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Review of *Catch Rope: The Long Arm of the Cowboy: The History and Evolution of Ranch Roping* By John R. Erickson

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Coleman, Michael C., "Review of *Catch Rope: The Long Arm of the Cowboy: The History and Evolution of Ranch Roping* By John R. Erickson" (1996). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1096.

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Catch Rope: The Long Arm of the Cowboy: The History and Evolution of Ranch Roping. By John R. Erickson. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1994. Photographs, annotated bibliography, index. xii + 174 pp. \$26.50.

"Cowboying has always been an assault on common sense," writes John R. Erickson. "There never was any money in it . . . and the ratio of hours-to-dollars, multiplied by broken bones, has made it something close to folly" (p. 125). In this affectionate study of the art of catch roping, Erickson convincingly shows just how hard, dangerous, and near plumb crazy a cowboy's life could become. But, as the author also convincingly shows, the cowboy was "a workingman. He was shaped and defined by his work. Like most of us, he was at his best when he was doing his job, using his tools and skills to accomplish

difficult tasks" (p. ix). The most important tools were his horse and catch rope.

Erickson himself worked for eight years as a roping cowboy and has written other books on the West; he spent seven additional years researching *Catch Rope*. Although relying heavily on anecdote, Erickson carefully notes his sources and is critical of writers who make undocumented claims. The book mixes historical analysis with tall and not-so-tall tales, interviews, and personal experience, all to communicate both the method and the madness of the roping cowboys.

Using secondary accounts, Erickson suggests the antiquity of the catch rope (what we greenhorns call the lasso or lariat, terms Erickson rarely uses). He then examines a basic two-fold division in ranching traditions. Among other distinguishing characteristics, the Hispanic *vaquero* used the "dallying" technique: he loosely bound his rope around the saddle horn, often leaving slack between horse and roped cow. The Anglo/African American "cowboy" generally used a "hard tie" technique: he tied the rope fast to the saddle horn and trained his horse to move away from the roped animal. Drawing partly on experience, Erickson judiciously evaluates the two traditions and techniques, noting the value of each in different situations—indeed, some cowboys have used both. The first half of the book ends on an ironic note. By about the 1950s roping had almost died out on many cattle ranches. Working cowboys had to "relearn the ropes," so to speak, from rodeo performers to reintroduce roping on the range. By then, sadly, much of the old lore had been lost, and the book is a generally successful salvage archaeology of catch roping. To his credit, Erickson the range cowboy admits to being bested by the rodeo men in a recent roping competition.

As a non-cowboy, I found the historical sections of the book most enjoyable. The remainder deals heavily with roping techniques and situations in which the rope "ort" or "ort not to be" employed. There are many clear photographs and amusingly instructive cartoons. Line illustrations or diagrams would

have further helped this reviewer figure out the throwing techniques. The study would make an ideal computer-readable book, complete with film clips of the many throws, viewable in slow motion.

Erickson sets his account in the literature of cowboys and roping and supplies a short but useful annotated bibliography. There is nothing here of the "New Western History," however, and little about socio-economic conditions, gender issues, Indians, or African American cowboys. Sharply focused on catch

roping, the book nevertheless communicates well the tribulations and satisfactions of life on the range. The many quotations and paraphrases of stories by fellow cowboys give *Catch Rope* its evocative sense of camaraderie: we feel like we're sitting around a campfire with the author and his friends. And it is a good feeling.

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