

A REBEL.REBEL LETTER

The Marketplace Needed a Cowboy

A patent nobody remembers, two advertisements from 1915, and the question National Day of the Cowboy quietly asks every heritage brand in America.

BY AUSTIN RIPMASTER

Nobody licensed the Fourth of July.

Nobody licensed the cowboy either.

Every July, the marketplace gathers around traditions it did not invent. The flag. The parade. The county fair. The rodeo. The backyard grill. The cowboy. None of these belong to advertisers. They belong to people. They were built by repetition rather than invention, accumulated across generations until they became so familiar we forgot they had authors at all. The cowboy belongs to America, which is another way of saying he belongs to no one, which is another way of saying every brand may borrow him and none may be him.

Which is why the fourth Saturday of July interests me. Since 2005 it has been the National Day of the Cowboy: one of the few days on the calendar when every heritage brand in the Western category stands up at the same hour and answers the same unspoken question in public.

On the twenty-fifth of July, 2026, it fell, and the scroll answered. What follows is what it said.

I. The Scroll Boot Barn is posting the Code of the West. Lucchese is honoring the grit, the work ethic, and the quiet independence that built the American West, and inviting you to explore Western outfits. Thoughtful pieces, respectful pieces, and cover the logos and they could have shipped from one desk. Not because

anyone copied anyone. Because everyone inherited the same symbol, and the symbol arrives with its vocabulary preinstalled.

Cowboys & Indians, the magazine that has covered this world for three decades, posted a rider at full gallop under a Wyoming sky: a legacy of grit, resilience, and an enduring respect for the land, closing on those who find freedom where the trail meets the sky. The photograph is credited to Shane Baxter, and that credit is the only authored thing in the post, the one line that names a person who made something.

Notice the shape of the boot company's post, too, and notice it as a category mechanism rather than one house's lapse, every brand in the scroll does the same thing. It moves from the grit and the work ethic and the quiet independence to an invitation to explore Western outfits, in one breath, without a seam. The tribute arrives carrying the transaction. That is not hypocrisy; it is the job the tribute was hired to do.

Set the magazine's caption beside the boot company's. Grit. Resilience. Respect for the land. Grit. Work ethic. Quiet independence. A publication whose entire business is this world, and a brand selling into it, arrived at the

same words on the same morning. Neither did anything wrong. That is what a symbol does to everyone who reaches for it: it hands them the vocabulary before they have thought of one.

But two posts in that morning's scroll are stronger than the rest, and it is worth being precise about why.

Cavender's came closest to saying out loud what this letter is going to spend twelve pages saying. The caption: we don't just celebrate the cowboy spirit; we live it every day. That is the right sentence. It names the exact distinction the day is failing.

It arrives as a produced film that ends on a logo over a field at golden hour, the tagline set in type. THIS IS HOW WE LIVE.

The family whose name is on those stores may well live precisely as the caption says. That is what makes this the hardest case in the scroll rather than the easiest one. A house that lives it says so in the same words a house that doesn't would use, and the saying is what flattens them together. Claiming standing and having it are different acts, and only one of them is visible from the outside.

Which is what the next two did differently. Neither claimed anything.

Stetson asked a question. That sounds like a small thing and it is the whole editorial act.

The question was not what the cowboy means to America. It was what a real cowboy means to you, put to Grant Golliher, author of *Think Like a Horse* and owner of the Diamond Cross Ranch, a man who could only answer it from inside. And his answer goes where brand copy cannot follow: the cowboy is out on the

range most of the time, not seen, tending cattle because he knows cattle. Then it's in his heart. It was in his heart when he was a boy, before he ever was one.

Consider who asked. Stetson is not a hat company that happens to sell to cowboys. Stetson is the word Americans use when they mean the hat, the brand name that became the symbol so completely that the symbol answers to it. A house in that position could assert anything about the cowboy and be believed. It asked a rancher a question instead, and then got out of the way of the answer.

And Mark Maggiori posted a painting. A rider under a gathering storm, twenty-seven thousand likes by mid-morning, no product, no campaign, no call to action of any kind. The magazine's rider, that same morning, drew a hundred and seventy-eight. I don't offer that as a controlled comparison; the accounts are not the same size. I offer it because the day's most-carried image was made by the man who posted it, and the rest of us were passing along pictures of a world we were describing. It is the strongest image of the day, and it is strong for a reason no brand can borrow: Maggiori earns the canvas. He has painted the rider and the sky one canvas at a time, in the only currency the tradition accepts, which is work inside it. When a painter posts the cowboy, it is a contribution. When a brand posts the cowboy, it is a citation.

What separates the strong pieces from the rest is not sincerity, everyone in the scroll is sincere. It is vantage. Ask of every post the same question: from where does the speaker view the subject? The brand-voiced pieces view the cowboy from the grandstand, at parade distance, the silhouette against the sky. Golliher speaks from inside the fence, where the cowboy is mostly not viewed at all. Maggiori paints from the same side. Contribution and citation are just the two ends of that distance.

And then there is Hyer, which did not post the cowboy at all.

Four days ago the Olathe house announced a film: Mind in the Middle. The Comeback of Stetson Wright, releasing on its own YouTube channel the day after the holiday. No product in the frame. A man's face under a hat, a logo small in the corner, and a title lifted from inside the discipline rather than from the category, mind in the middle is what a rider is trying to keep, not a value a brand is trying to claim. The post is co-authored with the athlete himself. It drew two thousand seven hundred.

Hyer had every excuse to post the symbol. Its founding is the same story I am about to tell you about somebody else: a German immigrant named William Hyer taught his son the boot trade; the son, Charles, opened a shop in Olathe in 1875; a cowboy nobody ever named came in off the Kansas City stockyards and asked for something better than what the war had left him. The house answered with a boot, and then answered the larger problem with an instrument, a measurement chart, mailed out with its flyers, so a man on the remotest ranch could send his own dimensions in and get boots that fit. They still peg with lemonwood.

That house could have written the heritage post in its sleep. It made a documentary about a living man instead, and put it on a channel it owns.

Note what Hyer did not claim, too. The company's founding legend, the first cowboy boot, is exactly that, a legend, hedged in every serious account with tradition credits and according to legend. The measurement chart is not a legend. It is a record. On the day the category reached for the myth, the house with the most quotable myth available reached for a man with a name.

So before noon the day had run its own experiment and published the results.

Three positions, and they sort by vantage rather than by budget.

Most of the category described the cowboy from outside, in the words the category keeps on hand. Cavender's claimed to be him, which is a better instinct and a harder thing to prove, because the claim arrives in the register

where every house sounds sincere. And two houses did the only thing that settles it: they put a man who actually is one in front of the audience and got out of the way. Stetson put the question inside the fence. Hyer put the camera there.

The painter and the rancher never had to do any of this. That is where they live.

Which made me wonder how the oldest company in the scroll talked back when its founders were the practitioners.

The oldest Lucchese advertisements I could find do not mention cowboys.

II. Stockmen, Attention The advertisement ran in San Antonio in 1915. The company was thirty-two years old, a boot and shoe factory at 316 East Houston Street, and this is the entire text:

STOCKMEN, ATTENTION

We know you are particular about your footwear. Therefore, particular stockmen wear our boots. It's a "cinch" those made by us will give perfect satisfaction. Send for measuring blank.

REPAIRING

S. LUCCHESI · Boot & Shoe Factory · 316 E. Houston St.

Read the opening again. We know you are particular. That may be the most confident sentence in American advertising, and it is confident about the customer, not the product. It does not create a desire. It does not manufacture an anxiety and sell the cure. It acknowledges a standard the reader already holds and proposes to meet it. The entire persuasive apparatus of the modern category, the grit, the heritage, the West that lives in you, is absent, because

the man being addressed did not need to be told who he was. He needed boots. The vantage is the counter, not the grandstand.

A second advertisement from the same year makes the logic explicit, in a sentence whose grammar buckles under its own compression:

The stockman is particular about his foot-wear. Lucchese is particular in the making of his boots is why the wise cowman sends his measure to Lucchese.

A copywriter would have fixed that sentence. A bootmaker wrote it. Two kinds of particular, welded into one seam that doesn't quite close, and the seam is the proof of authorship. Nobody polished this. Somebody who made boots all day wrote down why his customers came back, and paid the paper to print it.

And notice what appears in both advertisements, set off in its own line, a word no heritage campaign would lead with today:

REPAIRING

Repairing of all kinds and quickly done.

The factory that made the boots wanted you to know it would fix them. Both times it advertised, it advertised the repair alongside the sale. The only call to action in either piece is send for measuring blank, the company wasn't asking for your attention. It was asking for your measurements.

The advertisement does not create aspiration. It acknowledges standards.

III. The Patent Then I found the document that reads like the company's founding philosophy, and it is not an advertisement at all.

United States Patent 1,089,567. Boot Tree Former. Application filed August 5, 1911. Granted March 10, 1914. Seven figures across one sheet, drawn by

the Columbia Planograph Company of Washington: an adjustable wooden former, split along its length, with a threaded spreading mechanism at its core, designed to be inserted into a boot after wear so the leather holds its shape.

Sit with what this is. Two and a half years of a working bootmaker's attention, filed, examined and granted, spent not on a prettier boot, not on a faster process, not on one more reason to buy one more pair. Spent on a device to preserve the pair already sold. The invention presumes the sale has happened and asks what the maker still owes. The answer, apparently, was: help the object last.

That is a complete commercial philosophy in a single patent drawing. The sale is not the end of the relationship; it is the beginning of custody. Repair advertised beside every sale. A former to hold the boot's shape between wearings. Long before sustainability became a marketing category, long before circular commerce had a name, ninety-seven years before Patagonia asked America not to buy the jacket, the philosophy was already on file at the Patent Office. Stewardship, not as copy. As engineering.

And here the archive does something the mythology cannot. The name on the patent is not the name on the advertisements. The ads are signed S. Lucchese. Salvatore, the founder the company's timeline remembers, the immigrant from Palermo whose story anchors every anniversary campaign. The patent is signed Michele Lucchese, in a careful hand above the word Inventor, a Lucchese the brand's own published history never mentions. The mythology kept one brother. The record kept them both.

One more thing. Open the company's catalog today and you will find cedar boot trees, a signature accessory, sold to help your boots keep their look, shape, and fit for years. The patent expired a century ago. The philosophy is still in the product line. I would bet the company can no longer tell you why.

It was not an advertisement. It was engineering.

The letters are free. The record is the point.

I V. The Marketplace Needed a Cowboy The stockman never did.

He was not a symbol. He was a customer, a man with cattle, a season, and a foot's worth of measurements to send in, who judged a boot by whether it survived him. The company's entire address was calibrated to that man. It assumed his standards, requested his dimensions, and committed to his repairs.

Then the customer changed, and the direction of address reversed.

Commerce has always translated lived experience into portable symbols; it is how culture spreads, and there is nothing dishonorable in it. The ranch became a silhouette. The boot became identity. The hat became aspiration. The work became an aesthetic. The stockman, the particular man with the particular standards, became the cowboy, a figure who belongs to everyone precisely because he no longer works for anyone. Founders almost never begin there. Levi Strauss began with rivets, because pockets tore. Yvon Chouinard began forging pitons, because the available ones failed. The Lucchese brothers began with a measuring blank and a repair bench. Marketing arrives later. Mythology arrives later still. And eventually, this is the cost, the symbol becomes more familiar than the life that created it, and the company finds itself writing to spectators in the vocabulary of a man it no longer measures.

That is what the day actually tests. Not whether a brand has a story. Whether it remembers which direction its founders were facing.

V. The Backdrop I have standing in this. Years ago we made a campaign for Lucchese called The Living Cowboy. Jess Oldham and Cat Edwards stand before a painted Western backdrop, exactly the flat, art-directed West a

century of advertising has trained the eye to expect. Then the backdrop falls away, they mount, and they ride into the actual West Texas horizon.

At the time I thought we were making a film about authenticity. I now think we were making a film about direction. The camera was never exposing the cowboy. It was exposing the backdrop, the painted symbol, held up between the viewer and the working land.

Years later I watched some of that same imagery reappear beside an invitation to explore Western outfits. Nothing had changed about the photography. Everything had changed about the editorial point of view. The campaign that rejected the costume had quietly become one.

Not because anyone intended it. Not because anyone at the house stopped caring. Because that is what a symbol does when no editor is standing beside it. The marketplace drifts toward the backdrop the way water drifts toward the sea, and it takes a deliberate act of custody, a refusal, renewed on schedule, to keep facing the other way.

One letter at a time. Nothing written for reach.

VI. What Falls to the Houses The answer is not another campaign. Every house in the category can commission the rider and the sky, and every house does, and the machines that now answer the world's questions will retrieve them together, because a category that sounds like one company is, to a retrieval system, one company. Awareness converges. Records don't.

What the heritage houses hold, and almost none of them use, is the archive. And the distinction that matters is the one between an archive and a corpus. An archive stores documents. A corpus interprets them. The patent is interesting because it reveals a philosophy. The repair line is interesting because it reveals a value. The measuring blank is interesting because it reveals respect. None of these artifacts means anything alone; curated

together, they become a point of view no competitor can borrow, because no competitor's founders filed it.

Remember this morning's experiment. The two voices that carried the day belonged to a rancher and a painter, people with standing inside the tradition, earned in the only currency it accepts. The heritage houses do not need to rent that standing. Their archives are full of it, because the founders were the practitioners, and the archive is where their voices are still on file.

Most heritage companies do not suffer from a lack of history. They suffer from not yet knowing what a record is worth in a retrieval age. The discipline optimized to myth and segmentation for thirty years, and the legend tested better than the document every time. What changed is who is reading. The 1915 advertisements have been sitting in the newspaper record for a hundred and eleven years. The patent has been sitting at the Patent Office for a hundred and twelve. The house they belong to spent that Saturday, like every house in the category, celebrating the symbol, while the documents that would distinguish it from every other voice in the scroll sat exactly where the founders left them.

Think of it as a ledger, because that is what it is.

Every sentence a house publishes is a deposit, and there are only two accounts open to it. Its own corpus, which compounds, and which no competitor can draw against. Or the category's, which is pooled, everyone deposits, everyone withdraws, and the balance belongs to nobody.

Grit is a deposit in the pooled account. So is heritage, and craftsmanship, and the quiet independence that built the American West. They are not wrong words. They are simply words paid into an account with a hundred other names on it, and when a machine goes looking for whom to credit, a pooled account has no owner to name. The house that writes them has not said nothing. It has said something, accurately, into a fund it does not hold.

Stockmen, attention is a deposit in the first account. It has been earning for a hundred and eleven years.

There are two instruments a house can hold up to its audience: a mirror, or a magnet. The shopper survey is a mirror. It asks the market what it already is and reflects the average back, politely, at scale, and since every competitor's mirror faces the same crowd, every reflection matches. That is where the one voice in the scroll comes from. The particular man is a magnet: one customer, held to standards, whom the company addresses directly and lets everyone else overhear. The 1915 advertisement is a magnet document. It names its man in the first word, Stockmen, and a hundred and eleven years later, we are still leaning in.

Imagine the house writing to that man today. Not a demographic. A man. He mends his own fence. He is out of sight most of the year, and the thing he is was in his heart before he ever became it. What would the company say to him? It already knows. It wrote it in 1915.

We know you are particular.

History remembers the companies that served the practitioner. The marketplace remembers the companies that served the symbol. The rare houses that survive with their meaning intact are the ones that do both without confusing the order.

VII. The Boots Disagree I have been living with this question longer than one news cycle, because I have written a novel about it. It is called ROOMS, the first book of a cycle called UNIFORMS: How America Dressed Itself, published by Rebel.Rebel Press under the name A.K. Nolan, which is a pen name of this house. It is fiction, invented in the places novels invent, about the century in which America turned working clothes into a national costume, and about the people who did the measuring.

Its prologue is titled "America Needed a Costume," and it ends:

The myth insists the cowboy needed no one. The boots disagree.

That is the whole argument of this letter, arrived at from the other side. The myth requires the cowboy to be alone, self-made, unmeasured, a silhouette against the sky, viewed from a distance. Golliher's cowboy, remember, is mostly not viewed at all. The boots know better. A boot is a record of an actual man: his foot, his stance, his wear pattern, his repairs. Somebody took the measurements. Somebody kept the blank on

file. Somebody patented a device so the boots would hold their shape through another season, because the man inside them had more seasons to work. The cowboy is what the marketplace made of him. The stockman is what the boots remember.

The marketplace needed a cowboy, and it got him, he is in every scroll today, saluted by every logo, owned by none.

The founders needed a customer. So they measured him.

Belonging survives where the measurements are kept.

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