



Social Studies

Genre

Informational Nonfiction

gives facts about real things, people, or events.



Text Feature

A **Map** typically shows the relative position and size of the places represented.

Content Vocabulary

ranchos

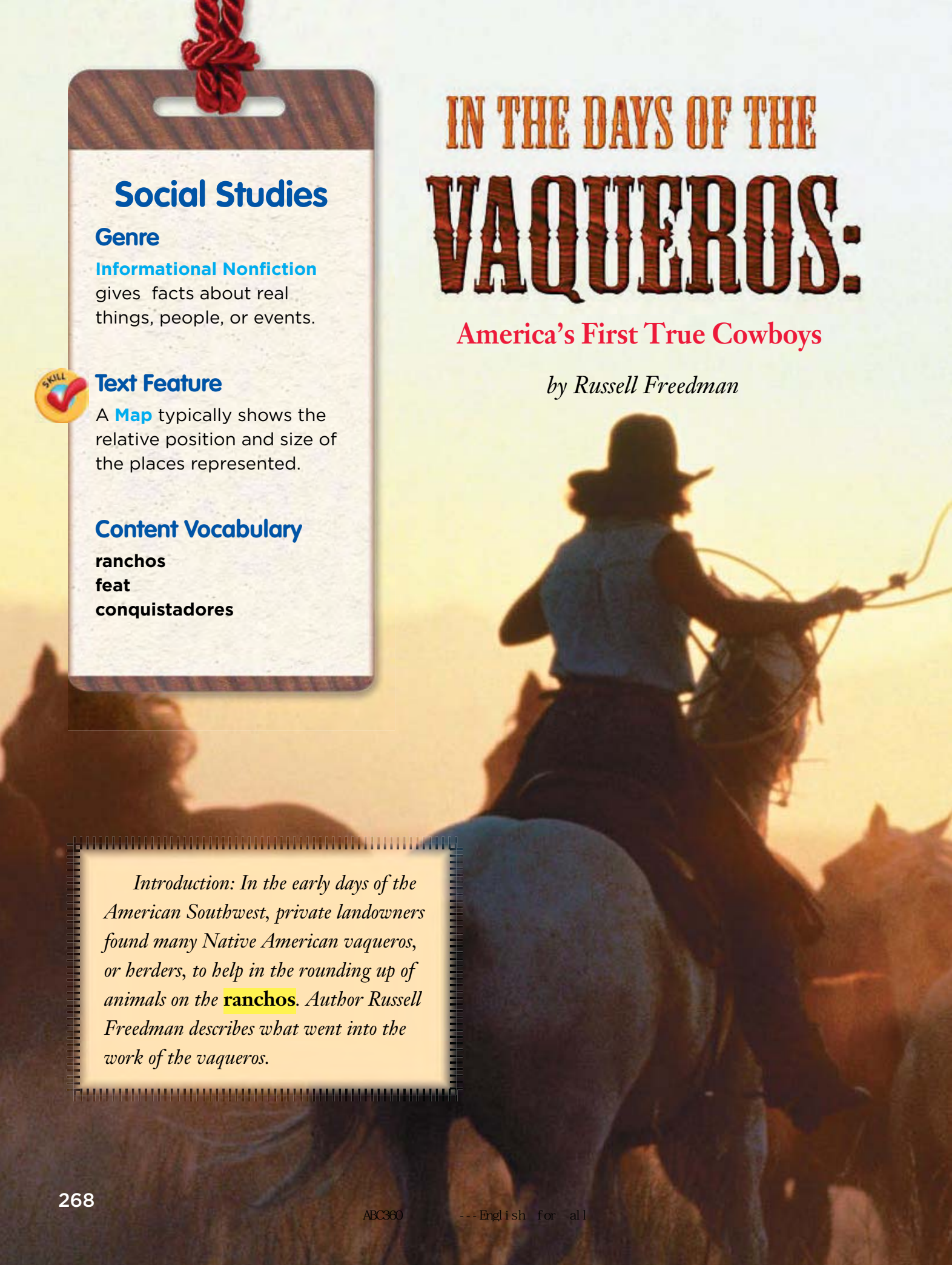
feat

conquistadores

IN THE DAYS OF THE VAQUEROS:

America's First True Cowboys

by Russell Freedman



*Introduction: In the early days of the American Southwest, private landowners found many Native American vaqueros, or herders, to help in the rounding up of animals on the **ranchos**. Author Russell Freedman describes what went into the work of the vaqueros.*

Tools of the Trade

Over the centuries, ranching changed very little in New Spain. The most important tools for working cattle on the open range continued to be the vaquero's horse and his lariat.

He looked upon his lariat as his good right arm, and it was seldom out of reach of his nimble fingers. With it, he was ready for almost any task that came along.

He made his lariat himself, cutting long strips of untanned cowhide, which he soaked and stretched until they were pliable. Then he braided the leather strips into a rope, which he stretched again, oiled, and softened, working it over with loving care until he was satisfied that it was ready to use.

A typical lariat was about 60 feet long and as thick around as a man's little finger. There were longer ropes, *reatas largas*, which ran to 110 feet or more. Children had their own pint-sized lariats. It seemed that everyone was always roping for practice, and that every target was fair game. Dogs, pigs, and chickens became as expert at dodging the rope as the vaqueros were at throwing it.

Coyotes were considered the toughest wild animals to rope, and a man who managed to snare one was greatly admired. While he took pride in his **feat**, he would say with modesty, "*Ese fue un supo,*" "That was a lucky throw."



This map shows the Southwest in 1840.



**A Vaquero by Frederic Remington
circa 1881-1909**

Vaqueros also made fine horsehair ropes, *mecates*, which were used for reins and halters. Different colors of hair were blended together, forming ropes that were not only strong but beautiful.

In the early days, vaqueros made their own saddles as well. They took as a model the old Spanish war saddle on which the **conquistadores** had ridden into Mexico, and they gradually transformed it to meet the special needs of cowhands working in cattle country.

They added a large round-topped saddle horn as a sturdy anchor to which their lariats could be secured when they roped a steer. They made the saddle's stirrup straps longer,

allowing the rider to get a better knee grip. The stirrups themselves were carved out of wood. They were big enough to let a man stand upright while riding down a steep slope or trotting along the trail.

Saddles became stronger and more compact. At first, vaqueros placed a blanket, a piece of leather, or an animal skin over the seat of the saddle to provide a little comfort. Later they devised the *mochila*, a removable leather covering that fit snugly over the entire saddle and often had built-in saddlebags.

Vaqueros working in brush country covered their stirrups with leather casings called *tapaderas*, or taps, which shielded the rider's feet from cactus thorns. In the deserts of northwestern Mexico, saddles were rigged with *armas*, huge slabs of cowhide that hung down from the saddle on either side, covering and protecting the rider's thighs and lower legs.

Later, vaqueros attached smaller, lightweight *armitas* directly to their legs. These in turn developed into seatless leather leggings called *chaparreras*, or chaps, for protection while riding through mesquite and chaparral thickets. Chaps also protected a rider against rope burns, abrasions from trees and corral posts, and horse bites. They were made of smooth buckskin, or of goat, sheep, wolf, bear, or lion pelts with the wool or fur left on the outside of the chaps.

Since the vaquero often spent his days from sunrise to sunset in the saddle, no single piece of equipment was more important. A well-made saddle, lovingly maintained, was important to his horse, too. A rider with a gentle hand and a good rig could travel for hours and still have a healthy horse, but a poorly made saddle could make a horse sore in no time at all.

Connect and Compare



1. Study the map on page 269. What are some of the differences between this map and the United States today? **Reading a Map**
2. What would happen to a vaquero if his saddle was lost or damaged? **Analyze**
3. Think about this selection and *Juan Verdades*. How is Juan's life the same as and different from that of a vaquero? **Reading/Writing Across Texts**



Social Studies Activity

Research information about vaqueros. Then imagine that you are a vaquero living on a California rancho. Write a journal entry that describes your day. Include information that you learned from your research.



Find out more about vaqueros at www.macmillanmh.com

Writer's Craft

Voice

A writer's individual **voice** is important when describing someone. Voice can also tell something about the narrator. Choose words that make your writing more interesting.

Write a Character Sketch

The Storyteller

by Manny R.

I wanted readers to understand how I feel about Mando. I used descriptive language in my sketch.

Mando is quite the storyteller. He can capture the attention of any audience. With his wild, curly hair and his huge, sparkly eyes, Mando never seems to stop moving.

Mando spins tales about the most amazing subjects. He describes a family with a pet elephant in their home. He jokes about a wind that blows a steak off a barbecue and onto a neighbor's plate two houses away. He describes all of these scenes with a lot of elaborate hand waving.

He always has a crowd around him. No matter where we go, people always end up talking to Mando. Maybe it's because even though he likes talking, Mando is a good listener, too.

People often question the things Mando says. When he is asked if his stories are true, Mando always insists they are, with a wink. So we never know if he really believes them or not. Mando always keeps us guessing.

I used a specific voice to help bring Mando to life.



Your Turn

Write a few paragraphs about an interesting fictional person or animal. Be sure that readers can tell what your view of this character is through your use of a specific voice and descriptive words. Use the Writer's Checklist to check your writing.



Writer's Checklist

- Ideas and Content:** Is my character sketch clear?
- Organization:** Did I develop my character sketch around a central theme?
- Voice:** Do the details and the **voice** tell how I feel? Do they make my writing more interesting?
- Word Choice:** Did I choose strong action verbs to tell what happens?
- Sentence Fluency:** Did I vary my sentence structures and lengths?
- Conventions:** Do my subjects and verbs agree? Did I check my spelling?