

## Sins of Omission

by Roger D. McGrath

# The Modern Myth of the Black Cowboy

"Nigger Charley" Tyler rode the range of the Owens Valley in the trans-Sierra country of California during the early 1860's. He was one of the hired hands of the ranching McGee family, who grazed their beeves in the valley and then drove them north to market at the booming mining camp of Aurora. Paiute Indians, living in the valley and subsisting primarily on pine nuts and grass seed, found the new food source irresistible and began rustling cattle. Tyler was one of dozens of cowboys from several ranches who tried to stop the thefts. Fights erupted, and both Indians and cowboys were killed. Then, in an ambush, Tyler was captured by the Paiute, bound securely, and sequestered at a remote location.

To Paiute, Tyler was a special prize. They later explained that they easily recognized this one cowboy and identified him as having been in several earlier fights because he was black. Not only was he the only black among all the cowboys, but he was the only black they had ever seen. Now, they would make him pay for those earlier fights. They tortured him for three days, then roasted him to death.

That there were black cowboys such as Charley Tyler is not to be denied. (I told Tyler's story in a book I wrote about the mining camps of Aurora and Bodie.) However, that blacks accounted for a significant percentage of cowboys is a politically correct myth. I have watched this myth develop and grow during the last 30 years until it is now *de rigueur* to claim that 20 or 25 or even 30 percent of all cowboys were black. Much of this began following the 1965 publication of *The Negro Cowboys*. UCLA English professors Philip Durham and Everett Jones argue that popular literature about cowboys rarely mentioned black cowboys, although they not only existed but participated in good numbers on the long drives from Texas to the cattle towns of Kansas.

The authors include numerous anecdotes about black cowboys that were not new at all, having been mentioned in several works dealing with cowboys going back to the turn of the century. They also estimate that nearly 20 percent of the cowboys who drove the herds north from

Texas were black or Mexican. This is where the fun really began. First, the Mexican component of the estimate was soon ignored. Then, the fact that the estimate only applied to cowboys on the cattle drives from Texas was ignored. By the mid-1970's, it was said that 20 percent of all the cowboys of the Old West were black. By the 80's, the figure had reached 25 percent. An otherwise excellent documentary, *America's Music: The Roots of Country*, has musician Marty Stuart matter-of-factly stating that a quarter of all cowboys were black. The movie *Posse* (1993) was accompanied by a promotional flyer that claimed 30 percent of cowboys were black. The Black American West Museum in Denver states on its website that "nearly a third of the cowboys of the West were black."

If anyone challenges these wildly inflated figures, he is called a racist. My own research has led me to conclude that, in the cattle country outside of Texas, it was uncommon to find more than a few black cowboys. In Montana, where there were thousands of cowboys, the federal census of 1880 records only 346 blacks—men, women, and children—in the entire territory. Similar figures can be found for the Dakotas and Wyoming. The cattle regions throughout the rest of the West also had a dearth of blacks.

But what of Texas in the post-Civil War period, when slaves were freed and used as cowboys? Terry Jordan, in an outstanding work of cultural geography, *North American Cattle-Ranching Frontiers* (1993), provides demographic data that puts the percentage of black cowboys in Texas in the single digits. Jordan, for example, notes that

Runnels and Callahan counties, representative of the north-central Texas region, by 1880 housed, respectively, 118 and 177 Anglo-American cowboys, but not a single black cowhand. Wichita County, farther north on the Red River, in that year boasted the greatest concentration of black cowboys on the Texas cattle frontier, a total of 15, but even there the African-Americans were greatly outnumbered by



the 67 Anglo herdsmen. In all West Texas in 1880, only 4 percent of all cowboys, excluding camp cooks, were black while Anglo-Americans accounted for about 9 out of every 10. Subsequently black ranch hands never became common anywhere in the West . . . in spite of exaggerated claims to the contrary.

The most exaggerated claims about black cowboys are found in Nat Love's supposed autobiography, *The Life and Adventures of Nat Love* (1907). If he actually wrote it, it is the only known autobiography of a black cowboy. Love's exaggerations are all about himself: He was almost everywhere in the Old West and palled around with many of the famous figures of the frontier, including Billy the Kid; he was captured by Indians but escaped, used his lariat to save a drowning cowboy from a raging river, was adopted by an Indian tribe, survived 14 different bullet wounds ("any one of which would be sufficient to kill an ordinary man"), had horses shot out from under him, killed men in gunfights.

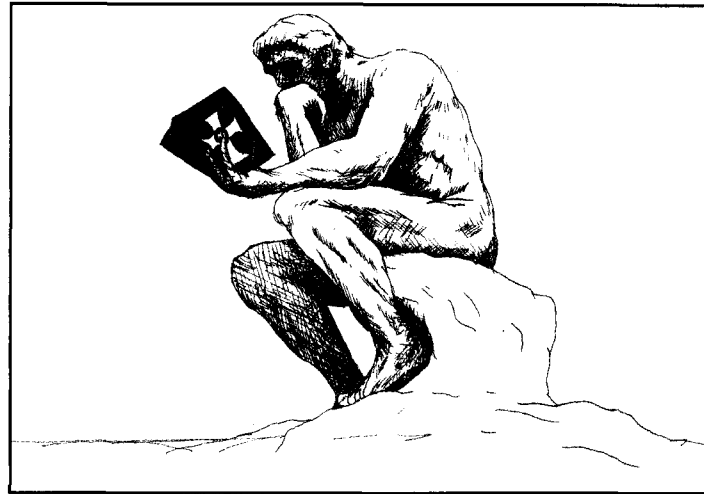
Books about blacks in the West never fail to mention Nat Love. What they do not tell the reader, however, is the mere fact that there is no independent confirmation of anything in Love's autobiography. Nat Love can only be found in his own book. Ramon Adams, in *Burrs Under the Saddle: A Second Look at Books and Histories of the West* (1964), says, "Although this Negro author is supposed to be writing of his own experiences, he either has a bad memory or a good imagination." We do, however, know one thing for certain: Love did spend time on the frontier—he was a porter on a railroad that ran through the West.

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# Boethius and Lady Philosophy

First Things First

by James Patrick



As founder of the intellectual tradition of the West, Saint Augustine has one peer: Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, a Roman of noble antecedents who spent his life in the service first of literature, then of the Gothic kingdom of Theodoric, and always, throughout a life that compassed literary success, high office, and political disgrace, of the Catholic faith and the Lady Philosophy, his figure for the philosophic wisdom of the West.

The political story that shaped Boethius' life began in 324, when Constantine's plan to move the capital of the empire from Rome to the city of Byzantium, on the eastern shore of the Sea of Marmora, matured. By moving the capitol, Constantine unintentionally left the West defenseless at the moment when barbarian pressure and influence became irresistible. In 476, the emperor Romulus Augustulus was deposed by the soldier Odovacar, who governed until 486, when he was defeated by Theodoric, an able Arian Ostrogoth educated in Constantinople. Theodoric's capital, Ravenna, became the first city of Italy.

For the senatorial class into which Boethius was born in 480, the move from Rome to Ravenna brought little change. Theodoric, like Odovacar before him, was an insistent tax collector, but he left in place the senatorial class, with its customary access to office and honors. Though an Arian, Theodoric tolerated Catholic families, and they, in turn, continued to dominate Italy, repaying Theodoric by calling him *Rex Theodoricus Pius Princeps Invictus Semper*.

Ostrogoth dominance segregated Italian society; the Roman class of "those who mattered most" staffed local administration, while the Goths controlled the army. No Roman was allowed to enter the army; no Goth was allowed to enter a Roman school. The most troublesome division, however, was not be-

tween Roman and Ostrogoth but between Catholic and Arian. The Arians tolerated Catholics but never trusted them. They admired the senators and used them, but Catholics were only rarely and reluctantly admitted into their families.

Constrained by Ostrogoth power, Byzantine neglect, and Arian heresy, Boethius' world was anxious but usually not unsafe. In an insecure time, when *romanitas* was threatened but not yet defeated, it was the custom of the class that possessed memory to write down the things remembered. Around 430, Vincent of Lerins had written his *Commonitorium*, typifying the tradition that would make copying the practical sign of the monastic life, and, three centuries later, the Venerable Bede, in his *History of the English Church and People*, noted that he had depended upon "countless faithful witnesses who either know or remember." Memory was the bridge between the dying empire of Augustus and the revival of learning in the ninth century.

Boethius' father died when Boethius was a boy, so he was reared in the household of the powerful senator Symmachus. Boethius fell to the literary life naturally; the time was ripe. The philosophy of Aristotle in its relation to Plato and to neoplatonism was a dominant theme at Athens, Alexandria, Rome, and Constantinople. Boethius' surviving works must be seen against a background of a lively philosophic tradition represented by Porphyry, Iamblichus of Calcis, and Plutarch of Athens and his pupils Hierocles and Proclus the Lycian. Boethius himself translated Aristotle's *On Interpretation*, *Categories*, and *Topics* and commented on Marius Victorinus' translation of Porphyry's *Introduction to the Categories*. Philosophy, reason's perennial engagement with truth, was derivative but not sterile. By 507, Boethius (not yet 30) had written extensively on Aristotle and the liberal arts. Later, he would write short theological treatises and, at life's end, the *Consolation of Philosophy*.

When Boethius wrote the *Consolation*, he was in prison, with the near certainty of death always before him. Thus, many have

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