriers that keep interested individuals and potential converts out of churches. One man I spoke to had been raised in the Baptist Church. He described his upbringing and how that led him to reject traditional barriers to attendance, like the idea of “church clothing,” by saying:

Now I was raised that two weeks before Easter Sunday you always had to go to town to get a new sport coat or shirt or tie, slacks. Hell, you wore a tie every Sunday when you went to church. Well, that wasn’t wrong, but if I couldn’t afford a tie, couldn’t afford a sports coat, and whatever. I probably would have felt out of place in Sunday school with all those other little kids sitting around there lookin’ at me wondering why you’re not dressed up like you’re supposed to be.⁵⁸

He was not the only person to speak with me about economic and class differences and their relationship to clothing and church attendance. A young woman told me a story about an economically disadvantaged family at a church she attended prior to her becoming involved with a cowboy church. The family in question “actually left their church because they were frowned upon” for not having “church clothing.” In her opinion, this was a travesty because it undermined foundational Christian teachings. As she explained, “if you can take that time, that hour and a half [or] two hours, just to be at church, you’re doing something right.”⁵⁹ At one church, the associate pastor shared with me that the cowboy church “has been able to get into the lower economical area of our community, and people appreciate that. That’s why a lot of people come; because it doesn’t matter if you drive your hog up here or if you’re in flip flops and shorts.”⁶⁰ Many individuals involved in creating cowboy churches and those who invite new members feel that the informal dress code fits into their overall mission to be attractive to members of the community who do not feel comfortable or welcome in a traditional church environment.

In addition to the overarching commentary on economics, clothing, and church attendance, one aspect of the appeal of cowboy churches is the freedom to wear clothing specific to cowboy and western-heritage culture, including hats, to services. The only requirement for those attending cowboy churches is to remove their hats for prayer; other than that, attendees may wear them for the duration of the service. Additionally, it is not uncommon to see a congregant in chaps and spurs, especially if a rodeo event is taking place after the church service. For those actively engaged in a ranching lifestyle, the relaxed dress code makes allowances for their demanding work schedule, which is unpredictable and generally a seven-days-a-week job. One man who is an active rancher told me that part of his attraction to the church is that if he needs to work around church, he is able to do so. He said:

We can saddle our horses and take them to church and dress the way we're dressed right now and go work cattle that afternoon if we feel the need. We're not at all self-conscious about the way we're dressed or the way anybody else is dressed.⁶¹

A woman elaborated that attendance, by and large, depends on the informality. Based on her experiences with cowboy culture, she felt that:

A lot of the ranchers out there wouldn't be comfortable going to any other church because of the expectations that are sometimes unjustly tied to churches or tied to faith. You have to dress a certain way, you have to talk a certain way, and that cowboy church dispels all those myths and you can just be anyone. And it's welcoming but, yet, still doesn't in any way waiver on the word of God.⁶²

Congregants at cowboy churches emphasize that making it easier for people to attend services in their work attire lowers the barriers that prohibit many western-heritage individuals from attending traditional church. Indeed, regardless of their participation in the cowboy culture, the freedom to be physically comfortable and authentic is perceived to be a major factor in the success of cowboy churches in non-city areas.

The goal of combining cowboy culture and Christian theology becomes clear through the lived experiences of congregants. A young man I spoke to unintentionally summed up why cowboy churches are attractive to rural men by succinctly stating that he enjoyed:

The fact that you can walk in wearing your hat and nobody says anything. And the preacher is up there with his cowboy hat on and the boots he wore the day before on the ranch. You know, it makes everyone a little bit more relaxed. And the way he delivers [the sermons]. He's not up there telling you that you're doing everything in life wrong. You know what I mean? He's telling you what you need to do and it's your choice after that.⁶³

While many contemporary Christian churches embrace the casualness of American culture, cowboy churches are attractive to unchurched rural men, their target demographic, because they reflect the cowboy lifestyle and contemporary agrarian life not just via their message, but also through the creation of a rustic, rugged church environment.

Masculine Christianity

Although cowboy churches are a relatively contemporary development, they share strong ties to other masculine Christian movements in the United States including the Muscular Christianity movement of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, Promise Keepers and Power Team ministries that became active in the 1990s, and the contemporary development of Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) Ministries. These entities seek to transform the lives of unchurched men by bringing them to know and accept Christ. To accomplish this, they embrace a version of theology that emphasizes the ties between masculinity and Christian identity, while also identifying men as the head of the Christian family. The logic for embracing this masculine theology exists for two central reasons. First, it dispels the notion that religion is a woman's domain and, second, it creates an entry point for men to join the larger Christian community.⁶⁴ While there are some differences between cowboy churches and other muscular movements, the "similarities between the goals of the groups necessitate that cowboy churches be included in the larger discussion of masculine Christianity."⁶⁵

Muscular Christianity, according to Clifford Putney, was a predominantly male movement and "can be defined simply as a Christian commitment to health and manliness" which was popularized in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries by "droves of Protestant ministers in England and America" who "concluded that men were not truly Christians unless they were healthy and 'manly.'"⁶⁶ In this case, manliness was tied to fitness and strength. Spearheaded by individuals who are best described as supporters of reform during the Progressive Era, the supporters of Muscular Christianity stood in opposition to Victorian values, which they believed downplayed these particular traits. Instead, Muscular Christians "proposed a new model for manhood, one that stressed action rather than reflection and aggression rather than gentility."⁶⁷ Supporters of Muscular Christianity included followers of the Social Gospel who "fashioned a call to worship" that attempted to appeal to men "through their sense of discipline, through their sense of the practical, through their youthful passions, and through their desire for the heroic."⁶⁸ To encourage male attendance, churches built gyms and hosted sports events to cultivate their interest in church culture. They also created men's groups that resembled military organizations, and they painted men as being protectors of faith and family. One Methodist event, the Columbus Exhibition at the 1919 Ohio State Fair, even included a "bucking bronco contest."⁶⁹ Although the movement eventually declined in popularity among mainline and liberal Protestants, it remained popular in more conservative churches. While cowboy churches do not explicitly focus on the body, they do relate certain activities that involve dominion over the land and animals—including rodeo, ranching, and farming—with masculinity. In cowboy churches, what is important is not necessarily health and physical fitness, but activities that involve physicality, like farming or ranching, and take place in non-domesticized spaces, which may include pastures, farms, and oil fields.

The conservative resurgence of the 1970s revealed the survival of Muscular Christianity and paved the way for movements like Promise Keepers, Power Team, and Christian MMA Ministries. While Muscular Christianity focused on the physical and spiritual sides of male religiosity, Promise Keepers, founded in 1990 by Bill McCartney, a

University of Colorado football coach, focuses solely on “Christian discipleship” and male fellowship.⁷⁰ Promise Keepers is a nondenominational group that is best known for its large rallies and gatherings including the Stand the Gap rally held on the Washington Mall in October of 1997.⁷¹ The organization seeks to “return men to God and the teachings of Jesus as they relate to the family” while also encouraging men to cultivate supportive, spiritual relationships with one another.⁷² In addition to large events, Promise Keepers hosts regional conferences emphasizing the importance of interacting with local accountability groups, usually based in churches, where men can meet to deepen their faith with other men.⁷³ Although the strength and membership declined following financial problems in the late 1990s, they maintain a public presence via their website. Online, they offer paying members access to videos, a tool to help memorize scripture, and an accountability system for monitoring internet usage in order to avoid temptation and un-Christian content online.⁷⁴ Ultimately, Promise Keepers hopes to restore “traditional nuclear family values” that it perceives as under attack by liberal social and political forces.⁷⁵

The history of Muscular Christianity, as well as groups inspired by similar goals and values, demonstrates some of the methods Christian groups have used to promote the idea that masculinity and Christianity are compatible. Historically, these organizations have accomplished this through the use of what may be viewed as select aspects of so-called secular masculine culture. In doing so, Christian organizations are able to craft a message for the men they want to attract. What sets cowboy churches apart from these other movements is both organizational and spatial. In terms of organization, they are generally stand-alone churches rather than solely traveling or affiliated ministries, meaning that cowboy culture becomes the central identifying marker of church culture. Spatially, these churches focus on a rural, agrarian identity that allows members to resist the idea that city culture defines traditional church culture. The construction of rustic cowboy churches emerges from the mixing of cowboy identity with the rejection of the idea that only urban, “feminized” attitudes and opinions should define Christianity. In cultivating a masculine church culture, cowboy church leaders hope to bring rural men into the church by providing a culturally relevant, masculine community where they will feel welcome while intentionally eschewing aspects of church culture perceived to be feminine.

The reality of cowboy churches is that while adult men comprise a significant percentage of the congregation, women and children also attend these churches which usually results in the creation of separate women’s and children’s ministries. Women’s ministries often embrace the cowgirl theme but fundamentally depend on reaffirming the gender binary and men’s leadership roles. There are some leadership opportunities for women, typically related to ministries that emphasize the children or domestic abilities, like a kitchen ministry. Despite the emphasis on masculinity, cowboy churches also must find ways to include the individual women, wives, and families that make up cowboy church congregations without adopting too much “feminine” culture.

Conclusion

Cowboy church congregants emphasize that providing a church environment that mirrors their own work environment makes it easier for people to attend services. Church leaders believe doing so lowers the barriers that prohibit or discourage many rural individuals, especially men, from attending traditional churches. By encouraging attendance in work attire and creating a rustic ambience, the cowboy church becomes a place in which the rural male can worship without discrimination. Whether congregants actually participate in cowboy culture or not, the freedom to be physically comfortable and authentic is perceived by cowboy church leadership to be a major factor in the appeal of cowboy churches. Regardless of its effectiveness in attracting unchurched men, the effort expended by cowboy churches demonstrates a link between this relatively recent church movement and the larger historiography of masculine Christianity in the United States. Their existence further indicates the denominational ties between the American South and American West, as evidenced by Texas's contested geography and the historic ties between the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, and the Southern Baptist Convention.

One necessary area of further study regarding cowboy churches is related to the racial makeup of these churches. Both cowboy churches I studied professed to be open to everyone, but the demographics of the congregations were predominantly white, with only small Latinx representation despite being located in areas with a significant Latinx population. There are some examples of Spanish language cowboy churches, or *iglesias vaqueras*, in the United States and Dallam mentions at least one cowboy church pastored by an African American man, but, in my experience as well as Dallam's, cowboy churches are predominantly white, masculine spaces.⁷⁶ This is not unlike what Putney highlights in his work: "evidence points to the fact that muscular Christianity in the Progressive Era was primarily a white Christian phenomenon."⁷⁷ While cowboy churches, like Muscular Christian groups before them, profess to be targeting a specific cultural subset of the population, they nonetheless tend to attract a limited, mostly white, demographic that is not necessarily representative of the entire cultural group. More targeted research may shed light on whether this is due to cowboy culture, a more specific culture of cowboy churches, or a combination of these and other factors.

Studying AFCC churches allows scholars to better understand how Christian organizations in the twenty-first century view the needs of rural communities in Texas and other states in the American South and West. Cowboy churches are not intended to replace more traditional churches in rural communities, but to provide communities that are, on the surface, culturally different from what unchurched individuals may assume traditional churches to be. The intentional cultural construction of cowboy churches, especially apparent in their material culture, demonstrates that those planting churches of this nature are aware of the larger discourses surrounding regional identity, rural versus urban life, and cultural markers of belonging. In cowboy churches, the material culture of the church is not neutral or random. Instead, it is intended to send cultural cues to the target demographic: unchurched men associated with cowboy culture.

Citation Guide

1. Sarah "Moxy" Moczygamba, "Horseshoe Crosses and Muddy Boots: Material Culture and Rural Masculinity in Cowboy Churches," Essay, *MAVCOR Journal* 3, no. 2 Special Issue: Material and Visual Cultures of Religion in the American South (2019), doi:10.223322/mav.ess.2019.1

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Notes

1. My original work on cowboy churches took place between 2011 and 2013. At the time, the AFCC mission statement declared their goal to be “to resource and develop Cowboy Churches through enhanced training, assessment, coaching, communication and connectedness through the movement of God’s Spirit within the Western Culture; to establish a forum or platform for the ‘Baptist Way’ Cowboy Churches to speak to one another; to enable ‘Baptist Way’ Cowboy Churches to speak with a united voice; and to encourage the Cowboy Churches to remain voluntarily related to those Baptist entities that are supportive of and cooperating with the Fellowship.” See, “Mission Statement,” American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, accessed October 7, 2012, <http://hdl.handle.net/10079/2afe8454-9e07-4905-8b8d-31064d3f411f>, archived at <hdl.handle.net/10079/d5d47c02-9a8f-4ac9-b009-e643e8a0b1b1>. Today, their website and mission statement contains no mention of Baptist affiliation. See, “Mission Statement,” American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, accessed February 2, 2018, <hdl.handle.net/10079/5694a9b0-f049-43aa-9633-89b2c65c208a>. However, the Texas Baptist General Convention continues to chronicle their involvement in Western Heritage Ministry in Texas in their 2017 Book of Reports. See, Baptist General Convention of Texas, *2017 Book of Reports*, Digital Report, accessed February 2, 2018, <hdl.handle.net/10079/a2b3c230-5b0e-4881-97df-a14e00c8c373>.

2. Russell McCutcheon, *A Modest Proposal on Method: Essaying the Study of Religion* (Boston: Brill Publishers, 2015), 12.

3. McCutcheon, *A Modest Proposal on Method*, 12.

4. Marie Dallam, *Cowboy Christians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 137–169.

5. Not to be confused with Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis that proposed the closing of the American West, the closing of the open range occurred with the mass adoption of barbed wire in cattle culture in the 1880s. Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (London: Penguin Books-Great Ideas,

2008).

6. David Dary, *Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 4.
7. Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 87, 307.
8. James R. Wagner, "Cowboy: Origin and Early Use of the Term," in *The Cowboy Way: An Exploration of History and Culture*, ed. Paul H. Carlson (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2006), 11, 17.
9. Dary dedicates chapters two, three, four, five, and eleven to the major differences between cattle cultures and the culture adapted to fit different climates and landscapes. Differences in culture include manners of dress, saddle shape, roping method, and more. See, Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 44–88, 227–53.
10. Ramon F. Adams, *The Old-Time Cowhand* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), 47.
11. Adams, *The Old-Time Cowhand*, 47-48.
12. See, "History," Ranchman's Campmeeting in the Southwest, accessed October 7, 2012, <http://www.kathrynsweb.com/ranchmen/history.htm>; "History," Hill Country Cowboy Campmeeting, accessed October 7, 2012, hdl.handle.net/10079/a2b3c230-5boe-4881-97df-a14e00c8c373; and Fernec Morton Szasz, *Religion in the Modern American West* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2000), 44.
13. Richard Aquila, "Introduction: The Pop Culture West," in *Wanted Dead or Alive: The American West in Popular Culture*, ed. Richard Aquila (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 11.
14. Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 66.
15. Kristine Fredriksson, *American Rodeo: From Buffalo Bill to Big Business* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985), 10–13.
16. Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*, 69, 75.
17. Slotkin explores these themes in great detail and examines how the meaning of the cowboy and the West changed to reflect the cultural realities of the decade in *Gunfighter Nation*.
18. Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 336–37.
19. William Lindsey and Mark Silk place Texas—along with Louisiana, Arkansas, Mis-

souri, and Oklahoma—into a region they call the “Southern Crossroads.” William Lindsey and Mark Silk, eds., *Southern Crossroads: Showdown States* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005).

20. Robert Wuthnow, *Rough Country: How Texas became America’s Most Powerful Bible-Belt State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 13.

21. Wunthnow, *Rough Country*, 13.

22. William Lindsey, “Introduction,” in *Southern Crossroads: Showdown States*, eds. William Lindsey and Mark Silk (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005), 16.

23. For discussion of the key theological and political changes in the Southern Baptist Convention see David T. Morgan, *The New Crusades, The New Holy Land: Conflict in the Southern Baptist Convention 1969–1991* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1996). For further discussion of how “Texas theology” ties together the American South and West in the post-war era see Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2010) 271–86.

24. “Statement of Position,” Cowboys for Christ, accessed February 13, 2018, hdl.handle.net/10079/c3655023-bf5b-4fae-8393-13fed48b7dde.

25. Dallam, *Cowboy Christians*, 75–76.

26. “FCC Chapters,” Fellowship of Christian Cowboys, accessed February 13, 2018. hdl.handle.net/10079/67072e1e-0a10-443a-aafc-7b9b1bd7d27a.

27. See Glenn Smith, *Apostle Cowboy Style* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation Press, 2014). The two groups can be found on their websites: “Founders,” Cowboy Ministers Network, accessed January 25, 2018, hdl.handle.net/10079/14300526-ff3b-4ade-b64f-098c6579c162. “About,” Rodeo Cowboy Ministries, accessed January 25, 2018, hdl.handle.net/10079/2e7049cd-d97c-4bf4-a158-553960d127f5.

28. Peter Applebome, “Church Just Like Home to Cowboys,” *New York Times*, April 27, 1987, accessed October 7, 2012, hdl.handle.net/10079/6f3f5244-7c35-4800-b267-obode22a45d8.

29. Applebome, “Church Just Like Home to Cowboys,” 2.

30. See endnote 1.

31. Karen L. Willoughby, “Old West Church Saddles Up with Boost from CP Missions,” *Baptist Press*, May 1, 2002, accessed October 7, 2012, hdl.handle.net/10079/1246deao-231d-4e4c-bbof-d404095f1ce4. The separation of the AFCC from the BGCT can be indirectly traced in the annual reports published by the

BGCT. From 2013 to 2015, the AFCC goes from being prominently mentioned to not discussed at all in the document. See, Baptist General Convention of Texas, *2013 Book of Reports*, Digital Report, accessed February 2, 2018, hdl.handle.net/10079/edf232a0-c591-4a6b-848d-22786b95fb6e. Baptist General Convention of Texas, *2014 Book of Reports*, Digital Report, accessed February 2, 2018, hdl.handle.net/10079/646d7a3d-95c6-48cc-8ffa-b99baco22ofa. Baptist General Convention of Texas, *2015 Book of Reports*, Digital Report, accessed February 2, 2018, hdl.handle.net/10079/247849f8-f8cf-4fe6-aae5-a848168f15f3. This point was somewhat difficult to establish, because, as Dallam confirms, “the AFCC did not make a big public announcement about the change.” Dallam, *Cowboy Christians*, 93.

32. Paul Gauntt, “History of Cowboy Church Movement,” *Waxahachie Daily Light*, Saturday, April 25, 2009, accessed October 7, 2012, hdl.handle.net/10079/3807c9abd8ab-4b96-b26a-142ed47eade7.

33. Willoughby, “Old West Church Saddles Up.”

34. Willoughby, “Old West Church Saddles Up.”

35. “Nolen to Coordinate Cowboy Fellowship,” *The Baptist Standard*, August 8, 2006, accessed October 7, 2012, hdl.handle.net/10079/304782dc-f443-44c2-afc4-f02871661827.

36. “Cowboy Church Removes Nolen from Leadership Post,” *The Baptist Standard*, October 7, 2010, accessed December 10, 2014, hdl.handle.net/10079/696a927d-6e02-41a3-bddc-e46a2260f9e3.

37. After this time, the AFCC stopped updating their church directory in an easy-to-access Excel format. Given the layout of their current website, it is now impossible to determine the exact number of cowboy churches that are considered to be affiliates without help from the AFCC, who declined to be involved with my research.

38. “AFCC Church Directory” (Excel Document, American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, August 2, 2012).

39. “Cowboy Church Removes Nolen.”

40. Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York City: The FreePress, 1996), 60.

41. Kimmel references Slotkin’s work within his discussion on the cowboy. Kimmel, *Manhood in America*, 63.

42. Kimmel states, “But nowhere could American men find a better exemplar of rugged outdoor masculinity than out west with the cowboy, that noble denizen of the untamed frontier.” See, *Manhood in America*, 148.

43. Kimmell, *Manhood in America*, 150.
44. Although some members of cowboy churches drink, many avoid alcohol and all condemn drunkenness.
45. Kimmell, *Manhood in America*, 313.
46. Robert A. Orsi, *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 12.
47. One Baptist website states the following: “Men are Strategic! A classic Promise Keepers survey shows that if a child is the first person in the family to accept Christ and join the church, the rest of the family will do the same only 3.5% of the time. If the mother is the first, that percentage goes to 17%. But if the father is the first to accept Christ and join the church, the rest of his family will follow 93% of the time! An intentional ministry designed to reach men for Christ will help a church not only reach men, but also reach and strengthen their family.” “Baptist Men and Women on Mission,” Baptists on a Mission, accessed October 22, 2012, hdl.handle.net/10079/2d65c8fd-37dd-4686-acda-ed4bdea7d07.
48. Scotty Smith, interview by author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, July 19, 2012, 9:05 a.m.
49. Pete Pawelek, interview by author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, August 2, 2012, 3:49 p.m.
50. Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 2.
51. McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 8.
52. McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 8.
53. Anonymous, interview by author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 6, 2012, 12:37 p.m.
54. Anonymous, interview by author, June 6, 2012.
55. Anonymous, interview by author, Charlotte, TX, digital recording, July 19, 2012, 4:33 p.m.
56. Pete Pawelek, interview by author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, May 30, 2012.
57. David Morgan, “Introduction,” *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief*, ed. David Morgan (London: Routledge, 2010), 8.

58. Anonymous, interview by author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 7, 2012, 9:58 a.m.

59. Anonymous, interview by author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, August 6, 2012, 10:55 a.m.

60. Scotty Smith, interview by author, Jourdanton, TX, digital recording, July 19, 2012, 9:05 a.m.

61. Anonymous, interview by author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 15, 2012, 6:01 p.m.

62. Anonymous, interview by author, Alpine, TX, digital recording, June 15, 2012, 12:50 p.m.

63. Anonymous, interview by author, Jourdanton TX, digital recording, August 2, 2012, 8:06 a.m.

64. Many scholars comment on the relationship between women and religion in the United States, as discussed in the third footnote. Gender scholar Michael Kimmel states that muscular Christianity developed as the response to the idea that Victorian culture feminized religion. He says, "In paintings and drawings (of Jesus) of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jesus was imagined as a thin, reedy man, with long bony fingers, and soft doelike eyes, a man who could easily counsel you to turn the other cheek and love your enemies." See, Michael Kimmel, *The Gendered Society*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 240.

65. Sarah "Moxy" Moczygemba, "Rounding Up Christian Cowboys: Myth, Masculinity, and Identity in Two Texas Congregations" (master's thesis, University of Florida, 2013), 97–103. Echoing the claims I made in my master's thesis on cowboy churches, Dallam states that these cowboy churches are "a kind of neomuscularism." Dallam, *Cowboy Christians*, 137.

66. Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 11.

67. Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 5.

68. Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 76.

69. Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 198.

70. Randy Balmer, "Introduction," in *The Promise Keepers: Essays on Masculinity and Christianity*, ed. Dane S. Claussen (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2000), 3–4.

71. Balmer, "Introduction," 4.
72. Robert A. Cole, "Promising to Be a Man: Promise Keepers and the Organizational Construction of Masculinity," in *The Promise Keepers: Essays on Masculinity and Christianity*, ed. Dane S. Claussen (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 2000), 115.
73. Cole, "Promising to be a Man," 115–16.
74. "Premium Content," Promise Keepers, accessed February 15, 2018, hdl.handle.net/10079/2d65c8fd-37dd-4686-acda-edeb4bdea7d07, and "Promise Keepers Resources and Affiliates," Promise Keepers, accessed February 15, 2018. hdl.handle.net/10079/2d65c8fd-37dd-4686-acda-edeb4bdea7d07.
75. Cole, "Promising to Be a Man," 117.
76. Dallam, *Cowboy Christians*, 28–29.
77. Putney, *Muscular Christianity*, 8.



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1 My original work on cowboy churches took place between 2011 and 2013. At the time, the AFCC mission statement declared their goal to be “to resource and develop Cowboy Churches through enhanced training, assessment, coaching, communication and connectedness through the movement of God’s Spirit within the Western Culture; to establish a forum or platform for the ‘Baptist Way’ Cowboy Churches to speak to one another; to enable ‘Baptist Way’ Cowboy Churches to speak with a united voice; and to encourage the Cowboy Churches to remain voluntarily related to those Baptist entities that are supportive of and cooperating with the Fellowship.” See, “Mission Statement,” American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, accessed October 7, 2012, <http://www.americanfcc.org/content.cfm?id=2002>, archived at <https://web-beta.archive.org/web/20110712133535/http://www.americanfcc.org/content.cfm?id=2002>. Today, their website and mission statement contains no mention of Baptist affiliation. See, “Mission Statement,” American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, accessed February 2, 2018, <https://americanfcc.org/about/mission-statement/>. However, the Texas Baptist General Convention continues to chronicle their involvement in Western Heritage Ministry in Texas in their 2017 Book of Reports. See, Baptist General Convention of Texas, *2017 Book of Reports*, Digital Report, accessed February 2, 2018, https://texas-baptists.s3.amazonaws.com/downloads/2017BookOfReports.11_INTERACTIVE.pdf.

2 Russell McCutcheon, *A Modest Proposal on Method: Essaying the Study of Religion* (Boston: Brill Publishers, 2015), 12.

3 McCutcheon, *A Modest Proposal on Method*, 12.

4 Marie Dallam, *Cowboy Christians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 137–169.

5 Not to be confused with Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis that proposed the closing of the American West, the closing of the open range occurred with the mass adoption of barbed wire in cattle culture in the 1880s. Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (London: Penguin Books-Great Ideas, 2008).

6 David Dary, *Cowboy Culture: A Saga of Five Centuries* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), 4.

7 Dary, *Cowboy Culture*, 87, 307.

8 James R. Wagner, “Cowboy: Origin and Early Use of the Term,” in *The Cowboy Way: An Exploration of History and Culture*, ed. Paul H. Carlson (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2006), 11, 17.

9 Dary dedicates chapters two, three, four, five, and eleven to the major differences between cattle cultures and the culture adapted to fit different climates and landscapes.