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Cowboy Singin'

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"OH BURY ME NOT ON THE LONE PRAIRIE ..."

Bruce Brock

Cowboy Singin'

The cowboy's heyday occurred during the years following the Civil War, when Texas cattle were distributed to other markets by driving them up the trail on the hoof. The plentiful longhorns were considered almost worthless in the burgeoning wild herds of Texas but would multiply in value when delivered to dinner tables many miles away.



While some cattle drives from Texas to parts north occurred as early as the 1830s, they didn't become profitable until later years when there was a market and infrastructure to support them.

After a few decades of intense trail-driving activity, working cowboys started settling down onto ranches. Barbed wire had made the long trail drives difficult, and expanded train coverage made them less necessary. The long trail drives had almost ceased by 1890, yet would be

chronicled for years to come in stories, books and songs.

Cowboys have always sung at their work, though the reasons for singing and the origins of many of their songs remain in question. Just about anyone who works long, repetitive hours will have a reason to sing, if only to while away the time. During the spacious and lonely hours of the night, while men kept watch over the cattle, they would sing hymns and ballads and other



"GIT ALONG LITTLE DOGIES"

Bruce Brock

peaceful songs that fit the quiet setting. It has been said that such singing would keep the cattle from "milling" or circling around and getting worked up. It also served as a distraction from the various odd sounds of the night that could spook a cow and cause a stampede.

Singing also served to inform fellow cowboys of one another's whereabouts. Instead of, "Clem, you doin' alright?"

or "Hank, where are you now?" the occasional spontaneous vocalization served as a kind of "Marco Polo" in the dark night. These long hours also gave occasion to experimenting with the words of a song, and a drover with a taste for fine language might from time to time come up with a new verse to a long rambling song like "The Old Chisholm Trail."

The earliest instances of cowboy singing were probably a carryover from music traditions that the individuals grew up with, such as ballads, hymns and recreational songs. But as cowboys developed their own distinct culture, which was amplified by tales, articles and dime paperbacks, they developed a sense of community pride, and songs were tailored to serve that community. While singing around the campfire or the bunkhouse to the accompaniment of a fiddle, harmonica or guitar, an increased sense of fraternity arose from songs about riding a "Strawberry Roan," or "The Cowboy's Dream." An occasional tear might be shed to the lonesome strains of "Home Sweet Home" or "The Gal I Left Behind," both of which existed in cowboy versions.

A surprising number of fine, perspicacious cowboy songs originated in the city. Writers, poets and journalists who were fascinated with cowboy culture or who had memories of visits to the West would spin

fascinating yarns set to music. Songs of the 1880s, like "Zebra Dun" and "Tying Knots In the Devil's Tail," brought the music one step closer to Tin Pan Alley, while taking root in the cowboy community as well. Some of these latter-day trail men kept the cowboy singing traditions going through the turn of the century, and a direct connection can be seen with the early commercial cowboy bands like Sons of the Pioneers. Yet, the pure, down-to-earth folk tradition continues to this day, as cowboys gather for conventions of poetry, song and storytelling.

Kelly Werts has dedicated much of his life to preserving and invigorating the music of the Kansas pioneers through musical performances, workshops and residencies. His CD/book, Home On the Range- The Kansas Pioneers And Their Music, has contributed to the cause by documenting and presenting traditional music and folklore of the Midwest in an authentic fashion. He believes that the best old-time music seems fresh and new every time you play it.