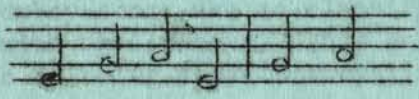


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NEBRASKA FOLKLORE PAMPHLET ONE

COWBOY SONGS



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FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT
NEBRASKA MAY 15, 1937

NEBRASKA FOLKLORE PAMPHLETS
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Number One
COWBOY SONGS
May 10, 1937

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Many of these songs, handed down and repeated by word of mouth, are adaptations of old English ballads. Many of them have become so changed by adaptation and transmission that their sources are doubtful. Some few of them originated in Nebraska.

Their authenticity is based upon their inclusion in a syllabus of titles, Folk-song of Nebraska and the Central West; direct contribution from Nebraska pioneers; or both.

In many compilations, cowboy songs are so classified because they have found particular favor with the cowboys. This group of songs have the additional characteristic of being about cowboy life. Some of them have Nebraska locale.

THE HORSE WRANGLER
(Also known as The Tenderfoot)

I thought one spring just for fun
I'd see how cow-punching was done,
And when the roundups had begun
I tackled the cattle-king.
Says he, "My foreman is in town,
He's at the plaza, and his name is Brown,
If you'll see him, he'll take you down."
Says I, "That's just the thing."

We started for the ranch next day;
Brown augured me most all the way.
He said that cow-punching was nothing but play,
That it was no work at all,---
That all you had to do was ride,
And only drifting with the tide;
The son of a gun, oh, how he lied.
Don't you think he had his gall?

He put me in charge of a cavyard,
And told me to work too hard,
That all I had to do was guard
The horses from getting away;

I had one hundred and sixty head,
 I sometimes wished that I was dead;
 When one got away, Brown's head turned red,
 And there was the devil to pay.



Sometimes one would make a break,
 Across the prairie he would take,
 As if running for a stake—
 It seemed to them but play;
 Sometimes I could not head them at all,
 Sometimes my horse would catch a fall
 And I'd shoot like a cannon ball
 Till the earth came in my way.

They saddled me up an old gray hack
 With two set-fasts on his back,
 They padded him down with a gunny sack
 And used my bedding all.
 When I got on he quit the ground,
 Went up in the air and turned around,
 And I came down and busted the ground—
 I got one hell of a fall.

They took me up and carried me in
 And rubbed me down with an old stake pin.
 "That's the way they all begin;
 You're doing well," says Brown.
 "And in the morning, if you don't die,
 I'll give you another horse to try."
 "Oh say, can't I walk?" says I.
 Says he, "Yes, back to town."

I've traveled up and I've traveled down,
 I've traveled this country round and round,
 I've lived in city and I've lived in town,
 But I've got this much to say:
 Before you try cow-punching, kiss your wife,
 Take a heavy insurance on your life,
 Then cut your throat with a barlow knife--
 For it's easier done that way.

THE COWBOY'S LAMENT

This song is also known as The Dying Cowboy. Its origin has been traced by Phillips Barry to The Unfortunate Rake, a song popular in Ireland in the eighteenth century.

As I walked out in the streets of Laredo,
 As I walked out in Laredo one day,
 I spied a poor cowboy wrapped up in white linen,
 Wrapped up in white linen as cold as the clay,

Chorus:

"Oh, beat the drum slowly and play the fife lowly,
 Play the Dead March as you carry me along;
 Take me down the green valley, there lay the sod o'er me,
 For I'm a young cowboy and I know I've done wrong."

"I see by your outfit that you are a cowboy,"
 Those words he did say as I boldly stepped by.
 "Come sit down beside me and hear my sad story;
 I was shot in the breast and I know I must die.

"Let sixteen gamblers come handle my coffin,
 Let sixteen cowboys come sing me a song,
 Take me to the graveyard and lay the sod o'er me,
 For I'm a poor cowboy and I know I've done wrong.

"My friends and relations, they live in the Nation,
 They know not where their boy has gone.
 He first came to Texas and hired to a ranchman,
 OH, I'm a young cowboy and I know I've done wrong.

"Go write a letter to my gray-haired mother,
 And carry the same to my sister so dear;
 But not a word of this shall you mention
 When a crowd gathers round you my story to hear.

"Then beat your drum lowly and play your fife slowly,
 Beat the Dead March as you carry me along;
 We all love our cowboys so young and so handsome,
 We all love our cowboys although they've done wrong.

"There is another more dear than a sister,
 She'll bitterly weep when she hears I am gone.
 There is another who will win her affections,
 For I'm a young cowboy and they say I've done wrong.

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

"Oh, muffle your drums, then play your fifes merrily;
Play the Dead March as you go along.
And fire your guns right over my coffin;
There goes an unfortunate boy to his home.

"It was once in the saddle I used to go dashing,
It was once in the saddle I used to go gay;
First to the dram-house, then to the card-house,
Got shot in the breast, I am dying today.

"Get six jolly cowboys to carry my coffin;
Get six pretty maidens to bear up my pall.
Put bunches of roses all over my coffin,
Put roses to deaden the clods as they fall.

"Then swing your rope slowly and rattle your spurs lowly,
And give a wild whoop as you carry me along;
And in the grave throw me and roll the sod o'er me,
For I'm a young cowboy and I know I've done wrong.

"Go bring me a cup, a cup of cold water,
To cool my parched lips," the cowboy said;
Before I turned, the spirit had left him
And gone to its Giver--the cowboy was dead.

We beat the drum slowly and played the fife lowly,
And bitterly wept as we bore him along;
For we all love our comrade, so brave, young and handsome,
We all loved our comrade although he'd done wrong.

THE LITTLE OLD SOD SHANTY

This song is an adaptation of The Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane, written by W.S. Hays in 1871. There are several variants. Friends of a Nebraskan, Emery Miller, claim he wrote the adaptation while holding down a claim.

I am looking rather seedy now while holding down my claim,
And my victuals are not always carved the best;
And the mice play shyly round me as I nestle down to rest
In my little old sod shanty on my claim.

The hinges are of leather and the windows have no glass,
While the board roof lets the howling blizzards in,
And I hear the hungry coyote as he slinks up through the grass
Round the little old sod shanty on my claim.

Yet, I rather like the novelty of living in this way,
 Though my bill of fare is always rather tame,
 But I'm happy as a clam on the land of Uncle Sam,
 In the little old sod shanty on my claim.

But when I left me Eastern home, a bachelor so gay,
 To try and win my way to wealth and fame,
 I little thought I'd come down to burning twisted hay
 In the little old sod shanty on my claim.

My clothes are plastered o'er with dough, I'm looking like
 a fright,
 And everything is scattered round the room,
 But I wouldn't give the freedom that I have out in the West
 For the table of the Eastern man's old home.

Still, I wish that some kind-hearted girl would pity on
 me take,
 And relieve me from the mess that I am in;
 The angel, how I'd bless her if this hor home she'd make
 In the little old sod shanty on my claim.

And we would make our fortune on the prairies of the West,
 Just as happy as two lovers we'd remain;
 We'd forget the trials and troubles we endured at the first
 In the little old sod shanty on my claim.

And if fate should bless us with now and then an heir
 To cheer our hearts with honest pride of fame,
 Oh, then we'd be contented for the toil that we had spent
 In the little old sod shanty on our claim.

When time enough had lapsed and all those little brats
 To noble man and womanhood had grown,
 It wouldn't seem half so lonely as round us we should look
 And we'd see the old sod shanty on our claim.

TEXAS RANGERS

(Much Sung in Nebraska)

Come, all you Texas rangers, wherever you may be,
 I'll tell you of some troubles that happened unto me.
 My name is nothing extra, so it I will not tell—
 And here's to all you rangers, I am sure I wish you well.

It was at the age of sixteen that I joined the jolly band,
 We marched from San Antonio down to the Rio Grande.
 Our captain he informed us, perhaps he thought it right,
 "Before we reach the station, boys, you'll surely have
 to fight."

And when the bugle sounded our captain gave command,
 "To arms, to arms," he shouted, "and by your horses stand."
 I saw the smoke ascending, it seemed to reach the sky;
 The first thought that struck me, my time had come to die.

I saw the Indians coming, I heard them give the yell;
 No feelings at that moment, no tongue can ever tell.
 I saw the glittering lances, their arrows round me flew,
 And all my strength it left me and all my courage too.

We fought full nine hours before the strife was o'er.
 The like of dead and wounded I never saw before.
 And when the sun was rising and the Indians they had fled,
 We loaded up our rifles and counted up our dead.

And all of us were wounded, our noble captain slain,
 And the sun was shining sadly across the bloody plain.
 Sixteen as brave rangers as ever roamed the West
 Were buried by their comrades with arrows in their breast.

'Twas then I thought of mother, who to me in tears did say,
 "To you they are all strangers, with me you had better stay."
 I thought that she was childish, the best she did not know;
 My mind was fixed on ranging and I was bound to go.

Perhaps you have a mother, likewise a sister too,
And maybe you have a sweetheart to weep and mourn for you;
If that be your situation, although you'd like to roam,
I'd advise you by experience, you had better stay at home.

I have seen the fruits of rambling, I know its hardships well;
I have crossed the Rocky Mountains, rode down the streets
of hell;
I have been in the great Southwest where the wild Apaches
roam,
And I tell you from experience you had better stay at home.

And now my song is ended; I guess I have sung enough;
The life of a ranger I am sure is very tough.
And here's to all you ladies, I am sure I wish you well,
I am bound to go a-ranging, so ladies, fare you well.

JESSE JAMES

The meter and sentiment of this ballad indicate an adaptation from stanzas found in Song Ballets and Devils Ditties, by W.A. Bradley. This song is of late composition. The hero of the tale is known to living Nebraskans and Missourians. His home is a point of interest not far from Excelsior Springs, Missouri. As late as 1933 a man claiming to be Jesse James traveled through the State of Nebraska. In the summer of 1934 a man in Excelsior Springs, Missouri, was publicly proclaiming himself as Jesse James.

Jesse James was a lad that killed a-many a man;
He robbed the Danville train.
But that dirty little coward that shot Mr. Howard
Has laid poor Jesse in his grave.

Poor Jesse had a wife to mourn for his life,
Three children, they were brave.
But that dirty little coward that shot Mr. Howard
Has laid poor Jesse in his grave.

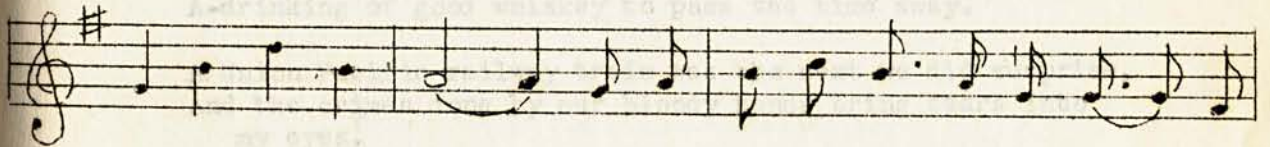
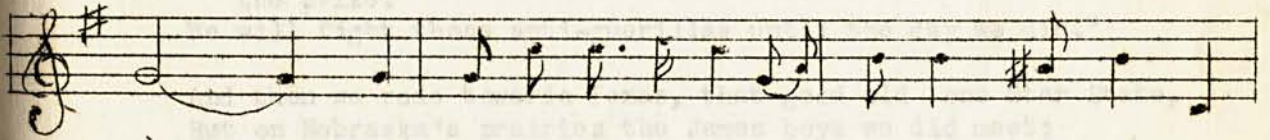
It was Robert Ford, that dirty little coward,
I wonder how he does feel,
For he ate of Jesse's bread and he slept in Jesse's bed,
Then laid poor Jesse in his grave.

Jesse was a man, a friend to the poor,
He never would see a man suffer pain;
And with his brother Frank he robbed the Chicago bank,
And stopped the Glendale train.

It was his brother Frank that robbed the Gallatin bank,
And carried the money from the town;
It was in this very place that they had a little race,
For they shot Captain Sheets to the ground.

They went to the crossing not very far from there,
 And there they did the same;
 With the agent on his knees, he delivered up the keys
 To the outlaws, Frank and Jesse James.

It was on Wednesday night, the moon was shining bright,
 They robbed the Glendale train;
 The people they did say, for many miles away,
 It was robbed by Frank and Jesse James.



It was on Saturday night, Jesse was at home,
 Talking with his family brave,
 Robert Ford came along like a thief in the night
 And laid poor Jesse in his grave.

The people held their breath when they heard of Jesse's
 death,
 And wondered how he ever came to die.
 It was one of the gang called little Robert Ford,
 He shot poor Jesse on the sly.

Jesse went to his post with his hand on his breast;
 The devil will be upon his knee.
 He was born one day in the county of Clay
 And came from a solitary race.

This song was made by Billy Gashade,
 As soon as the news did arrive;
 He said there was no man with the law in his hand
 Who could take Jesse James when alive.

COLE YOUNGER

I am one of a band of highwaymen, Cole Younger is my name;
 My crimes and depredations have brought my friends to shame;
 The robbing of the Northfield bank, the same I can't deny,
 For now I am a prisoner, in the Stillwater jail I lie.

'Tis of a bold, high robbery, a story to you I'll tell,
 Of a California miner who unto us befell;
 We robbed him of his money and bid him go his way,
 For which I will be sorry until my dying day.

And then we started homeward, when brother Bob did say:
 "Now, Cole, we will buy fast horses and on them ride away.
 We will ride to avenge our father's death and try to win
 the prize;
 We will fight those anti-guerillas until the day we die."

And then we rode towards Texas, that good old Lone Star State,
 But on Nebraska's prairies the James boys we did meet;
 With knives, guns, and revolvers we all sat down to play,
 A-drinking of good whiskey to pass the time away.

A Union Pacific railway train was the next we did surprise,
 And the crimes done by our bloody hands bring tears into
 my eyes.
 The engineer and fireman killed, the conductor escaped alive,
 And now their bones lie mouldering beneath Nebraska's skies.

Then we saddled horses, northwestward we did go,
 To the God-forsaken country called Min-ne-so-te-o;
 I had my eye on the Northfield bank when brother Bob did say,
 "Now, Cole, if you undertake the job, you will surely curse
 the day."

But I stationed out my pickets and up to the bank did go,
 And there upon the counter I struck my fatal blow.
 "Just hand us over your money and make no further delay,
 We are the famous Younger brothers, we spare no time to pray."

THE COWBOYS DREAM

Other titles by which this song is known are Roll On Little Dogies and The Cowboy's Meditation. Besides the accompanying air the song is often sung to the tunes of My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean and The Sweet Bye and Bye. One collector of folklore has given this as a plainsman's version of an Old World ballad, The Unfortunate Rake; another as an adaptation of Ocean Burial. Its meter and sentiment resemble both.

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 roundup,
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 wondered 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 loosed,
Stampede at the sight of a hand,
Are dragged with a rope to the roundup,
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 out 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
Whi drifts from the straight, narrow way.

The musical score consists of six staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a time signature of 3/4. The melody is written in a single voice part. The first five staves contain the main body of the song, and the sixth staff is labeled 'REFRAIN' and contains the repeated musical phrase.

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 DREARY BLACK HILLS

Several variations of this song are extant.

Kind friends, you must pity my horrible tale,
 I am an object of pity, I am looking quite stale,
 I gave up my trade selling Right's Patent Pills
 To go hunting gold in the dreary Black Hills.

Chorus:

Don't go away, stay at home if you can,
 Stay away from that city, they call it Cheyenne,
 For big Walipe or Comanche Bills
 They will lift up your hair on the dreary
 Black Hills.

I got to Cheyenne, no gold could I find,
 I thought of the lunch route I'd left far behind;
 Through rain, hell, and snow, frozen plumb to the gills—
 They call me the orphan of the dreary Black Hills.

The round-house in Cheyenne is filled every night
 With loafers and bummers of most every plight;
 On their backs is no clothes, in their pockets no bills,
 Each day they keep starting for the dreary Black Hills.

Kind friend, to conclude, my advice I'll unfold,
 Don't go to the Black Hills a-hunting for gold;
 Railroad speculators their pockets you'll fill
 By taking a trip to those dreary Black Hills.

Chorus:

Don't go away, stay at home if you can,
 Stay away from that city, they call it Cheyenne,
 For old Sitting Bull or Comanche Bills
 They will take off your scalp on the Dreary Black Hills.

* * * * *

Nebraska Folklore Pamphlet Number Two will be issued on or before May 25, 1937, and will contain Indian Legends.