A formal photograph of the manager and members of the Dodge City Cowboy Band in 1886.
A few years ago, I was talking about cowboy music with Guy Logsdon at the National Cowboy Symposium in Lubbock, Texas. A widely respected folklorist, Guy is one of, if not the leading authority on the songs of cowboys. Farmers, soldiers, coal miners, gold prospectors, fishermen, railroaders—America has a rich tradition of occupational folk songs, but in the course of our conversation, Guy mentioned that no other occupational group has created more poems and songs than the cowboy.

Why so? For one thing, a cowboy’s daily work takes place outside, where he is mounted on a horse in the great outdoors surrounded by the glories of nature, and nature has long been an inspiration to poets. Moreover, a cowboy’s work can be stirring, whether he is roping a wild steer, trying to stop a stampede, or attempting to stay on a bucking horse, so he has plenty of exciting material to write about. But much of a cowboy’s work is not so dramatic; indeed, it is often routine, even boring. Such times give him the opportunity, and the leisure, to put some of those exciting events into verse.

Consider the railroad ballad about John Henry, driving spikes into crossties with a nine-pound hammer. At the end of a ten- or twelve-hour day, he probably does not feel much like sitting around a campfire at night after supper, telling tales and singing songs with his fellow gandy dancers. He wants to get some sleep. But trail-driving cowboys often relaxed after eating at the chuck wagon and spent time talking and singing before crawling into their bedrolls. After all, their horses had been doing the heavy work during the day, so, unlike John Henry, the cowboy had plenty of breath left for singing and visiting.1

---

As I look over the many, many folk songs that cowboys created during the last decades of the nineteenth century, they seem to my mind to fall into three categories, each with a specific purpose. The first two, trail-driving and night-herding songs, could be considered work songs, while the third, chuck-wagon (or campfire) songs, was more for entertainment.

“The Old Chisholm Trail,” perhaps the earliest and one of the most popular of the cowboy songs, is a prime example of a trail-driving song.2 It was sung by the cowboy during the daytime to entertain himself during the long days spent moving cattle north. A typical day on the trail usually covered eight to twelve miles, giving the cattle plenty of time to graze.3 If all went smoothly, a trail boss would often deliver cattle to a Kansas railroad weighing more than when they had left Texas, even after walking several hundred miles.

Years ago, I interviewed an old-timer who, as a youth in the first decade of the twentieth century, had worked on a Wyoming ranch. One night, he told me, the cattle he and other cowboys were herding stampeded, and late the next day, they were found forty miles away. Trailing cattle north at the leisurely pace of ten miles a day when they could travel four times as fast could be excruciatingly boring. Talking to others can relieve boredom, but when a herd of 2,000 steers was strung out over a mile or more, none of a cowboy’s fellow drovers would be close enough for conversation. Talking extensively to oneself can cause one’s mental stability to be questioned, but singing to oneself carries no such stigma.

Thus, the solitary, tedious daytime hours were often passed not only in song but also in composing. It was a rare day on the trail, some of the old drovers have said, when someone didn’t come up with a new verse to “The Old Chisholm Trail.” Most of the scores of surviving verses to this song (hundreds if not thousands undoubtedly were never written down) describe life on the trail: long days, early mornings, bad (or at least monotonous) food, bucking horses, bad weather, stampeding cattle.

Texas cattle (as the longhorns were called, distinguishing them from American cattle, the shorthorned British breeds) had been driven to diverse markets for decades before the big Texas-to-Kansas drives, beginning in 1867, established the Chisholm Trail in fact and in the American imagination. The longhorn itself had evolved from

3. Ibid., 111.
Singing the Cattle North

Spanish cattle brought to the new world. The Spanish government encouraged settlers to move into the outer reaches of New Spain, while the Catholic Church did the same with missions. Each sent cattle and other livestock with settlers and priests. The descendants of these cattle formed the basis of the cattle industry in the Republic of Texas after its 1836 break from Mexico, which itself had rejected Spanish rule in 1821. While many Texas cattle were sold for hides and tallow, others were delivered to markets that spanned the continent. Longhorns in the 1840s and 1850s were driven to New Orleans to be shipped to eastern markets, while, after the discovery of gold at Sutter’s Mill in 1848, others were driven across the southern deserts to sell to miners in California. Beginning in the 1840s, many Texas cattle were moved up the Shawnee Trail that crossed eastern Indian Territory, southeast Kansas, and Missouri on the way to Iowa or Illinois.4

The Civil War, however, caused a temporary hiatus in the sale of Texas cattle. Mexico did not need them; New Mexico was controlled by the U.S. government; the Five Civilized Tribes in Indian Territory had their own cattle, while to the north was the free state of Kansas; and blockades of the Mississippi River and Gulf of Mexico shut off the possibility of markets in the South. During the four years of the war, cattle multiplied in Texas but were not being sold, leading to Joseph McCoy’s well-known observation that following the Civil War, the wealth of a Texas cattle owner could be judged by the size of his herd—the more cattle he had, the poorer he was.5

In the rest of the United States, particularly the East and South, domestic herds had been heavily depleted by the feeding of troops on both sides of the conflict. Thus, a steer that might cost only two or three dollars in Texas could, immediately after the war, bring up to forty dollars in Chicago. The first big drive following the war was in 1866 and went to Sedalia, Missouri. As a cattle town,


Sedalia lasted only a year because of Texas fever, a tick-borne disease to which longhorns were immune but that killed American cattle. The Missouri Legislature outlawed the importation of Texas cattle, which provided the opportunity for Joseph McCoy to establish a cattle market at Abilene and thus indirectly give birth to the Chisholm Trail.

Come along boys and listen to my tale;  
I’ll tell you of my troubles on the Old Chisholm Trail  
Come a ti-yi-yippee yippee yea, yippee yea  
Come a ti-yi-yippee yippee yea.

Started up the trail October twenty-third,  
Started up the trail with the 2U herd.  
Come a ti-yi-yippee yippee yea, yippee yea  
Come a ti-yi-yippee yippee yea.6

As we will see, there were plenty of troubles a drover might encounter on a trail drive, as suggested by many of the verses to this song. In fact, the difficulties were so many and often so severe that only about a third of the cowboys who trailed cattle north during the open-range period from right after the Civil War to the closing of the trails around 1890 made a return trip; once was enough for the rest: “I’ll sell my outfit as fast as I can, / And I won’t punch cows for no damn man.” In contrast, many trail bosses (“Old Ben Bolt was a blamed good boss, / But he’d go to see the gals on a sore-backed hoss”) made multiple trips, no doubt because they were usually paid twice as much or more as the average dollar-a-day drover, most of whom were young men ranging in age from the early teens to the midtwenties.7

Although some of the cattle driven to markets in the north were owned by individual ranchers, most in the trail-drive era were the property of cattlemen or cattle companies that purchased large numbers of Texas cattle as a speculative business venture. Herd sizes ranged from several hundred to several thousand, with the average size ranging between 2,000 and 3,000 head. A large operator may have had from a dozen to over fifteen different herds on the trail in a single season.8

Although The Log of a Cowboy by Andy Adams is a novel, it provides perhaps the best account of a trail drive, beginning with the assembling of a crew, as described by the narrator, a young man on his first drive. A standard trail crew included a trail boss, eight to ten drovers, a chuck wagon and cook, and a horse wrangler. The remuda (horse herd) and the mules pulling the chuck wagon were owned by the cattle company; a cowboy generally owned just his saddle and tack: “On a ten-dollar horse and a forty-dollar saddle / I’m goin’ to punchin’ Texas cattle.” Adams tells how the trail boss selected his mount of ten horses, and then each crew member selected his string for the drive, one horse at a time, starting with the most senior and ending with the most junior, until each man had ten horses. Those horses were his for the duration of the drive, and no one else could ride one without his permission. Some were good cow horses and some were green broke, but they would be well trained by the end of the drive. Few, however, could be considered pets: “My horse threwed me off at a creek called Mud, / My horse threwed me off round the 2U herd. / Last time I seen him he was running ‘cross the level, / Kicking up his heels and buckin’ like the devil.”

At first by custom and later by law, all the cattle in a herd would leave Texas wearing the same road brand, thus making sorting easier if herds became mixed while traveling north. Cattle were not so much driven as herded up the trail, allowing them plenty of time to graze as they went. By being in the right place at the right time, a drover could ensure that the cattle moved in the correct direction without having to excite them and thus perhaps cause them to lose weight.

One of the major discomforts of the trail was a pervasive lack of sleep: “Well I’m up every morning before daylight / Before I sleep the moon shines bright.” Breakfast came early on the trail, followed by letting the herd move off the bed ground. Cattle were usually in camp about ten hours each night, thus allowing them time to rest and an opportunity to ruminate. (A cow has four stomachs [actually one stomach with four different compartments] and must be given time to chew its cud to get the optimum food value from each mouthful of grass.) Longhorns tend to be watchful, even nervous animals; thus, two drovers would be with the herd throughout the night to keep the cattle calm, to keep any that arose during the night from straying, and also to be handy in case of a stampede.

If there were ten cowboys in the crew, each would take a two-hour shift in riding night herd (or night guard).


8. Dobie, Up the Trail from Texas, 64.
During the evening or early-morning hours, when there was some daylight, they might ride silently, but in the dark hours, each night herder would sing or hum as he rode, thus helping to keep the cattle calm.

By singing or humming, the cowboy would let the cattle know he was there; thus, the sudden sound of his horse’s hoof striking a rock would be less likely to set them running. In 1923, at age nineteen, my father helped drive a herd of 1,500 steers from Canadian, Texas, to Englewood, Kansas, and the trail boss, Lon Ford (an old open-range cowboy who still carried a pistol on his hip at that late date), told him and the other cowboys on the crew to sing or hum as they rode night guard because the sound of their voices would help keep the cattle quiet.

Night-herding songs tended to be long (a two-hour watch to fill), slow (to create a lullaby effect), and sad—often because the cowboy was not exactly feeling happy. Many of these early-day drovers were young, in their teens or early twenties. Many were away from home for the first time, missing their friends, their family, and perhaps especially their mother’s cooking. For weeks in a row, they were awakened in the middle of the night or the early-morning hours to ride night guard, thus losing several hours of sleep each night. Perhaps it was drizzling...
a cold rain, and the coyotes were howling and the owls hooting. It was lonely out there, and they felt miserable. But they had to sing. Thus the sad night-herding song.

An early favorite was “Lorena,” a Civil War ballad about a lovelorn man whose girl had left him for another. It is said that at least one Confederate captain forbade his men to sing that song around the campfire at night. If they did, then many would become so homesick (or so worried about their girl back home) that they would be gone the next morning.

“I Ride an Old Paint” depicts the plight of the night herder. In the chorus (“Ride around little dogies, ride around them slow, for they’re fiery and snuffy and raring to go”), the edgy longhorns are depicted as ready to stampede. In the second verse, we learn of the troubles that have afflicted “old Bill Jones.” His wife has been killed in a saloon brawl, and his daughters have run off to Denver and gone bad, “but still he keeps singing from morning to night,” just as the cowboy riding night herd has to keep singing, no matter how awful he feels.

The last verse, one hopes, is not meant to be taken literally, for in it, the cowboy gives instructions for after he is dead. Instead of a funeral and burial, he requests that his horse be saddled, his bones tied to the saddle, and the horse turned loose to “take me to the prairie that I love the best.” The thought of that poor horse wandering forever
with the cowboy’s corpse tied to its back surely reflects the night herder’s mournful state of mind, not an actual request.

Stampedes were one of the dangers to life and limb for both drovers and livestock on a trail drive. Sometimes stampedes were started intentionally by either white or Indian rustlers, but more often a flash of lightning or some unexpected loud noise set them off. Cattle, horses, and cowboys could be killed or crippled by running blindly over unfamiliar country in the middle of the night, like the title character in “Little Joe the Wrangler,” another sad night-herding song. Herds could get mixed and valuable time spent in separating the cattle, as seen in these verses from “The Old Chisholm Trail”:

No chaps, no slicker, and it’s pouring down rain,
I swear by God, I’ll never night herd again.

The wind commenced to blow and the rain began to fall.
It looked, by grab, like we was goin’ to lose ’em all.

I jumped in my saddle and gave a little yell.
The tail cattle broke and the leaders went to hell.

Last night I was on guard and the leaders broke the ranks,
I hit my horse down the shoulders and I spurred him the flanks.

I was on my best horse, and a going on the run,
The quickest shootin’ cowboy that ever pulled a gun.

I don’t give a darn if they never do stop;
I’ll ride as long as an eight-day clock.

I herded and I hollered, and I done pretty well,
Till the boss said, “Boys, just let ’em go to hell.”

We combed through the thickets and herded on open ground;
From that night on it was riding round and round.

Stampedes could be one of the major troubles on the trail, but so was rain, especially too much of it: “It’s cloudy in the west and lookin’ like rain / And my damned old slicker’s in the wagon again.” Day after day of rain created miserable conditions, especially when the bedrolls and blankets became soaked. Extended rain also made it difficult, if not impossible, for the cook to start a fire and provide hot food. More seriously, extreme weather was probably responsible for more cowboy trail-drive deaths than stampedes, rustlers, and Indians combined. Lightning from a thunderstorm is fearful, and on the treeless plains, a mounted man made a prime target. Cowboys often divested themselves of any metal they could if a thunderstorm was imminent. In addition, many cowboys drowned while trying to swim herds across flooded rivers.

Compared to potentially fatal troubles such as stampedes and floods, lack of sleep was a minor discomfort but a real one all the same. Stampedes often called for all hands to be on duty for hours, sometimes for forty-eight hours or more, without a chance to eat or to bed down for even a couple of hours. Also, the aftereffects of a stampede often called for extra work sorting out cattle from different herds that had gotten mixed and looking for lost cattle—work that could last for days. Under such extreme conditions, a drover often rubbed tobacco juice into his eyes to keep them open. Following an extended period without sleep, cowboys would sometimes doze in the saddle if the cattle were moving quietly up the trail. If a hand voiced a complaint about the lack of rest, he was often told that he could catch up on his sleeping during the winter. One man threatened to move to Greenland after the drive because there the winter nights were six months long.⁹

Another cause for complaint was food: “It’s bacon and beans most every day / I’d rather be eatin’ prairie hay.” Some cooks were good, and some weren’t, but in either case, chuck-wagon food could get monotonous. Sowbelly, beans, and cornmeal or flour (for Dutch-oven sourdough biscuits) could be stored compactly and didn’t spoil, so these foodstuffs provided the basis for most meals. Sometimes a trail boss would sanction the butchering of a lame steer in the herd, but beef on the trail often came from a stray animal: “There’s a stray in the herd and the boss said ‘Kill it’ / So I bedded him down in the bottom of a skillet.”

Wild game when available—buffalo (in the early trail-driving days), deer, and antelope—provided some variety in the menu, as did wild turkey. Finding a turkey away from timber, a cowboy could trot after it just slowly enough to keep it running, but not fast enough to make it fly, until its wings and tail began to droop from exhaustion.

He would then swoop up, grab the bird by the neck, and carry it to the chuck wagon for supper. Canned tomatoes and peaches also added variety to the menu, as did occasional fresh eggs and vegetables bought from a farm wife if a homestead were near the trail.

Every bit as much as sowbelly and beans, Arbuckle’s Ariosa Coffee was a staple of trail drives. Not only at meals but during the night, a cowboy fighting drowsiness while riding night guard might well ride to the wagon and pour a cup from the pot that simmered on the coals all night long. The coffee beans came unground in one-pound sacks, and each Arbuckle sack contained a stick of peppermint candy. Drovers vied for the opportunity to grind the cook’s coffee, for whoever performed that chore received the candy as a reward.

Usually the second-highest-paid member of the crew (after the trail boss), the cook was king of his domain, which encompassed about a fifty-foot radius around the chuck wagon. He was also the de facto druggist and doctor, carrying liniment, turpentine, quinine, and other such nostrums in the chuck box. Trail drives were dry (i.e., no liquor allowed), but often the medicine chest also contained a bottle of whiskey for snakebite. In addition to foodstuffs and utensils, the chuck wagon carried the bedrolls and tarpaulins that made up each drover’s bed. Often the wagon carried the crew’s firearms, for unless trouble with rustlers or Indians was anticipated, the cowboy needed no extra weight to add to his horse’s load. A cowhide slung under the wagon, called a cooney or a possum belly, carried extra firewood or buffalo chips. Cowboys often dragged wood they ran across to the wagon, for it was to their advantage to stay in the cook’s favor.

On a cloudless night, the chuck-wagon tongue would be pointed toward the North Star, serving as a compass for both wagon and trail boss in case the next day was cloudy or foggy. To make sure he kept heading north on such a day, the cook might attach a long lariat rope to the back axle, checking it often to make sure it was dragging straight, not at an angle.

After supper was the time for visiting and singing around the campfire. While the trail-driving song was intended to entertain the cowboy himself and the night-herding song to entertain the cattle, the purpose of the chuck-wagon (or campfire) song was to entertain one’s fellow cowboys. Often these songs told stories, such as “When the Work’s All Done This Fall” or “The Cowboy’s Lament.” The former was written by D. J. O’Malley about an incident in Montana when a cowboy was killed during a roundup, while the latter was adapted to the cowboy way of life from an Irish ballad by Frank Maynard.

The lives of cowboys were filled with exciting incidents involving bad horses and wild cows, many of which were
turned into poems and then into songs. A good story is fun to hear, but once told, it can lose its effect. Listeners don’t want to hear the same story told over and over (as is depicted in *The Log of a Cowboy*, when the cowboys around the campfire pretend to go to sleep when one of them starts telling a tale he had previously recounted). But people will gladly listen to a poem more than once. Set that poem to music, and cowboys will happily hear that song many times and perhaps even request it every night.

Frank Maynard, in his memoirs, describes how he came to write what he titled “The Dying Cowboy,” which we know as “The Cowboy’s Lament.” In the winter of 1876, Maynard was helping care for a herd of Grimes cattle south of Medicine Lodge on the Kansas–Indian Territory border. All the boys in camp, he said, were singing the “song about the bad girl,” i.e., the “Bad Girl’s Lament,” which derived from a late-eighteenth-century Irish folk song, “The Unfortunate Rake,” about a young soldier dying from the ravages of venereal disease. In the American version, the young girl is dying from an unspecified illness. (The cowboys, however, knew the situation: they often referred to the song as “The Whore’s Lament.”)

Maynard said that he adapted the song to the cowboy way of life by making the main character a ranger and having him die of a gunshot wound. He set the action at the doorway of Tom Sherman’s barroom in Dodge City. He commented that the other cowboys he was working with liked his version of the song and started singing it.

That spring, Maynard helped take the cattle to Wichita, where other herds were also waiting to be shipped to market. Later that summer, Maynard said, he heard his song being sung all up and down the trail. The Texas cowboys, in true folk fashion, had heard his song and then adapted it by moving the action hundreds of miles south to the Mexican border—to “The Streets of Laredo.”

After months of daily facing the dangers and enduring both the hardships and the tedium of riding the Chisholm Trail, the herd would finally reach Abilene—or in later years Ellsworth, Newton, Wichita, or Caldwell: “We hit Caldwell and we hit her on the fly / Goin’ to quit punchin’ cows in the sweet bye-and-bye.” There the cattle would be loaded onto trains bound for Chicago, Kansas City, or some other market town: “We rounded ‘em up and put ‘em on the cars / And that was the last of the old Two Bars. / I sold my horse and I hung up my saddle, / And I bid farewell to the longhorn cattle.” Then the drovers could get cleaned up and blow through their pay at one of the many saloons, dance halls, and gambling houses available in each of those cow towns.

Or they might pocket their wages and head for home: “Goin’ to the boss to get my money, / Goin’ back home to see my honey. / Come a ti-yi-yippee yippee yea, yippee yea / Come a ti-yi-yippee yippee yea.” Of all the many songs the drovers composed as they followed cattle north in the open-range era that followed the Civil War, “The Old Chisholm Trail” presents the most realistic view of life on a trail drive.