

Ancestry

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My fans called me Deadwood Dick, but Nate Love was my real name, and as everyone knows I won the South Dakota rodeo in 1876. In those days, rodeo competitions had very few rules, but the aim was always the same: to rope, throw, tie, bridle, saddle and mount a wild horse, and to do so in the shortest possible time. I was tested with horses that bolted and pitched but I hung on like a leech. Fearless and undaunted, I was the finest roper of the West, and the best shot as well, earning first place in at least six events.

If you want to know how I became the best and most celebrated rodeo rider in the country, read on.

To be honest I didn't have the best start in life. My paternal grandparents were captured in what is now called Angola and transported to Virginia against their will in 1788. They were set to work on a plantation just outside Richmond, but at that time, tobacco was not the only export. Black women like my grandmother were bred to increase the number of enslaved people on the estate, and as soon as they were old enough my father and his siblings were separated and sold to the highest bidder.

My father was bought by Mr Love and sent to work on his new plantation, miles away in Tennessee. I don't know anything about my mother's background, but when I was born sometime in June 1854, my parents, Jordan, my older brother, Sally, my sister and I lived in a ramshackle log cabin at the end of a long dusty track. As soon as I could walk, I was sent out to the tobacco fields, picking off worms and topping the plants. I escaped the lash of the overseer, and the suffering it brought, but to this day my blood boils at the thought that humans or animals could be treated this way.

When I was 11 years old, the civil war ended and slavery was abolished. At first, no one told us we were free, but when we eventually found out, papa rented some land from the Master and tried to eke a living out of the poor soil. Not long after the first crops were in the ground, father took sick and died. At that point I left home, never to return.

I fell in with a group of vagabonds, roaming the country and taking whatever work we could find. I ended up on a cattle ranch and as they say, the rest is history. Like most other cowboys I was a hired hand, good with horses and skilled in branding and rounding up. Our job was to lead herds of cattle through canyons and gorges and protect them from attack across miles of rough country.

Buffalo stampedes were the worst but nowhere was safe from marauding rustlers or from Indians surrounding our camps at night. I have fourteen bullet wounds to my name so I can tell you, this was not an easy life, but it was a life that I grew to love.

It wasn't long before I was put in charge of a team of men. I was popular and my reputation grew, not least because I was one of the few who refused to use a whip. I never said why, but I expect you can guess this had something to do with my previous life on the plantation.

Ancestries are never clear cut, and for freed slaves like me, the camaraderie of the open road took no account of race or ethnicity. For us, skill was all. Of course, we weren't the first to learn the ropes. Generations of Spanish and Mexican Vaqueros had been corralling and herding animals long before Black cowboys arrived on the scene, but the rodeos gave us a chance to prove ourselves and show that newcomers can pick up techniques and keep cultural traditions alive.

This picture shows me at the top of my game.



From what I hear, rodeos have been taken over, regulated and turned into multi-million-dollar professional businesses from which Blacks, Mexicans and American Indians are routinely excluded. On the plus side, people tell me the whip has been banned from modern competitions. I can't take any credit for this, but I've always known that some traditions are wrong.

Whipping is not the only thing that's changed. Cattle are no longer driven across the country and when the land was enclosed and fenced our work dried up. Everyone moved on to a new job, me included. I didn't mind the life of a train conductor. At least I got to travel, and to be honest I was getting a bit long in the tooth: too old to be sleeping under the stars, night after night.

In telling you this story – the story of me, Nate Love, the best cowboy in the world – I want to remind you that there is never just one tale to tell and that the fabric of our lives is made of interwoven ancestries. I also want to remind you that nothing stays the same forever. Transitions from the slave trade to its abolition and from the hard graft of cattle ranching to spectator sport are part of my history, but not my history alone.