



On the Trail of the Ancestors: A Black Cowboy's Ride Across America

Lisa K. Winkler

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Miles J. Dean, a Newark, NJ schoolteacher, rode his horse from New York to California to celebrate the contributions African Americans made in the settling of the United States. During his six-month, 5,000-mile journey, Dean, a 57-year-old African American, addressed people along the way at schools and colleges, community organizations, and penal institutions. He met hundreds of Americans through informal encounters at campgrounds, Wal-Mart parking lots, restaurants, and country stores. With each, he shared his reasons for the journey and inspired others to fulfil their dreams. Growing up in Brooklyn, New York, Dean first learned about cowboys from watching television. Like any boy at that time, he wanted to be like those heroes and pretended to be a cowboy. He galloped through the streets on his bicycle, ambushing outlaws on street corners. Although Hollywood helped keep his dream alive, the cowboys on TV didn't look like Dean. At age 23, he saw Sidney Poitier play a cowboy in the 1972 film, *Buck and the Preacher*, and realized he too could be a cowboy. He deferred his teenage dream another 10 years before he could afford riding lessons and eventually bought his first horse. But the film inspired him to explore the African American history he never learned in school, specifically the contributions made during the 1500-1800s when horses were the primary means of transportation. He knew he wanted to make a cross-country journey and retrace the steps of these early pioneers; it was just a question of when. On September 22, 2007, Dean brought his horse, Sankofa, a 12-year-old Arabian stallion into New York City and rode to the African Burial Grounds, in lower Manhattan to begin his journey. Granted an unpaid leave of absence from his 5th grade social studies position, he embarked on this odyssey he had dreamed about for nearly 35 years. Six months later, Dean completed the trip with a celebration at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles. In between he visited several historical monuments, paying homage to history's forgotten heroes, including the black jockeys at Kentucky's Churchill Downs and soldiers at Tennessee's African American Civil War Cemetery. His travels through Memphis and Little Rock evoked his own memories of growing up during the Civil Rights Movement. His ride through the harsh deserts of the Southwest and across California's formidable Chocolate Mountains allowed him to re-enact the conditions and perils faced by early cowboys and marshals. *On the Trail of the Ancestors: A Black Cowboy's Ride Across America* recounts how one man followed his childhood dream. Dean's commitment to his journey helped him battle a brain tumor; his gratitude to his ancestors fortified his resilience; and his integrity to honoring heroes in history via his horse kept him on road. This book chronicles Dean's cross-country journey and introduces readers to people from all cultural and social backgrounds. Dean's many encounters with strangers who assisted him, his meetings with students, his participation in local community parades and other events as he travelled bring to life the complex tapestry of the country. As Dean travels from state to state, the reader learns about African Americans who contributed to US history. Dean's relationship with his horse Sankofa provides insights about what it is like to ride a horse for six months. Whether navigating dangerous terrain and city traffic, riding long distances, handling medical problems for him and the horse, or facing the challenges of acquiring the four relief horses, his anecdotes regale readers with the visceral pleasures and difficulties of such a journey. Dean's story demonstrates that an ordinary person can accomplish the extraordinary.



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