

*Tells the story of the dude ranch and how it wove its way into American life and culture*

## **American Dude Ranch**

*A Touch of the Cowboy and the Thrill of the West*

By Lynn Downey

Viewers of films and television shows might imagine the dude ranch as something not quite legitimate, a place where city dwellers pretend to be cowboys in amusingly inauthentic fashion. But the tradition of the dude ranch, America's original western vacation, is much more interesting and deeply connected with the culture and history of the American West. In *American Dude Ranch*, Lynn Downey opens new perspectives on this buckaroo getaway, with all its implications for deciphering the American imagination.

Dude ranching began in the 1880s when cattle ranches ruled the West. Men, and a few women, left the comforts of their eastern lives to experience the world of the cowboy. But by the end of the century, the cattleman's West was fading, and many ranchers turned to wrangling dudes instead of livestock. What began as a way for ranching to survive became a new industry, and as the twentieth century progressed, the dude ranch wove its way into American life and culture. Wyoming dude ranches hosted silent picture shoots, superstars such as Gene Autry were featured in dude film plots, fashion designers and companies like Levi Strauss & Co. replicated the films' western styles, and novelists Zane Grey and Mary Roberts Rinehart moved dude ranching into popular literature.

Downey follows dude ranching across the years, tracing its influence on everything from clothing to cooking and showing how ranchers adapted to changing times and vacation trends. Her book also offers a rare look at women's place in this story, as they found personal and professional satisfaction in running their own dude ranches.

However contested and complicated, western history is one of America's national origin stories that we turn to in times of cultural upheaval. Dude ranches provide a tangible link from the real to the imagined past, and their persistence and popularity demonstrate how significant this link remains. This book tells their story—in all its familiar, eccentric, and often surprising detail.

**Lynn Downey** is an independent writer, archivist, and historian. She is the author of *Arequipa Sanatorium: Life in California's Lung Resort for Women* and the award-winning debut novel, *Dudes Rush In*.

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FOR AUTHOR INTERVIEWS AND OTHER PUBLICITY INQUIRIES CONTACT:

KATIE BAKER, DIRECTOR OF MARKETING AND SALES

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA PRESS

TEL: 405 325 3200

FAX: 405 325 4000

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