



Station 4: Compton Cowboys

Established in the 1980s, Compton Cowboys met while participating in a non-profit that aimed to keep youth from gang life and gun violence through horseback riding. The Compton Cowboys have participated in rodeos, featured in fashion campaigns such as Pyer Moss, and interviewed by numerous media outlets. Read the below profile of the Compton Cowboys and respond to the following questions.

For the Compton Cowboys, Horseback Riding Is a Legacy, and Protection

A group of childhood friends wants to create a safer community and challenge the notion that African-Americans can't be cowboys.

By Walter Thompson-Hernández, *The New York Times*, March 31, 2018

For Anthony Harris, 35, walking to the corner store to buy a soda in his hometown, Compton, Calif., often comes with the risk of being stopped and searched by the police. But when Mr. Harris and other members of a group of horse riders known as the “Compton Cowboys” choose to ride their horses to the store, something entirely different happens.

“They don’t pull us over or search us when we’re on the horses,” Mr. Harris said while riding a dark brown horse named Koda as two police cars slowly drove past him on a recent trip to the store. “They would have thought we were gangbangers and had guns or dope on us if we weren’t riding, but these horses protect us from all of that.”

The Compton Cowboys, composed of 10 friends who have known one another since childhood, but officially came together as a group in 2017, are on a mission to combat negative stereotypes about African-Americans and the city of Compton through horseback riding.

The tight-knit group first met more than 20 years ago as members of the Compton Jr. Posse, a nonprofit organization founded by Mayisha Akbar in Richland Farms, a semirural area in Compton that has been home to African-American horse riders since the mid-20th century. Like other nonprofits, the Compton Jr. Posse and the Compton Cowboys rely heavily on donations from alumni, government grants and local community support used to sustain the cost of the horses on the ranch.

Most of the Compton Cowboys were first encouraged to join the organization by friends or relatives who believed horse riding would offer an alternative to gangs and violence prevalent throughout the city.

“When I was 11, I saw a black guy who was washing his horses outside of his home,” said Charles Harris, 29. “I walked up to him and started asking him questions about horses because I had only seen horses on TV before that.”

The man told him about the Compton Jr. Posse. The next day, Mr. Harris and his mother signed the papers and paid a fee to be a member.



For the Compton Cowboys, living in a community best known for the gangster rap group N.W.A. and high murder rates — 35 murders in 2016, with the crime index being nearly double the average in the United States, despite the fact that it has declined since 2002 — has been a motivating factor in their choices to ride horses.

“We’ve always wanted to give people a different side of Compton besides gangster rap and basketball,” said Leighton BeReal, 28, a member of the group who was born and raised in Compton...

Still, while the Compton Cowboys believe that they are helping to eradicate some of the negative stigmas of their city, their mission is to also break into a predominantly white western rodeo circuit. The group members have individually tried to do so over the years, albeit with some challenges. A typical horse can cost \$10,000 to \$50,000, depending on the breed, but the Compton Cowboys have had to rely on auctioned horses that cost approximately \$200, and were victims of abuse, malnourishment and other forms of trauma.

Resources are scarce, and they often rely on secondhand riding gear, which can put them at a disadvantage when riding against those with more resources. In addition, training with a limited number of saddles often means having to ride “bareback,” which, according to Randy Hook, has now become a staple of their style. Their unique style, however, is believed to be one of their strengths as they continue to challenge conventional cowboy culture in a rodeo world that often prides itself on tradition.

“We’re different than most cowboys because we wear Air Jordan’s, Gucci belts and baseball hats while we ride,” Anthony Harris said. “But we could also dress like other cowboys.”

For the Compton Cowboys, riding through the city brings different reactions from local residents. Some react to the sight of African-American men on horses with fascination and disbelief, creating what Mr. Hook, 28, describes as a “Compton paparazzi” experience. But some are used to seeing them, scarcely pausing to take a second look.

Combating the stereotype that African-Americans do not ride horses has always been an issue for the group, particularly because they are largely omitted from media like movies and books. African-American cowboys first emerged in the southwest United States at the conclusion of the Civil War, when freed African-American slaves migrated west to seek opportunities in a host of professions including cow herders and ranchers. According to William Loren Katz, author of “The Black West: A Documentary and Pictorial History of the African-American Role in the Westward Expansion of the United States” there were 5,000 to 8,000 black cowboys and cowgirls after the Civil War when wild herds of cattle were rapidly growing throughout the West.

“Being a black cowboy opened up professions for black men that they could not find in the North or South where they were often forced to work as street cleaners and elevator operators,” he said. Mr. Katz also said that black cowboys — although often erased from historical narratives — are an indelible part of United States history.





Questions:

What are some of the goals of the Compton Cowboys?

According to the *New York Times* piece, what are some of the obstacles the Compton Cowboys confront?

How are the Compton Cowboys different from popular depictions of the cowboy? Why is this significant?