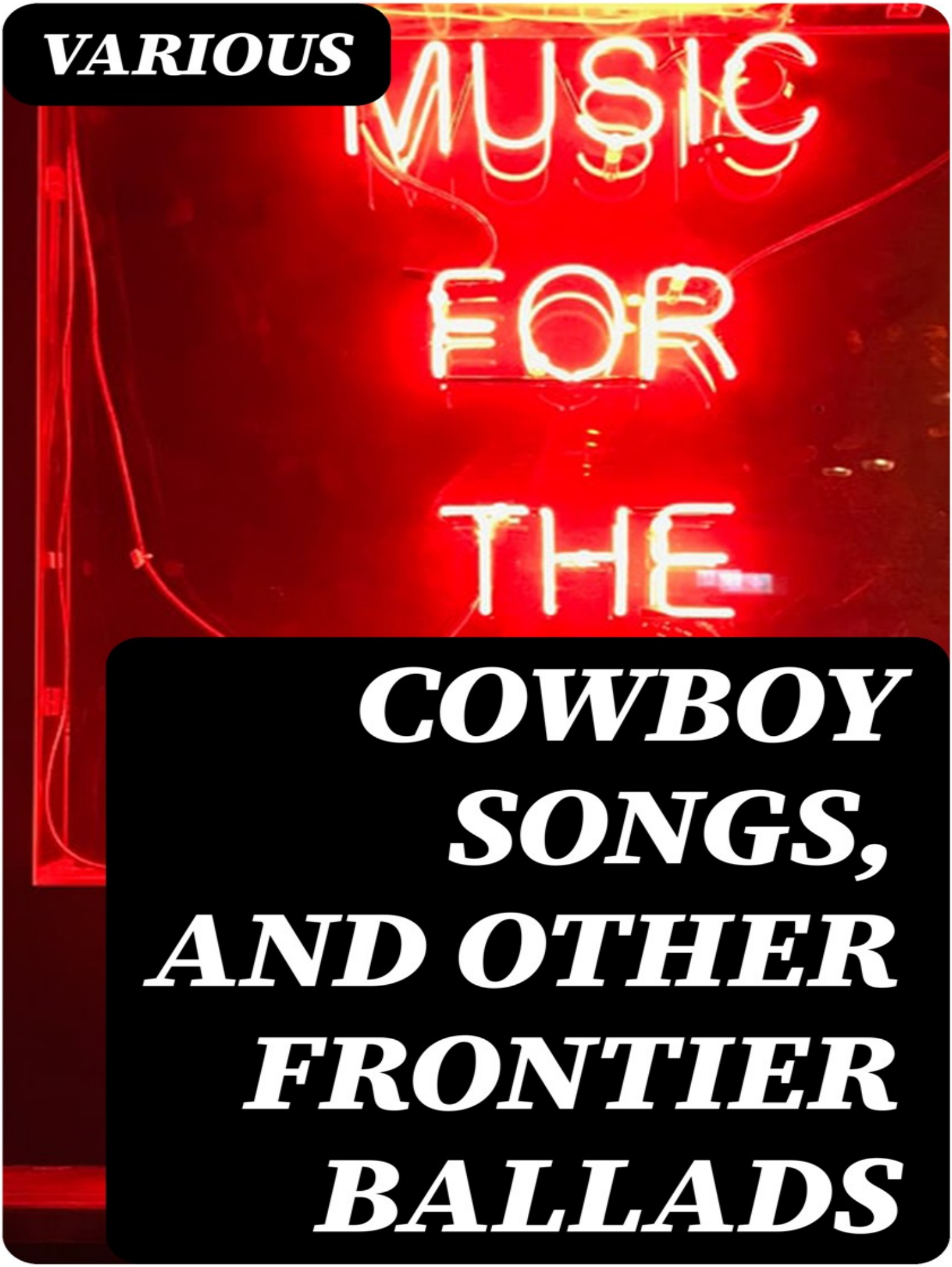
VARIOUS
MUSIC
FOR
THE
COWBOY
SONGS,
AND OTHER
FRONTIER
BALLADS

Various

Cowboy Songs, and Other Frontier Ballads

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INTRODUCTION

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It is now four or five years since my attention was called to the collection of native American ballads from the Southwest, already begun by Professor Lomax. At that time, he seemed hardly to appreciate their full value and importance. To my colleague, Professor G.L. Kittredge, probably the most eminent authority on folk-song in America, this value and importance appeared as indubitable as it appeared to me. We heartily joined in encouraging the work, as a real contribution both to literature and to learning. The present volume is the first published result of these efforts.

The value and importance of the work seems to me double. One phase of it is perhaps too highly special ever to be popular. Whoever has begun the inexhaustibly fascinating study of popular song and literature—of the nameless poetry which vigorously lives through the centuries—must be perplexed by the necessarily conjectural opinions concerning its origin and development held by various and disputing scholars. When songs were made in times and terms which for centuries have been not living facts but facts of remote history or tradition, it is impossible to be sure quite how they begun, and by quite what means they sifted through the centuries into the forms at last securely theirs, in the final rigidity of print. In this collection of American ballads, almost if not quite uniquely, it is possible to trace the precise manner in which songs and cycles of song—obviously analogous to those surviving from

older and antique times—have come into being. The facts which are still available concerning the ballads of our own Southwest are such as should go far to prove, or to disprove, many of the theories advanced concerning the laws of literature as evinced in the ballads of the old world.

Such learned matter as this, however, is not so surely within my province, who have made no technical study of literary origins, as is the other consideration which made me feel, from my first knowledge of these ballads, that they are beyond dispute valuable and important. In the ballads of the old world, it is not historical or philological considerations which most readers care for. It is the wonderful, robust vividness of their artless yet supremely true utterance; it is the natural vigor of their surgent, unsophisticated human rhythm. It is the sense, derived one can hardly explain how, that here is expression straight from the heart of humanity; that here is something like the sturdy root from which the finer, though not always more lovely, flowers of polite literature have sprung. At times when we yearn for polite grace, ballads may seem rude; at times when polite grace seems tedious, sophisticated, corrupt, or mendacious, their very rudeness refreshes us with a new sense of brimming life. To compare the songs collected by Professor Lomax with the immortalities of olden time is doubtless like comparing the literature of America with that of all Europe together. Neither he nor any of us would pretend these verses to be of supreme power and beauty. None the less, they seem to me, and to many who have had a glimpse of them, sufficiently powerful, and near enough beauty, to give us some such wholesome and enduring pleasure as comes

from work of this kind proved and acknowledged to be masterly.

What I mean may best be implied, perhaps, by a brief statement of fact. Four or five years ago, Professor Lomax, at my request, read some of these ballads to one of my classes at Harvard, then engaged in studying the literary history of America. From that hour to the present, the men who heard these verses, during the cheerless progress of a course of study, have constantly spoken of them and written of them, as of something sure to linger happily in memory. As such I commend them to all who care for the native poetry of America.

Barrett Wendell.

Nahant, Massachusetts,
July 11, 1910.

COLLECTOR'S NOTE

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Out in the wild, far-away places of the big and still unpeopled west,—in the cañons along the Rocky Mountains, among the mining camps of Nevada and Montana, and on the remote cattle ranches of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona,—yet survives the Anglo-Saxon ballad spirit that was active in secluded districts in England and Scotland even after the coming of Tennyson and Browning. This spirit is manifested both in the preservation of the English ballad and in the creation of local songs. Illiterate people, and people cut off from newspapers and books, isolated and lonely,—thrown back on primal resources for entertainment and for the expression of emotion,—utter themselves

through somewhat the same character of songs as did their forefathers of perhaps a thousand years ago. In some such way have been made and preserved the cowboy songs and other frontier ballads contained in this volume. The songs represent the operation of instinct and tradition. They are chiefly interesting to the present generation, however, because of the light they throw on the conditions of pioneer life, and more particularly because of the information they contain concerning that unique and romantic figure in modern civilization, the American cowboy.

The profession of cow-punching, not yet a lost art in a group of big western states, reached its greatest prominence during the first two decades succeeding the Civil War. In Texas, for example, immense tracts of open range, covered with luxuriant grass, encouraged the raising of cattle. One person in many instances owned thousands. To care for the cattle during the winter season, to round them up in the spring and mark and brand the yearlings, and later to drive from Texas to Fort Dodge, Kansas, those ready for market, required large forces of men. The drive from Texas to Kansas came to be known as "going up the trail," for the cattle really made permanent, deep-cut trails across the otherwise trackless hills and plains of the long way. It also became the custom to take large herds of young steers from Texas as far north as Montana, where grass at certain seasons grew more luxuriant than in the south. Texas was the best breeding ground, while the climate and grass of Montana developed young cattle for the market.

A trip up the trail made a distinct break in the monotonous life of the big ranches, often situated hundreds

of miles from where the conventions of society were observed. The ranch community consisted usually of the boss, the straw-boss, the cowboys proper, the horse wrangler, and the cook—often a negro. These men lived on terms of practical equality. Except in the case of the boss, there was little difference in the amounts paid each for his services. Society, then, was here reduced to its lowest terms. The work of the men, their daily experiences, their thoughts, their interests, were all in common. Such a community had necessarily to turn to itself for entertainment. Songs sprang up naturally, some of them tender and familiar lays of childhood, others original compositions, all genuine, however crude and unpolished. Whatever the most gifted man could produce must bear the criticism of the entire camp, and agree with the ideas of a group of men. In this sense, therefore, any song that came from such a group would be the joint product of a number of them, telling perhaps the story of some stampede they had all fought to turn, some crime in which they had all shared equally, some comrade's tragic death which they had all witnessed. The song-making did not cease as the men went up the trail. Indeed the songs were here utilized for very practical ends. Not only were sharp, rhythmic yells—sometimes beaten into verse—employed to stir up lagging cattle, but also during the long watches the night-guards, as they rode round and round the herd, improvised cattle lullabies which quieted the animals and soothed them to sleep. Some of the best of the so-called "dogie songs" seem to have been created for the purpose of preventing cattle stampedes,—such songs coming straight from the heart of

the cowboy, speaking familiarly to his herd in the stillness of the night.

The long drives up the trail occupied months, and called for sleepless vigilance and tireless activity both day and night. When at last a shipping point was reached, the cattle marketed or loaded on the cars, the cowboys were paid off. It is not surprising that the consequent relaxation led to reckless deeds. The music, the dancing, the click of the roulette ball in the saloons, invited; the lure of crimson lights was irresistible. Drunken orgies, reactions from months of toil, deprivation, and loneliness on the ranch and on the trail, brought to death many a temporarily crazed buckaroo. To match this dare-deviltry, a saloon man in one frontier town, as a sign for his business, with psychological ingenuity painted across the broad front of his building in big black letters this challenge to God, man, and the devil: *The Road to Ruin*. Down this road, with swift and eager footsteps, has trod many a pioneer viking of the West. Quick to resent an insult real or fancied, inflamed by unaccustomed drink, the ready pistol always at his side, the tricks of the professional gambler to provoke his sense of fair play, and finally his own wild recklessness to urge him on,—all these combined forces sometimes brought him into tragic conflict with another spirit equally heedless and daring. Not nearly so often, however, as one might suppose, did he die with his boots on. Many of the most wealthy and respected citizens now living in the border states served as cowboys before settling down to quiet domesticity.

A cow-camp in the seventies generally contained several types of men. It was not unusual to find a negro who,

because of his ability to handle wild horses or because of his skill with a lasso, had been promoted from the chuck-wagon to a place in the ranks of the cowboys. Another familiar figure was the adventurous younger son of some British family, through whom perhaps became current the English ballads found in the West. Furthermore, so considerable was the number of men who had fled from the States because of grave imprudence or crime, it was bad form to inquire too closely about a person's real name or where he came from. Most cowboys, however, were bold young spirits who emigrated to the West for the same reason that their ancestors had come across the seas. They loved roving; they loved freedom; they were pioneers by instinct; an impulse set their faces from the East, put the tang for roaming in their veins, and sent them ever, ever westward.

That the cowboy was brave has come to be axiomatic. If his life of isolation made him taciturn, it at the same time created a spirit of hospitality, primitive and hearty as that found in the mead-halls of Beowulf. He faced the wind and the rain, the snow of winter, the fearful dust-storms of alkali desert wastes, with the same uncomplaining quiet. Not all his work was on the ranch and the trail. To the cowboy, more than to the goldseekers, more than to Uncle Sam's soldiers, is due the conquest of the West. Along his winding cattle trails the Forty-Niners found their way to California. The cowboy has fought back the Indians ever since ranching became a business and as long as Indians remained to be fought. He played his part in winning the great slice of territory that the United States took away from Mexico. He has always been on the skirmish line of civilization. Restless,

fearless, chivalric, elemental, he lived hard, shot quick and true, and died with his face to his foe. Still much misunderstood, he is often slandered, nearly always caricatured, both by the press and by the stage. Perhaps these songs, coming direct from the cowboy's experience, giving vent to his careless and his tender emotions, will afford future generations a truer conception of what he really was than is now possessed by those who know him only through highly colored romances.

The big ranches of the West are now being cut up into small farms. The nester has come, and come to stay. Gone is the buffalo, the Indian warwhoop, the free grass of the open plain;—even the stinging lizard, the horned frog, the centipede, the prairie dog, the rattlesnake, are fast disappearing. Save in some of the secluded valleys of southern New Mexico, the old-time round-up is no more; the trails to Kansas and to Montana have become grass-grown or lost in fields of waving grain; the maverick steer, the regal longhorn, has been supplanted by his unpoetic but more beefy and profitable Polled Angus, Durham, and Hereford cousins from across the seas. The changing and romantic West of the early days lives mainly in story and in song. The last figure to vanish is the cowboy, the animating spirit of the vanishing era. He sits his horse easily as he rides through a wide valley, enclosed by mountains, clad in the hazy purple of coming night,—with his face turned steadily down the long, long road, "the road that the sun goes down." Dauntless, reckless, without the unearthly purity of Sir Galahad though as gentle to a pure woman as King Arthur, he is truly a knight of the twentieth century. A

vagrant puff of wind shakes a corner of the crimson handkerchief knotted loosely at his throat; the thud of his pony's feet mingling with the jingle of his spurs is borne back; and as the careless, gracious, lovable figure disappears over the divide, the breeze brings to the ears, faint and far yet cheery still, the refrain of a cowboy song:

Whoopee ti yi, git along, little dogies;
It's my misfortune and none of your own.
Whoopee ti yi, git along, little dogies;
For you know Wyoming will be your new home.

As for the songs of this collection, I have violated the ethics of ballad-gatherers, in a few instances, by selecting and putting together what seemed to be the best lines from different versions, all telling the same story. Frankly, the volume is meant to be popular. The songs have been arranged in some such haphazard way as they were collected,—jotted down on a table in the rear of saloons, scrawled on an envelope while squatting about a campfire, caught behind the scenes of a broncho-busting outfit. Later, it is hoped that enough interest will be aroused to justify printing all the variants of these songs, accompanied by the music and such explanatory notes as may be useful; the negro folk-songs, the songs of the lumber jacks, the songs of the mountaineers, and the songs of the sea, already partially collected, being included in the final publication. The songs of this collection, never before in print, as a rule have been taken down from oral recitation. In only a few instances have I been able to discover the authorship of any song. They seem to have sprung up as quietly and mysteriously as does the grass on the plains. All have been

popular with the range riders, several being current all the way from Texas to Montana, and quite as long as the old Chisholm Trail stretching between these states. Some of the songs the cowboy certainly composed; all of them he sang. Obviously, a number of the most characteristic cannot be printed for general circulation. To paraphrase slightly what Sidney Lanier said of Walt Whitman's poetry, they are raw collops slashed from the rump of Nature, and never mind the gristle. Likewise some of the strong adjectives and nouns have been softened,—Jonahed, as George Meredith would have said. There is, however, a Homeric quality about the cowboy's profanity and vulgarity that pleases rather than repulses. The broad sky under which he slept, the limitless plains over which he rode, the big, open, free life he lived near to Nature's breast, taught him simplicity, calm, directness. He spoke out plainly the impulses of his heart. But as yet so-called polite society is not quite willing to hear.

It is entirely impossible to acknowledge the assistance I have received from many persons. To Professors Barrett Wendell and G.L. Kittredge, of Harvard, I must gratefully acknowledge constant and generous encouragement. Messrs. Jeff Hanna, of Meridian, Texas; John B. Jones, a student of the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas; H. Knight, Sterling City, Texas; John Lang Sinclair, San Antonio; A.H. Belo & Co., Dallas; Tom Hight, of Mangum, Oklahoma; R. Bedichek, of Deming, N.M.; Benjamin Wyche, Librarian of the Carnegie Library, San Antonio; Mrs. M.B. Wight, of Ft. Thomas, Arizona; Dr. L.W. Payne, Jr., and Dr. Morgan Callaway, Jr., of the University of Texas; and my brother, R.C. Lomax, Austin;—have rendered me especially

helpful service in furnishing material, for which I also render grateful thanks.

Among the negroes, rivermen, miners, soldiers, seamen, lumbermen, railroad men, and ranchmen of the United States and Canada there are many indigenous folk-songs not included in this volume. Of some of them I have traces, and I shall surely run them down. I beg the co-operation of all who are interested in this vital, however humble, expression of American literature.

J.A.L.

Deming, New Mexico,
August 8, 1910.

COWBOY SONGS AND OTHER FRONTIER BALLADS

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THE DYING COWBOY[1]

"O bury me not on the lone prairie,"
These words came low and mournfully
From the pallid lips of a youth who lay
On his dying bed at the close of day.

He had wailed in pain till o'er his brow
Death's shadows fast were gathering now;
He thought of his home and his loved ones nigh
As the cowboys gathered to see him die.

"O bury me not on the lone prairie
Where the wild cayotes will howl o'er me,
In a narrow grave just six by three,
O bury me not on the lone prairie.

"In fancy I listen to the well known words
Of the free, wild winds and the song of the birds;
I think of home and the cottage in the bower
And the scenes I loved in my childhood's hour.

"It matters not, I've oft been told,
Where the body lies when the heart grows cold;
Yet grant, Oh grant this wish to me,
O bury me not on the lone prairie.

"O then bury me not on the lone prairie,
In a narrow grave six foot by three,
Where the buffalo paws o'er a prairie sea,
O bury me not on the lone prairie.

"I've always wished to be laid when I died
In the little churchyard on the green hillside;
By my father's grave, there let mine be,
And bury me not on the lone prairie.

"Let my death slumber be where my mother's prayer
And a sister's tear will mingle there,
Where my friends can come and weep o'er me;
O bury me not on the lone prairie.

"O bury me not on the lone prairie
In a narrow grave just six by three,
Where the buzzard waits and the wind blows free;
Then bury me not on the lone prairie.

"There is another whose tears may be shed
For one who lies on a prairie bed;
It pained me then and it pains me now;—
She has curled these locks, she has kissed this brow.

"These locks she has curled, shall the rattlesnake kiss?
This brow she has kissed, shall the cold grave press?
For the sake of the loved ones that will weep for me
O bury me not on the lone prairie.

"O bury me not on the lone prairie
Where the wild cayotes will howl o'er me,
Where the buzzard beats and the wind goes free,
O bury me not on the lone prairie.

"O bury me not," and his voice failed there,
But we took no heed of his dying prayer;
In a narrow grave just six by three
We buried him there on the lone prairie.

Where the dew-drops glow and the butterflies rest,
And the flowers bloom o'er the prairie's crest;

Where the wild cayote and winds sport free
On a wet saddle blanket lay a cowboy-ee.
"O bury me not on the lone prairie
Where the wild cayotes will howl o'er me,
Where the rattlesnakes hiss and the crow flies free
O bury me not on the lone prairie."
O we buried him there on the lone prairie
Where the wild rose blooms and the wind blows free,
O his pale young face nevermore to see,—
For we buried him there on the lone prairie.
Yes, we buried him there on the lone prairie
Where the owl all night hoots mournfully,
And the blizzard beats and the winds blow free
O'er his lowly grave on the lone prairie.
And the cowboys now as they roam the plain,—
For they marked the spot where his bones were lain,—
Fling a handful of roses o'er his grave,
With a prayer to Him who his soul will save.
"O bury me not on the lone prairie
Where the wolves can howl and growl o'er me;
Fling a handful of roses o'er my grave
With a prayer to Him who my soul will save."

The Dying Cowboy

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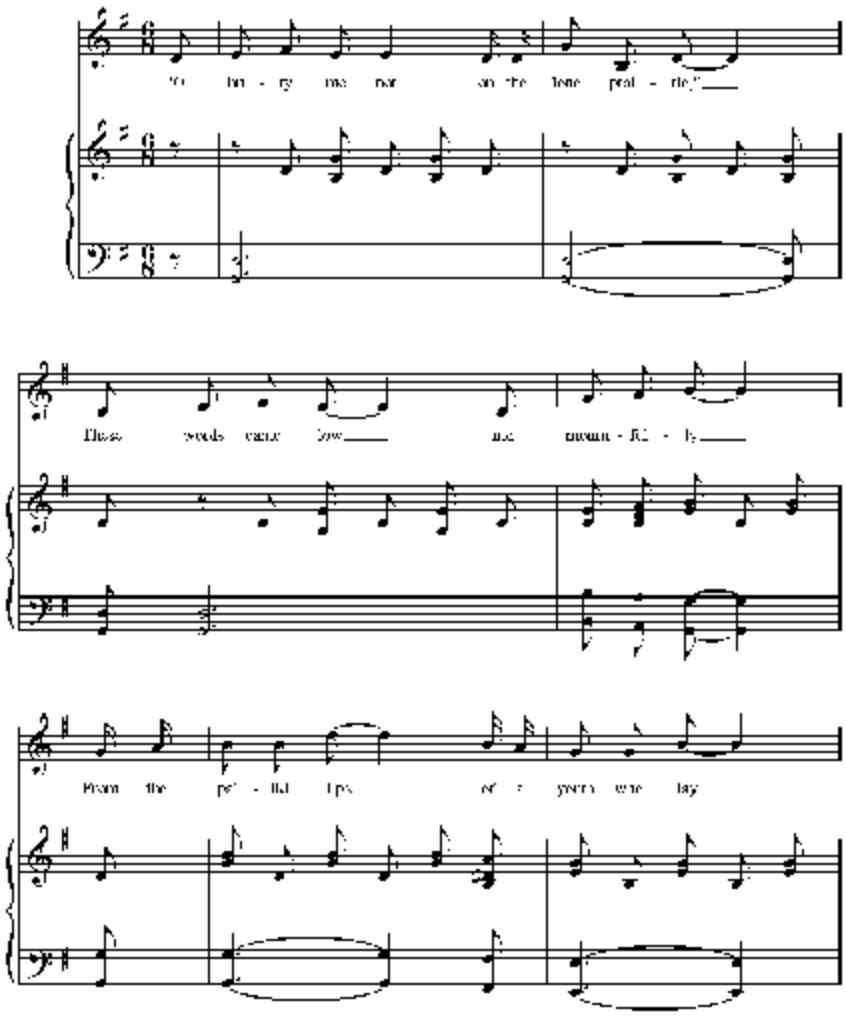
The Dying Cowboy



THE DAYS OF FORTY-NINE

We are gazing now on old Tom Moore,
A relic of bygone days;
'Tis a bummer, too, they call me now,
But what cares I for praise?
It's oft, says I, for the days gone by,
It's oft do I repine

For the days of old when we dug out the gold
In those days of Forty-Nine.
    My comrades they all loved me well,
The jolly, saucy crew;
A few hard cases, I will admit,
Though they were brave and true.
Whatever the pinch, they ne'er would flinch;
They never would fret nor whine,
Like good old bricks they stood the kicks
In the days of Forty-Nine.
    There's old "Aunt Jess," that hard old cuss,
Who never would repent;
He never missed a single meal,
Nor never paid a cent.
But old "Aunt Jess," like all the rest,
At death he did resign,
And in his bloom went up the flume
In the days of Forty-Nine.
    There is Ragshag Jim, the roaring man,
Who could out-roar a buffalo, you bet,
He roared all day and he roared all night,
And I guess he is roaring yet.
One night Jim fell in a prospect hole,—
It was a roaring bad design,—
And in that hole Jim roared out his soul
In the days of Forty-Nine.
    There is Wylie Bill, the funny man,
Who was full of funny tricks,
And when he was in a poker game
He was always hard as bricks.

He would ante you a stud, he would play you a draw,
He'd go you a hatful blind,—
In a struggle with death Bill lost his breath
In the days of Forty-Nine.

There was New York Jake, the butcher boy,
Who was fond of getting tight.
And every time he got on a spree
He was spoiling for a fight.
One night Jake rampaged against a knife
In the hands of old Bob Sine,
And over Jake they held a wake
In the days of Forty-Nine.

There was Monte Pete, I'll ne'er forget
The luck he always had,
He would deal for you both day and night
Or as long as he had a scad.
It was a pistol shot that lay Pete out,
It was his last resign,
And it caught Pete dead sure in the door
In the days of Forty-Nine.

Of all the comrades that I've had
There's none that's left to boast,
And I am left alone in my misery
Like some poor wandering ghost.
And as I pass from town to town,
They call me the rambling sign,
Since the days of old and the days of gold
And the days of Forty-Nine.

Days of Forty-Nine

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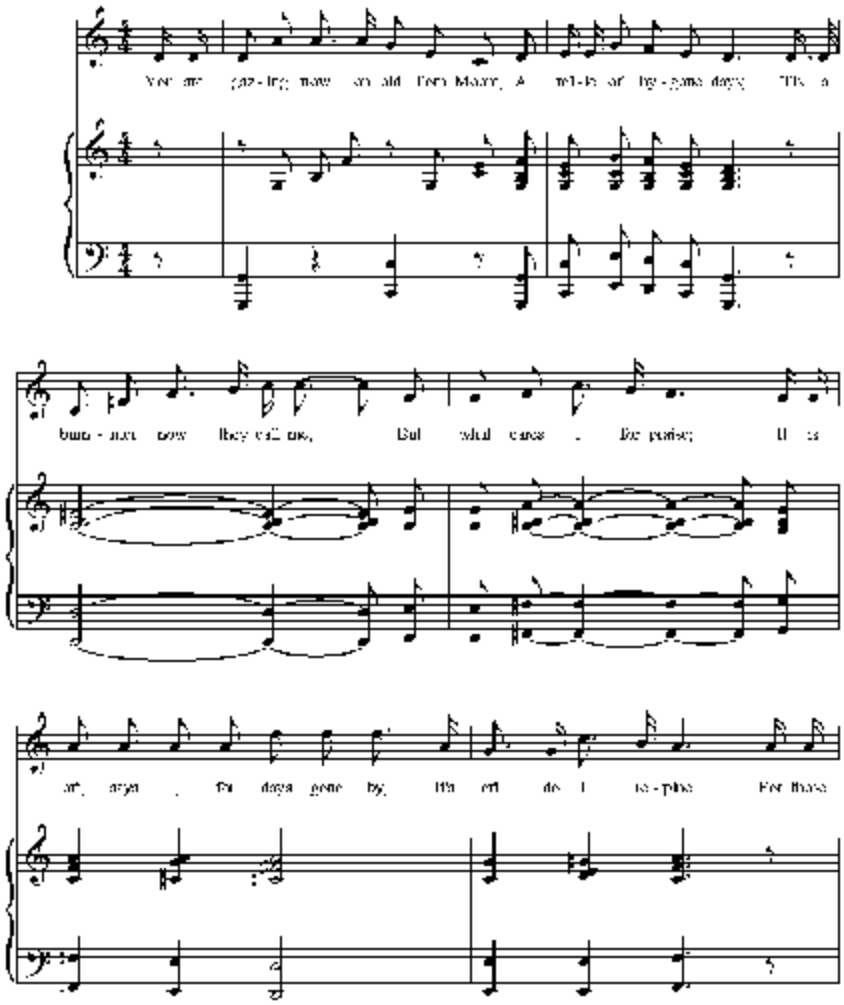
Days of Forty-Nine



JOE BOWERS

My name is Joe Bowers,
I've got a brother Ike,
I came here from Missouri,
Yes, all the way from Pike.
I'll tell you why I left there

And how I came to roam,
And leave my poor old mammy,
So far away from home.
    I used to love a gal there,
Her name was Sallie Black,
I asked her for to marry me,
She said it was a whack.
She says to me, "Joe Bowers,
Before you hitch for life,
You ought to have a little home
To keep your little wife."
    Says I, "My dearest Sallie,
O Sallie, for your sake,
I'll go to California
And try to raise a stake."
Says she to me, "Joe Bowers,
You are the chap to win,
Give me a kiss to seal the bargain,"—
And I throwed a dozen in.
    I'll never forget my feelings
When I bid adieu to all.
Sal, she cotched me round the neck
And I began to bawl.
When I begun they all commenced,
You never heard the like,
How they all took on and cried
The day I left old Pike.
    When I got to this here country
I hadn't nary a red,
I had such wolfish feelings

I wished myself most dead.
At last I went to mining,
Put in my biggest licks,
Came down upon the boulders
Just like a thousand bricks.
    I worked both late and early
In rain and sun and snow,
But I was working for my Sallie
So 'twas all the same to Joe.
I made a very lucky strike
As the gold itself did tell,
For I was working for my Sallie,
The girl I loved so well.
    But one day I got a letter
From my dear, kind brother Ike;
It came from old Missouri,
Yes, all the way from Pike.
It told me the goldarndest news
That ever you did hear,
My heart it is a-bustin'
So please excuse this tear.
    I'll tell you what it was, boys,
You'll bust your sides I know;
For when I read that letter
You ought to seen poor Joe.
My knees gave 'way beneath me,
And I pulled out half my hair;
And if you ever tell this now,
You bet you'll hear me swear.

It said my Sallie was fickle,
Her love for me had fled,
That she had married a butcher,
Whose hair was awful red;
It told me more than that,
It's enough to make me swear,—
It said that Sallie had a baby
And the baby had red hair.

Now I've told you all that I can tell
About this sad affair,
'Bout Sallie marrying the butcher
And the baby had red hair.
But whether it was a boy or girl
The letter never said,
It only said its cussed hair
Was inclined to be red.

THE COWBOY'S DREAM[2]

Last night as I lay on the prairie,
And looked at the stars in the sky,
I wondered if ever a cowboy
Would drift to that sweet by and by.

Roll on, roll on;
Roll on, little dogies, roll on, roll on,
Roll on, roll on;
Roll on, little dogies, roll on.

The road to that bright, happy region
Is a dim, narrow trail, so they say;
But the broad one that leads to perdition
Is posted and blazed all the way.

They say there will be a great round-up,
And cowboys, like dogies, will stand,
To be marked by the Riders of Judgment
Who are posted and know every brand.
I know there's many a stray cowboy
Who'll be lost at the great, final sale,
When he might have gone in the green pastures
Had he known of the dim, narrow trail.
I wonder if ever a cowboy
Stood ready for that Judgment Day,
And could say to the Boss of the Riders,
"I'm ready, come drive me away."
For they, like the cows that are locoed,
Stampede at the sight of a hand,
Are dragged with a rope to the round-up,
Or get marked with some crooked man's brand.
And I'm scared that I'll be a stray yearling,—
A maverick, unbranded on high,—
And get cut in the bunch with the "rusties"
When the Boss of the Riders goes by.
For they tell of another big owner
Whose ne'er overstocked, so they say,
But who always makes room for the sinner
Who drifts from the straight, narrow way.
They say he will never forget you,
That he knows every action and look;
So, for safety, you'd better get branded,
Have your name in the great Tally Book.
THE COWBOY'S LIFE[3]

The bawl of a steer,
To a cowboy's ear,
Is music of sweetest strain;
And the yelping notes
Of the gray cayotes
To him are a glad refrain.
And his jolly songs
Speed him along,
As he thinks of the little gal
With golden hair
Who is waiting there
At the bars of the home corral.
For a kingly crown
In the noisy town
His saddle he wouldn't change;
No life so free
As the life we see
Way out on the Yaso range.
His eyes are bright
And his heart as light
As the smoke of his cigarette;
There's never a care
For his soul to bear,
No trouble to make him fret.
The rapid beat
Of his broncho's feet
On the sod as he speeds along,
Keeps living time
To the ringing rhyme
Of his rollicking cowboy song.

Hike it, cowboys,
For the range away
On the back of a bronc of steel,
With a careless flirt
Of the raw-hide quirt
And a dig of a roweled heel!
The winds may blow
And the thunder growl
Or the breezes may safely moan;—
A cowboy's life
Is a royal life,
His saddle his kingly throne.
Saddle up, boys,
For the work is play
When love's in the cowboy's eyes,—
When his heart is light
As the clouds of white
That swim in the summer skies.

THE KANSAS LINE

Come all you jolly cowmen, don't you want to go
Way up on the Kansas line?
Where you whoop up the cattle from morning till night
All out in the midnight rain.
The cowboy's life is a dreadful life,
He's driven through heat and cold;
I'm almost froze with the water on my clothes,
A-ridin' through heat and cold.
I've been where the lightnin', the lightnin' tangled in my eyes,
The cattle I could scarcely hold;