Excerpted from:***Wild West Shows***by Paul Reddon, University of Illinois Press, 1999, p. 68-69.

*(Grade level band 9/10)*

When Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show began, most Americans knew little about cowboys and cared less about them. Writers used the terms *herdsman, vaquero,* and *cowboy* interchangeably. Fiction about cowboys was atrocious. In some quarters lurked a distrust of people who lived beyond the reaches of civilization. William Holmes McGuffey, moralist and influential author of the McGuffey Readers, taught children to fear such people. President Chester A. Arthur in 1881 spoke of cowboys as “armed desperados” and held them responsible for terrorism and bloodshed in the Arizona Territory. Five years later the New York Times still carried articles about the violent nature of cowboys.

In his pre-Wild West show days, Cody saw nothing spectacular about cowboys. Even though he owned cattle and worked with them on his ranch in North Platte, his autobiography contained only two pages on roundups and cowboys. In them, he noted their riding skills but he did not lionize them or praise their character. About cowboy life, he commented that is was a great deal of “hard work” and that he “could not possibly find out where the fun came in.” Although he claimed to have been involved in a number of occupations during his frontier years, Cody never claimed to have been a cowboy.

Although cowboys attracted attention in the Wild West show, their tarnished image remained in some news articles. In 1885, a journalist praised Cody for starting the Wild West show because it removed cowboys from the frontier, where they would be constantly in mischief. Another felt the need to ameliorate the image of “American frontiersmen and cowboys,” who were often “grossly misrepresented and as often abused.” The writer maintained: “They are not cheats, nor drunkards, nor rioters; but honest, temperate, and of quiet and gentle behavior.”

Those in the show worked on the image of cowboys. The program for the first Wild West show carried an article entitled “The Cow Boys” that called for recognition and respect. The piece said that they were not popular or familiar to Americans and were “falsely imagined,” “greatly despised,” “little appreciated,” and often assumed to be cattle rustlers. The Wild West show was the “advent” of cowboys before easterners that would improve their image. Cody and his partners asked patrons to recognize that these hands worked hard and helped to extend American civilization. Adding these qualities helped make more Americans consider cowboys acceptable.

Our group agrees that in one clear and concise sentence, the main idea from this passage is

Some students might struggle and believe that this is the main idea…

Continued to next page

Part 1) The main idea of this passage is

1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

Part 2) Which excerpt from the test best supports your answer to Part 1?

1.
2.
3.
4.