The Dodge City Cowboy Band
Clifford P. Westermeier

While its early history was being painted against the canvas of the frontier, Dodge City acquired more lurid and flaming titles than any other city. “The most wicked town in existence,” “The Beautiful, Bibulous Babylon of the Frontier,” “The Wickedest City in America,” “The Deadwood of Kansas,” the “rip-roaring burg of the West” were but a few of the scarlet sobriquets.  

It was a city of violent contrasts—brave men and bad men, harlots and ladies, dives and churches, ugliness and beauty—“Wicked Dodge” was the synonym of all that was profane, immoral and evil. From this “Bibulous Babylon,” this “Wickedest City,” came an organization so unpretentious and respectable that its virtuous fame made it welcome wherever it appeared. This was the Dodge City Cowboy Band of the 1880’s, recognized as one of the finest attractions and entertainments of the era.

Some dubiety exists concerning the year of its organization. Merritt Beeson of Dodge City says his father, Chalk Beeson, organized the band in 1879. Wright, in his Dodge City, maintained that the band was organized in 1881, and first appeared as such in a performance at the Topeka fair. An article from the “Ford County Clippings” of the Kansas State Historical Society says: “The Original Dodge City Cowboy Band was organized in 1881 or 1882 and for many years was a flourishing organization which enjoyed more than local fame.” The uncertainty is not clarified by the appearance of an article under the title “Dodge City Band” in the Ford County Globe, June 27, 1882:

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2. Letter from Merritt L. Beeson, October 24, 1950, to the Kansas State Historical Society; Wright, op. cit., p. 322.
Alderman C. M. Beeson or rather "Chalk," as we all know him after years of trials, has at last succeeded in organizing a Brass Band, and we claim it The Band of the Land, of which Dodge may justly be proud. . . . They perform every evening in front of the "Long Branch" and Opera House Balcony and crowds gather to hear them. . . .

Late in the summer of 1882 the Cowboy Band received an invitation to enter a band contest during the soldiers' reunion at Topeka. Evidently, the organization was eager to attend and to compete, for an appeal to raise money was published in the Ford County Globe. A subscription paper was circulated for the purpose of securing the necessary funds to defray the expenses of the trip. The Globe commented:

The boys will need considerable money to properly fit themselves out and pay necessary expenses while at Topeka, and we trust our cattle men, merchants and citizens generally will contribute freely and thus assist the distinguished "Cow Boy Band" of Dodge City to make a creditable display of their musical talent.5

Apparently, the band had excellent support, for a week later the same paper published a list of 29 firms and individuals with the approximate head of cattle represented by each—over 400,000 head, or a cash capital of nearly $10,000,000.6 On this trip to Topeka, each of the 25 men in the band wore a longhorn badge on his hat. "Their rigging presented a peculiar appearance, dark shirts with 'leather breeches full of stitches,' together with revolvers buckled on making up the uniform. As the train passed they were singing 'Oh! dear, raggedy Oh! Just look at the riggins on Billy Barlow.'"7

There is little more information concerning the Cowboy Band during the remainder of the year. The Globe published an account of a minstrel show, with singing, conundrums, jokes, stories and impersonations; however, music by the band constituted the greater portion of the program. "There was a goodly crowd present who listened with marked attention and showed their appreciation from time to time by loud bursts of laughter and applause."8

The Colorado Chieftain, the weekly newspaper of Pueblo, Colo., gave an account of the cattlemen's convention held in Dodge City beginning April 10, 1883. The cowboy band, managed by Chalk Beeson, serenaded the governor on that occasion.9 The same paper, a week later, commented on the close of the convention: " . . .

6. Ibid., September 12, 1882.
7. Ibid., September 19, 1882.
the proceedings wound up last night with the grandest ball and banquet ever held in western Kansas. . . . The music was furnished by Beeson’s orchestra. . . .”

During the ensuing months occasional mentions were made of practice sessions, but the subject of the Cowboy Band does not become significant until the early part of September, 1884. The proposal to send the organization to the Cattlemen’s convention in St. Louis in November met unanimous approval, because Dodge City and the cattle interests of Kansas would receive invaluable publicity at St. Louis. The suggestion was made that the Western Kansas Cattle Growers’ Association promote the idea and become the sponsor of the band.

This obvious promotion on the part of the Kansas Cowboy secured the desired results, and during the latter part of October the following article appeared.

It is all fixed that the Cowboy band goes to the National Stockmen’s convention at St. Louis. The band will number eighteen pieces, composed of musicians whose music will astonish the ears of the denizens [sic] of the Mound City and others, soies [sic] who will be there during the session of the great convention. They will find that the historic cowboy of the plains, as will be represented by the members of this band, is an individual of a far different color than what has been painted by sensational papers. He will be found to be a gentleman and as proficient in the aesthetical art of music as he is in the skill of punching cows. But we do not wish to anticipate.

The newspapers of the towns situated along the railroad recorded the progress of the band on its trip to St. Louis. From Nickerson came the following information: “Hearing that the Cowboy band of Dodge City would pass through on the evening train, a large number of our citizens met them at the depot and were favored with several choice selections of music.”

The band was provided with an especially-made banner—the present of Andy Snider and Sons. The Nickerson report also gave the first complete description of the costumes of the band: “all of them were dressed in regular cowboy style, broad hats, woolen shirts, leather leggins, spurs and pistols. . . .”

10. “Cow Congress Round-Up,” Ibid., April 19, 1883. (B. M. Wright in his Dodge City quoted this article in part on pp. 321 and 322; however, he recorded it as appearing in the Pueblo Chief, April 13, 1882, and he used the words the Cowboy Band for the words Beeson’s orchestra.)

11. Kansas Cowboy, Dodge City, September 13, 1884.

12. “Soies” is probably an attempt to make a plural of the word socius, meaning associate or member. Kansas Cowboy, October 25, 1884.

13. Ibid., November 22, 1884.


15. Ibid., November 22, 1884.
A report from St. Louis to the Kansas Cowboy gave further information concerning the arrival of and the impression created by the cowboy musical organization as it crossed the state of Kansas: “At all the stations in Kansas, word had been received that the band was coming and everybody flocked to the depot to get a peep at the cowboys and to hear their delicious music. The boys kindly satisfied the curiosity of the people by favoring them with airs.”

The Missouri Republican also related a first impression made by the cowboys in full regalia. On the opening day of the convention a band, with trumpets blaring and cymbals crashing, marched down Olive street. A crowd of excited and enthusiastic youngsters followed, watching especially the leader who bore a banner identifying the group as “The Cowboy Band of Dodge City, Kansas.” The drum major, Capt. J. S. Welch, waved his hands wildly and thus aroused greater enthusiasm in his fellow bandsmen.

But the appearance of the band was gorgeous. It was wild; it was ne plus ultra, sui generis, and superb. The inseparable gray slouch hat with a band inscribed “Cowboy Band of Dodge City, Kansas” and bearing also the picture of a steer, each hat having a different brand. . . . A flannel shirt, leather leggings of a conventional type, bandana handkerchief around throat, belt with a six-chambered ivory handled revolver and fierce Spurs completed the genuine cowboy outfit.

A Globe-Democrat reporter asked the leader of the band:

“What do you swing that gun for?”
“That’s my baton,” was the answer.
“Is it loaded?”
“Yes.”
“What for?”
“To kill the first man who strikes a false note.”

On the first day of the convention the delegates from Kansas and the Indian territory marched to the hall in a body. The Cowboy Band led the procession, and thousands of people followed; the sidewalks and windows were crowded with cheering and applauding spectators who were eager to see and hear the famous band.

The curious asked many questions about the band, and the various members of the organization offered interesting bits of information: They were all genuine cowboys, who were able to play different music at sight; they organized in 1882 for the fair at Topeka,
and Dodge City was selected as the rallying point if the band were ever to reorganize again; the importance of the cattlemen’s convention at St. Louis caused them, after a separation of two years, to come together two weeks before it.21

The reporter of the Missouri Republican was dubious about these statements, for the skill of the musicians showed practice and because the stories varied—one that they had been rehearsing during the year, another that they had not been together in two years. Someone was bold enough to say that the group was simply a local band from Dodge City, for the most part composed of professional musicians.22

Regardless of these varying stories, opinions or suggestions, the band did intrigue and amuse the St. Louisans. However, there is evidence that some of the delegates from parts of the West lacked enthusiasm for it. A delegate from Texas said:

. . . we are not responsible for this circus and are unwilling to endorse the band as a feature of the convention. We are not in favor of any such display as the so-called cowboy band is making. This leggin’ revolver business is out of place in a great city like St. Louis. Besides we are not the desperadoes the band would seem to indicate we are. . . . They parade the streets with the handles of their revolvers protruding from their hip pockets and their leader keeping time with one.23

A delegate from Colorado expressed his opinion in a similar fashion:

We feel that the cowboy band is out of place as long as they persisted in making a parade of their leggings and revolvers. It is painfully true that people in the East have been led to believe that a greater portion of cattlemen of South-west and West are as a rule desperate characters; and that we roam about over the prairies armed to the teeth with knives and revolvers. We want to dispel this idea as it places us in a false light before the world. Years ago when likely to meet a bunch of Indians, we were required to go heavily armed when we followed our cattle. Times have changed and the necessity for revolvers no longer exists. On many ranches cowboys are not allowed to carry revolvers. Today the average cowboy is as good an average American citizen as can be found anywhere in America.24

Some of the mystery hovering over, and unanswered questions concerning the band were clarified in the November 20 issue of the St. Louis paper. The editor of the Kansas Cowboy, S. S. Prunty, explained and also took responsibility for the appearance of the organization at the convention, namely, western Kansas had sent it

21. Missouri Republican, November 18, 1884.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
as a token of appreciation for the hospitality shown by St. Louis. Prunty said: “The attire of the members of the band is regulation dress of the plains cowboy. The spurs, pistol, and leather leggings are seen every day on the cowboy of the plains. The members, while mostly cowboys in jest, are gentlemen and some represent thousands of head of bovine.”

Regarding the controversy, the Cowboy Band was a great attraction for the people of St. Louis.

Immediately following the triumph at the cattlemen’s convention, the band, and also the delegates, received an invitation to visit Chicago. During their visit they played daily concerts in the Palmer House and, dressed in full regalia, were a great attraction to the spectators. The *Kansas Cowboy* commented: “If one didn’t expect that a man that drives cattle could bring music out of a cornet or horn, he was favorably disappointed, for the entire programme was performed excellently and with real pleasure, apart from the interest therein, to every surprised listener.”

The band played such selections as the “Monabello Waltzes,” the “Miserere” from “Il Trovatore,” and the “Criterion Quickstep.” The audience was particularly interested in the leader of the musicians, who waved his nickel-plated six-shooter for a baton, and “forthwith lead [sic] his performers into the open measures of the old operatic favorite, which many a New York opera-goer would think in strange hands if heard performed by such picturesque, half-warlike figures as composed the Cowboy Band.”

The editor of the *Kansas Cowboy* concluded his statement regarding the Chicago side trip with his usual plug for the home town: “They are giving Dodge City such an advertisement as she has never had before.”

The triumphs of the band during the Chicago visit resulted in an invitation from the Milwaukee & St. Paul railroad to visit Minneapolis and St. Paul. Supplied with all the necessary accommodations for the trip, they heartily accepted the courtesy.

When the band returned to Dodge City, the editor of the *Kansas Cowboy* heaped praise upon the members for “gentlemanly” conduct and their popularization of “the plains cowboy in the estimation of the eastern people.” Stating that Dodge City should be proud of its band, he concluded his comment in his usual stirring and cam-

25. Ibid., November 20, 1884.
27. Ibid., November 29, 1884.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., December 6, 1884.
30. Ibid.
paigning tone: “A town that can sustain such a popular organiza-
tion needs a $60,000 hotel.” 31 The Cowboy Band met in a council
and adopted resolutions, “wherein they express their appreciation
of the courtesies extended to them on their last trip to the great
cattlemen’s convention at St. Louis, and their subsequent journey to
Chicago, St. Paul and Minneapolis, and points along the route.” 32

The next news of importance concerning the band appeared about
two weeks before the second cattlemen’s convention, held in St.
Louis, November, 1885. The members were instructed to meet in
Dodge City on November 10 to start immediate training for the con-
vention. “The rehearsals will take place in one of the rooms of the
upper story of Prof. Ly Brand’s planing mill.” 33

Plans were elaborated and expanded this year. Although not too
many details are given, a longer tour was evidently in view. En
route to St. Louis, they presented a concert at the Grand Opera
House in Topeka, which was attended by Governor Martin and other
prominent officials. They also entertained in Kansas City and fol-
lowing their engagement at St. Louis, they were scheduled to ap-
pear “in other eastern places.” 34

In commenting on their appearance at the National Convention
of Stockmen, the Kansas Cowboy said: “The boys were as popular and
in as much demand as they were at the convention last year.” 35 In
St. Louis they played three evenings at the Crescent skating rink,
“the toniest institution of the kind in St. Louis.” 36 News of the
Dodge City fire caused the cancellation of the plans to appear “in
other eastern places,” because many of the boys suffered heavy losses
and were anxious to see what damage had been done. 37

The matter of the authenticity of the members of the band came
up again during the Kansas City exposition of 1887, and to settle the
question they proposed to give an exhibition of their roping skill.
Mr. Beeson, the manager, in speaking of the matter, said that every
member of his band were old cowboys who had spent the past ten
years in the West and on the ranch. Said he: “I have boys in my band
who can throw a steer over a horse.” 38

31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., December 13, 1884.
33. Ibid., November 7, 1885.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
(The fire of November 28, 1885, was disastrous and “the loss was at least $30,000 or even
$50,000.”)
The exposition was honored with a visit from President Cleveland, and the boys of the band, in their true Western generosity and enthusiasm, collected $100 in order to present him with an original sombrero which they immediately ordered from Mexico City. Much to their chagrin, however, it did not arrive in time to be presented to the chief executive.\textsuperscript{30}

In this same year the Cowboy Band was one of the chief attractions at the fourth annual convention of the Consolidated Cattle Growers' Association of the United States in Kansas City, Mo. According to a \textit{Rocky Mountain News} item, the band had been present at every national cattle convention since it was organized.\textsuperscript{40}

In his \textit{Dodge City}, Wright mentions that the band visited Denver and Pueblo, Colo., in 1886; however, no evidence has been found in the newspapers to verify this statement. It is of interest that a contract was made with the Cowboy Band to appear in Denver during the great Colorado jubilee held in the last week of March, 1888, for a four-day engagement at the attractive remuneration of $450. They marched in the parade which opened the celebration and played at the promenade concert before the grand ball at the Tabor Opera House. The band, even though it received favorable notice and attracted attention, was overshadowed by the splendor and excitement of the jubilee.\textsuperscript{41}

On February 24, 1889, they returned to Denver to present a concert at the Tabor Opera House. Twenty-five musicians, with Roy Drake as conductor, presented a program, composed of music and a quartet of colored male singers. The selections, “Last Heart Throb,” “British Night,” “Intrepid,” and “L’Espoir de l’Alsace” overtures were particularly worthy of note. The proceeds of the concert were given to the Cowboy Club of Denver to be applied toward the expenses of the club on its trip to Washington, D. C., for the inauguration of President-elect Harrison.\textsuperscript{42} The object of this trip was to advertise Colorado at the national capital, and the Denver club joined forces with the Cowboy Band of Dodge City for the expedition.\textsuperscript{43}

On the morning after the concert in Denver, the band with their majesties, Rex and the Queen of the Pueblo Mardi Gras, left by train

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40} “Kansas City Preparing for Cattle Convention,” \textit{Rocky Mountain News}, October 22, 1887.
\textsuperscript{41} Denver \textit{Republican}, March 15, 17, 29 and 30, 1888.
\textsuperscript{43} “The Cowboy Band,” Denver \textit{Republican}, February 24, 1889.
for the latter city. En route they serenaded the people of Colorado Springs and arrived at their destination in good form.44

As a feature of the Pueblo Mardi Gras, the band contested with the First infantry band of Denver.

... [It] was a gratifying treat to all who were within hearing distance. Martial music, passionate music, voluptuous music, music that quickened the spectators to spontaneous applause, music that thrilled them with the joy of living and music that held them spellbound in appreciative silence. Such was the contest.45

The Cowboy Band was victorious in the contest and was awarded a silver medal, presented by Rex after a very long-winded speech. The design of the medal, valued at $50 portrayed an elegant shield and crown surmounted by an eagle which was suspended from a massive bar. It was appropriately engraved: "Rex, To His Royal Band," and around the edge, "Pueblo, Colorado."46

This most recent triumph was surpassed only by the following engagement. On February 27, on a special train of Pullmans on the Rock Island railroad, the combined forces of Cowboy Band and Cowboy Club, numbering about 100, departed for the presidential inauguration.47 This joining of forces was clearly an advertising scheme on the part of Colorado and of Pueblo, as is very obvious in a speech given by Colonel Harvey at the Mineral Palace in that city. He said:

... that the Cowboy band had gone to Washington with the kindest feelings toward Pueblo and that two of the agents of the advertising committee had accompanied them with instructions to paint the city red. That the band would make a tour of the eastern cities and would take the Pueblo men with them and permit them to make announcements at their concerts, to distribute doders and in every other way to give the Pittsburg of the West the benefit of the drawing abilities of the Cowboy band.48

On the trip eastward, the combined cowboy groups were interviewed in various places. In Chicago, O. W. Wilcox, the secretary of the Cowboy Club, said to an inquiring reporter: "Oh yes, we are genuine cowboys, every one of us."49

A first hand account of the cowboy invasion of the national capital came from Thomas McGill, the advance agent of the groups, who reported that the cowboys were greeted with enthusiasm in the East

45. "King Rex in Pueblo," ibid., February 27, 1889.
46. ibid.; Pueblo Daily Chieftain, February 27, 1889.
and that on inauguration day, the Cowboy Band and Cowboy Club, led by "Buffalo Bill" Cody and Buck Taylor, were the greatest attractions of the parade.\textsuperscript{50} The news items which appeared the day after the inauguration confirm this statement, and one from the \textit{Daily News} of Trinidad, Colo., said: "It was an object lesson, illustrating things in the west, not often exhibited in that locality."\textsuperscript{51}

Mr. McGill also informed his contemporaries that at all the station stops enormous crowds waited to greet them, and "with the exception of President Harrison's car no other car east of Indianapolis received so much attention."\textsuperscript{52}

On the evening of March 3 the Cowboy Band presented a concert at the Bijou in the capital city where they were received with much enthusiasm and applause. They also serenaded the President at his Arlington Hotel headquarters during the inaugural ceremonies.\textsuperscript{53}

The immediate plans of the cowboy contingent following the Washington trip are not fully known, although Mr. McGill does offer some information. He had made arrangements for concerts in Philadelphia, New York, Boston and other places; the members of the band, however, felt compelled to return to Dodge City to take care of business matters before embarking on such a tour. He does say that a group of "the boys left for New York. . . . Some of them have gone to New England," but he does not state whether these men were members of the club or the band or of both. However, the band did give a concert at Pittsburgh before returning to Dodge City.\textsuperscript{54}

The fitting and honorable gesture, in considering the accomplishments of the Cowboy Band, is to leave it here at the height of this latest triumph. The Dodge City Cowboy Band was one of the unique institutions of western Kansas. It began as a local enterprise which received its first support from some of the most prominent citizens of that city, and with its very colorful and attractive regalia it caused comment wherever it appeared. That it was composed of skilled musicians is evident, for on every occasion the music played was of a high caliber. The numerous invitations and request performances endowed it with a national reputation. One of the dubious questions about the band was whether or not the members were real cowboys. The bandsmen often answered the question in the

\textsuperscript{50} "Cowboys Down East," \textit{ibid.}, March 11, 1889.

\textsuperscript{51} Trinidad (Colo.) \textit{Daily News}, March 6, 1889; "The Inaugural Parade," \textit{Denver Republican}, March 5, 1889.

\textsuperscript{52} "Cowboys Down East," \textit{ibid.}, March 11, 1889.

\textsuperscript{53} \textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}
affirmative, but Merritt Beeson reports that the band's personnel consisted of "musicians playing the little theaters and dance halls" in Dodge City, "and came from Denver, Kansas City, St. Louis and Chicago." Presenting a type of fine entertainment, the nationally famous Cowboy Band brought more fame to the "Wickedest City in America" than did all the lures concocted to attract the weaknesses of mankind.

Many gaps appear in the chronology of the band's history, still a pattern has been developed which offers a fair understanding of the accomplishments and the entertainment value of this unique musical organization. A final newspaper item, swept with nostalgia and sadness, brings the story of the Cowboy Band to a close:

Idaho Springs, Colo., June 4. (Special.)—The paraphernalia of the famous Dodge City Cowboy Band was unloaded here yesterday and will be used by the Idaho Springs Cowboy Band. ... Jack Sinclair, the leader and manager of the original cowboy band has been engaged as manager, and the aggregation will be heartily backed by the citizens of Idaho Springs.56

55. Letter from Beeson, October 24, 1950, to the Kansas State Historical Society.