Range Ballads

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The absence of sophistication, so essential to the production of an indigenous balladry, certainly obtained in that vast region where there was no law west of Dodge City and no God west of Fort Worth. In this raw, harsh land, during the latter part of the 19th century a distinctive type of American folk music was born. It owes its origin to no dim time in the past when history slides off into legend. The image of its creator is indistinct—a composite—the only thing of which we can be sure is that he has both feet in oxbow stirrups and a good Texas pony under him as he sings his lonesome cattle call.

Probably no figure in American history has been so thoroughly enveloped in the mists of romanticism as the cowboy. Years after the last long drive has ended his latter day counterpart rides majestically on to glory through media of fiction, radio, television, and screen; generally bedecked in trappings that would have astonished his authentic predecessor and often to the accompaniment of a musical tribute to the glories of the Old West.

Frederic Remington's cowhand thundered Hell-for-leather across 30 years of the history of the West before the changing times reduced him to a drab rider of line fences and a farmer cutting hay for winter feeding. In a sentimental nation the memory of his robust years lingers on. By 1924 Charlie Siringo, grown old and saddle weary, waiting, as he said for "Gabriel to toot his horn" could look around him at Hollywood's version of the cowboy and find little faithful representation except the never-changing landscape of his beloved Southwest.\(^1\) In 1934 "Boots and Saddles" was the year's most popular song; a few years later "Stagecoach" won the motion picture industry's highest award. In mid-20th century pseudo-cowboy songs capture the public fancy and are broadcast across the nation by "name" bands. The folk music crowd tend to lump the "hill-billy" ballad and the Western song together and present the two types from a stage cluttered with performers garbed to fit their respective repertoires.

Stage and screen have given the American public a nostalgic

\(^1\) Charles A. Siringo, Riata and Spurs (Boston, 1927), pp. 274, 275.
version of cowboys grouped around a dying campfire, singing in harmonious though untrained voices the incomparable songs of the Old West. However fetching this illusion may be, it has little foundation in fact. When his long day in the saddle was over the cowboy was prone to build a few smokes around the campfire and tell a few tales of another drive before rolling into his blankets. He liked to hear the faint strains of some old song sung by some less fortunate hand who rode his lonesome guard around the herd. 

As long as he heard singing the cowhand knew all was well with the cattle.

In uncommon circumstances, however, such as when several herds grouped close together waiting to cross a swollen stream and consequently there was little work to be done, songs might be sung around the campfire. While half a dozen herds waited to cross the flooded Canadian river the cowhands not on night herd visited around other campfires, renewing friendships and listening to the newest verses added to some favorite old tunes.

At the end of the trail, with the cattle sold, the cowboy sought release for his pent-up feelings and the satisfaction of appetites long denied. In the saloon, with the trail dust cut from his throat by proper refreshment, he was anxious to offer for the approval of his comrades and acquaintances the old trail ballads with whatever modification or addition he might have learned since their last meeting, and willing to listen to an unfamiliar song from either friend or convivial stranger.

Back on the home range, any near-festive occasion might produce its share of vocal effort. The spring roundup, when possibly a hundred men from far and wide might gather and renew friendships before the actual work began, offered an opportunity for the exchange of ballads. On a Kansas ranch, when winter came and there was little work to be done outside, the hands “pile-d up the blazing logs, s-a-ng songs, and forg-o-t the weather outside.”

Much of the singing on the trail was done by the night guard. Partly to keep themselves awake, and partly for its lulling effect on the herd, the riders sang as they swung their slow arc around the bedded down cattle. A rider on one side of the bed ground sang a verse of a familiar song, then his partner on the other side added the next. When the existing verses were exhausted, it was

3. Charles A. Strong, *A Lone Star Cowboy* (Santa Fe, 1919), p. 44.
only natural that the singers should add lyrics to the extent of their inclination and ability. If we are to accept the verdict of one who made many long drives, the singer's enthusiasm often made up for lack of ability, for he says that in all his years on the trail he never heard a really good singing voice. 6

Not only were the cattle soothed by songs, but instrumental performances occasionally took place. One old-timer relates with gusto how, while a comrade led his horse, he “agitsted the catguts,” and a very reassuring spectacle he must have been to a bedded-down herd. At any rate, he solemnly assures us that “those old long-horned Texas steers actually enjoyed that old-time music.” 6

Coming, as many cowboys did, from the more thickly settled portions of the country, it was natural that they brought along the songs they had sung in their former surroundings. Such old favorites as “My Bonny Lies Over the Ocean” and “When You and I Were Young, Maggie” permitted the singer to linger lovingly over each well remembered phrase. Hymns, whose cadence meshed with the rhythm of a slowly walking horse, were particular favorites. One widely known lad was dubbed “the Pilgrim” because his repertoire consisted of the old favorite “I’m a Pilgrim and a Stranger.” 7

Parodies of existing songs enjoyed a wide popularity. “Backward, Turn Backward” appeared as a revamped version of Eliza Akers Allen’s “Rock Me to Sleep.” 8 One of the best known of all cowboy ballads, “Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie,” bears a sharp similarity to a sailor chanty “The Ocean Burial,” which appeared about 1850. The resemblance is striking and one of the best-known authorities has commented at length on the connection between the two. 9 At least it poses the interesting possibility that even the balladry of the West got its bit of the salty tang that flavored Western vocabulary.

Some of the songs may have been brought from Europe by young men eager to share in the fantastic West. These importations, whether from Europe or from some near-foreign Eastern newspaper, underwent the same transformation to provinciality. They were sung to some well-known tune, or to one created by some

gifted but nameless composer. A great many of the songs exhibit a fine disregard for the niceties of grammar and poetic metre, but here and there a song shows that the composer must have had more than a nodding acquaintance with the schoolroom.

Some dramatic or amusing incident often provided the stimulus for a new song. A trail crew in Denver to “whoop ‘er up Liza Jane” was prevented from seeing a stage show because someone stole the leading lady’s tights, a catastrophe which forced the theater to suspend performances. A wit in the group composed a song “There’ll Be No Show Tonight,” unprintable, of course, but shortly popular from Texas to the Canadian border.10

A singular feature of the authentic cowboy ballad is that it deals with things in the immediate time and surroundings of the composer, or projects itself into the future. Paul Bunyan dwelt and performed his deeds in some mystic past and remote region, but cowboy ballad heroes like Cole Younger and Sam Bass were contemporaries of many trail cowboys. Though impossible to prove except by a process of rationalization, it seems reasonable to suppose that this immediacy stemmed from the fact that the cowboy lived an extremely precarious and nomadic life within a given geographical area.

Beneath the cowboy’s traditional swagger and bravado there always lurks the spectre of a haunting loneliness which occasionally breaks to the surface, as in

I’m a poor lonesome cowboy
And a long ways from home.11

With family ties severed, the cowboy’s thoughts easily wandered back to his old home. Especially on the long night herd did he have opportunity to compare his present existence with the one he had deserted to come to the cattle country.

Imbedded deep in the cowboy’s songs is the knowledge of the ever-present probability of violent death. While the cowhand, with his thigh-riding Colt’s Peacemaker, was indeed an itinerant arsenal, his longevity was by no means contingent on his ability to defend himself from his fellows similarly armed. Every time he mounted one of those skittish, half-broken horses, he did so at jeopardy of life and limb. In the branding pens a misstep or an incautious moment might be paid for by a rip from an enraged beast’s horn.

Trail accidents were commonly commemorated in song. Of these, the worst feared were plunging headlong to death over a cutbank, or being pitched under the hooves of a running herd when a horse put a foot in a prairie dog hole. An English visitor who had been particularly impressed by an impromptu rendition of “The Cowboy’s Lament” mentions that the singer shortly met death in just such a fashion.12

Will James probably gave voice to a general attitude towards outlaws, at least that expressed in ballads, when he said “To my way of thinking, anybody with a lot of nerve is never real bad all the way.”13 Certainly Sam Bass, Jesse James or Cole Younger do not appear as vicious and cold blooded killers who took human life to satisfy sadistic appetites. Bob Younger, brother of Cole, is described as anxious to return to his homeland to fight against the “anti-guerrillas until the day we die.”14 The ballad describes a train robbery in Nebraska and says that “the crimes done by our bloody hands bring tears into my eyes.” Jesse James is described as “a man a friend to the poor,” and it was “that dirty little coward that shot Mr. Howard [and] laid poor Jesse in his grave.”15

Possibly the cowboy, aware of his own risks, appreciated unbridled daring in others. Again, the outlaws were contemporaries of the composers, and many a cowboy claimed unabashed acquaintance with the whole formidable roster. From the many who later came forward to claim familiarity with the various outlaws, one begins to suspect something akin to the host of oil field hands of another generation who volubly attest to their personal friendship with “Pretty Boy” Floyd when he was an Oklahoma oil field roughneck. Unkind criticism might imply that the cowboy tended to identify himself with the heroic deeds of the miscreants. Certainly the 20 or 30 dollar-a-month cowhand had little reason to fear for the safety of his own purse, and was sufficiently impressed with the outlaw’s reputation as a gunfighter to prudently refrain from a test of his own skill unless suffering acute alcoholic hallucinations.

A corollary to the Robin Hood treatment of outlaws is the cycle of wrongdoing, retribution, and admonition often times expressed. Even so virile a character as the cowboy did not refrain from an occasional flyer at moralizing. The unfortunate, dying on the streets of Laredo, and realizing the approach of the penalty for his misdeeds, rhythmically warns others of the folly of wrongdoing.

12. Mary A. Jaques, Texan Ranch Life; With Three Months Through Mexico in a “Prairie Schooner” (London, 1894), p. 239.
13. Will James, Cowboys North and South (New York, 1924), p. 76.
After detailing the circumstances of the shooting affray, the expiring man pleads with his hearers to

Go gather around you a crowd of young cowboys
And tell them a story of this my sad fate;
Tell one and the other before they go further
To stop their wild roving before 'tis too late.16

In other instances the cowboy exhibited a studied indifference to formalized religion. The itinerant clergyman, with his incongruous clothing and fervent promises of Hell-fire-and-damnation was apt to receive short shrift at the hands of these boisterous nomads—a circumstance which often hastened the preacher’s departure for the East, there to add the weight of the cloth to the belief that here on the Western Plains dwelt a race of men as wild as the horses they rode and the cattle they herded.

This indifference towards religion was frequently expressed. Charlie Siringo’s dying mother pleaded with him to make peace with his God, a plea he says he was too busy to heed.17 “Teddy Blue” Abbott had no use for preachers “hollering hell-fire and brimstone,” but adds that during those long nights in the saddle “you get to thinking of those things.” 18

Some other cowhand did not only think of those things but expressed them in a manner profound in its simplicity as

Last night as I lay on my pillow
And looked at the stars up above
I wondered if over a cowhand
Had gone to that great land above.19

In terms of his own provincialism he pondered goodness and justice and expressed man’s eternal speculation on the afterlife, when the “Boss of the Riders” will make a tally on that final roundup day.

Faced abruptly with a situation which transgressed his tangible grasp, the cowhand often fell back on a song to bridge the gap. Searching for cattle lost in a stampede, a trail crew came unexpectedly upon the body of a cowboy who, together with his horse, had perished in last night’s wild melee. Awed by the stark circumstances, and in the absence of any religious services, the rough and tumble crew uncovered while that one amongst them with the best singing voice, sang “Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie” before the nameless unfortunate was lowered into an unmarked grave.20

So, where the visible symbols of institutionalized religion were

virtually absent, and while many of the vocal principals expressed an indifference to it, the cowhand seems to have carried his share of moral precepts which often found expression in his balladry.

In a section so predominately masculine it is not surprising to find women in an honored place in the ballads, even though contemporary wits claimed there were only two things a cowboy was afraid of—a decent woman and being set afoot. In the songs of sufficiently refined taste to be printed, the women mentioned are of the immediate family or a comely young lady, vaguely identified as "another."

Mother, as is to be expected, is surrounded with the tenderest of sentiments, whether she is still living in a distant land which the cowboy dreams of revisiting, or is no longer living. The "old cow-puncher . . . dressed in rags" told a "group of jolly cowboys, discussing plans at ease"

I'm going back to Dixie once more to see them all
Yes, I'm going to see my mother when the work's all
done this fall. . . .
My mother's heart is breaking, breaking for me
that's all,
And with God's help I'll see her when the work's all
done this fall.21

Certain it is that there was no surer way to arouse the full measure of the cowhand's fury than by an injudicious reference to one's immediate female ancestor. It is easy and in some measure probably justifiable to attribute these tender expressions to "Momism," supposedly a peculiar trait of Americans. But it must also be admitted that part of this reverent attitude towards mother might well stem from the extreme youth of many lads who worked cattle on the home range and made the long drive. Responsible accounts claim that many a boy went up the trail to Abilene when he was no more than 12, 14, or 16. In the early 1880's one of the most experienced of the trail bosses, represented as having been many, many times along the way, was then "about thirty." 22

The sister at home is the recipient of generous compliments on her beauty and purity; and gratefully remembered as a congenial playmate in a now remote past. The ranger, dying far "from his home in Texas," recalled

A fair young girl, my sister,
My only joy, my pride,
She was my friend from boyhood,
I had no one left beside.23

21. "When the Work Is All Done This Fall," Lomax, op. cit., pp. 53-55.
On occasion the cowboy ballad spins a golden dream about "another," upon whom fond remembrance has bestowed the utmost in charm and beauty. These delicate, wistful, and indeed bashful references reveal still another facet of this fleeting horseback troubadour.

There is another whose tears may be shed
For one who lies on a prairie bed.
There is another more dear than a sister
She'll weep when she hears I am gone.24

Again, in a light and bantering vein, he warns the Mississippi girls not to marry those Texan boys, and in a painfully realistic manner recounts the privations which will be their due when deposited as brides in log shacks on the live oak prairie. "They will take you out to live on a live oak hill," where

They live in a hut with a beoved log wall,
But it ain't got any windows at all;
With a clap board roof and a puncheon floor,
And that's the way all Texas o'er.25

Not all cowboy ballads are permeated with the shadows of sorrow or wistful memories of dear faces. The rider with "his hat . . . threwed back and his spurs . . . a jinglin'" exuded his full measure of the gusto and zest for life which Frederic Remington and Charlie Russell have so admirably perpetuated in paint and bronze.26 Though surrounded by grim and often harsh realities, his effervescent animal spirits found welcome release in some of his most attractive ballads. There was always the state of Texas, to whose glories the glass could always be proudly lifted high. His peculiar clothing and accoutrements set the cowhand apart from the plodding plowman and pedestrian townsman with whom he occasionally came into contact, and whose fears and suspicions he was not above fanning with a wholesale recounting of cowboy characteristics. Small wonder the shopkeeper looked to his shutters when informed

I'm a howler from the prairies of the West.
If you want to die with terror look at me.
I'm chained lightning—if I ain't, may I be blessed.
I'm the snorter of the boundless prairie. . .
I'm the snoozer from the upper trail!
I'm the reveler in murder and gone!
I can bust more Pullman coaches on the rail
Than anyone who's worked the job before.27

Even when he
Popped my foot in the stirrup and gave a little yell,
The tail cattle broke and the leaders went to hell,
he very soon added that he didn’t “give a damn if they never do
stop.” 28

With a wink and many a broad nod it has been widely suggested
that the best and most characteristic of all cowboy ballads are those
of such shocking obscenity that they could never be printed. That
many were probably of this variety can be partially accounted for
because in so virile a society so wholly lacking in respectable female
complement, a great deal of the talk turns on sex. The obscenity
of some may be attested to by anyone who has ever heard a rendi-
tion of “The Pride of the Prairie,” whose lyrics are well calculated
to burn the ears of the most calloused dance hall queen. To hul
such intriguing suspicion, J. Frank Dobie, certainly qualified to give
an opinion, reports that the finest of all cowboy ballads are those
most thoroughly printable. 29 While the cowhand scattered his
obscenity and profanity with abandon, it usually fell on impersonal
objects. He might refer to a “damned cowhand,” but never to a
friend as a “damned cowboy.”

Strangely enough, the cowboy seldom memorialized his horse.
Without pausing to detail the quarrel that constantly brews over
how well the rider treated his horse, it is sufficient to observe that
when the mount does enter the ballad, the horse is relegated to a
position subsidiary to the main thread of the story. The exception
to the rule is “My Bonny Black Bess,” an English importation which
eulogized the feats of a famous mare and her outlaw master. 30

The range cowhand has disappeared. In his place an overdressed
fop caters to the whims of dudes. The range pony has crossed
equine social barriers and become the world’s finest polo pony. The
longhorn steer is now usually found indoors, where his horns adorn
the backbar of every saloon worthy of the name between El Paso
and Calgary. Even the cowboy ballad has suffered adulteration
and is played over the air from records made in New Jersey or sung
by a singer whose connection with the West is confined to his sart-
torial affectations.

When the musical “Oklahoma!” received critics’ acclaim the
Western theme slipped from the celluloid horse opera into new

areas of respectability. To be sure, no star of that production sang any authentic ballad of the trail. But the essential dramatic and emotional elements of the Western did appear, albeit in a light vein. The themes for the classical music of any people have evolved from the simple annals of its folk music.

Inherent in the cowboy ballads are the elements of an indigenous American musical tradition. For the cowboy brought the songs of his homeland, refashioned them to his new surroundings, and finally generated a song peculiar to his occupation and land—resounding with the hoofbeats of flying cattle and horses; sobered by the death of a peerless comrade. Over much of the music hangs the pall of sorrow and loneliness, only to be relieved by the cowboy’s bubbling gusto and joy of living.