

## Digger Dan, the Generic Man

I came across Digger Dan the other day, and wouldn't you know it--he was hanging out on the fair and rodeo circuit. "Looking forward to the county fairs, come summer and fall," he said. "Been watching cowpokes this time of year even before this rodeo business got officially started at Deer Trail. I especially liked it when the bronc bustin' and steer wrestling was done for the fun of it, by a bunch of workin' cowpunchers." Said he even remembers 'Kid' Fletcher riding with a neck brace... "Tough fellows back then," he said.

Digger Dan is always talking about how things change. Take the word "cowboy." Old Digger Dan gets a burr under his saddle when you mention the word. "Why, back in the 60's, 70's, and 80's (the 1800's that is), you call a cowpuncher that, and it was like calling a Black man a nigger.

The facts are that a lot of those old-time punchers were Black. A good many "Buffalo Soldiers" (as Black soldiers on the plains were called) became cowpunchers, some having escaped the fetid malarial lowlands of Texas for the freedom and fresh air of the high plains and mountains. Take Billy Pickett, the Black cowpuncher who invented and perfected bulldogging; you couldn't call him a cow 'boy'. You try it, and every cowhand--Black, White Red and Brown--would be on you like a flash.

Seems like the word cowboy originated either with Eastern dudes or Southerners; it sure didn't originate among the cowpokes of the plains or mountains. In fact, according to Digger Dan, when an old cowhand called you a cowboy, you knew you were a greenhorn. You knew you had it made when the old puncher called you a good hand, a hard worker and an honest-to-God cowpuncher.

But old Digger Dan says it just wasn't the name that changed over the years. He says a real cowpoke was bashful around the girls, called them Ma'am or Miss, took his hat off indoors and, most importantly, loved and respected the land. Why old Dan says the last real movie cowpoke was "Coop."

Some of you remember him; Gary Cooper, the bashful, quiet, honest-to-the-core portrayer of the cowpuncher in films of the 1930's and 40's.

Old Dan says he had a scary experience a few years back, in one of those tinsel towns. Years ago that would have been New York or L. A., but now it could be right in your own back yard--Denver, the Springs, Albuquerque, maybe even Cheyenne. He said he went into one of those festive places where cowpokes used to visit to have good fellowship; said he had on his Levi's and old, sweaty cowpunchin hat. First thing he got called was a red-necked cowboy. That kinda' made him mad, but then he got to nosing around the urban scene and came across a lot of storefront cowboys (dudes with their Levi's stuffed into their walking boots). Some were even tryin' to ride those mechanical broncs in the bars. No sweat, just a breeze of after shave lotion and cologne.

Digger Dan got to thinking, and what he discovered dismayed him. Some of you old-timers know what he found. You guessed it. Most of what's called cowboys today, could never be called cowpunchers. Most are fair weather "cow gentlemen," or rip-snorting, cud-chewing, bad-tempered cynics, who have the manners and sensitivity of bull elephants in breeding season. And a

vocabulary limited to four-letter words. Digger Dan said he didn't really like my description, but he did admit that most who are called cowboys today are all-too-often the kind no self-respecting rancher would have hired thirty years ago.

"But they're not all that way," Dan said. "Nope. There's still cowpunchers out there. A lot of them have ranches; mostly little ones. Big outfits don't seem to have the sense to hire real cowpokes; get theirs from TV commercials. Tobacco ads I think." He continued, "You can always tell a genuine cowhand. They've got a kind of understanding look in their eyes. Eyes that twinkle when the fun's good and clean. They know hard times. They wrinkle young; been in the sun a lot. Like families and respect their women folk; think of them as equals. Generally try to be like their Dads. Oh, they still do some things they shouldn't; drink too much once in a while. Too many getting lip and mouth cancer from chewin' or emphysema from smoking too much; but that's life. They're mostly land lovers. Respect the land they do; make good neighbors. Most are kinda' sad at what's happening to it."

I looked at Digger Dan and thought to myself; just like him, kinda' generic-like. The kind that should inherit the Earth.

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