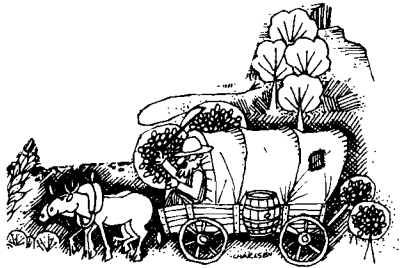


FOLKLORE RESEARCH IN THE CATTLEMAN

by James F. Hoy

While the theme of this year's [1974] Kansas Folklore Society meeting is applied folk life, my paper will have a dual purpose: primarily, it will describe and give a progress report on folklore research in *The Cattleman*, and it will conclude with a suggestion of how to utilize this kind of project in the classroom.



The Cattleman, the official journal of the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association, is a monthly publication first issued in 1914. While it is primarily a trade journal (with most articles dealing with such things as market trends, range management, and experiments in cattle feeding), it also contains a very large number of articles dealing with the history and culture of the Southwest and Great Plains regions. A colleague, Richard Keller, and I are currently compiling a bibliography of this material, a project now approximately half completed. From the work done so far, we estimate, conservatively, a final list of some 3200 items. Even more surprising to us than the wealth of material in the journal is the scarcity of reference to it in scholarly work. *The Cattleman* is referred to only once by J. Frank Dobie in his bibliography of Southwestern literature, once in Richard Etulain's 1972 bibliography of Western American literature (Dakota Press)—and virtually nowhere else.

The only standard reference work I have been able to find that indexes *The Cattleman* is *Writings on American History*, but even then only for the years 1948-1960. The first 34 years of *The Cattleman's* publications are ignored by WOA, and the last 13 years plus have not yet been reached. (*WOA* is that much behind schedule; the edition for 1960, was not issued until late 1973.) Even more distressing,

the listings in *WOAH* are inadequate; a sizeable number of important articles are not included.

So what we have found in this magazine is an untapped reservoir of resource material for the student of the American West, particularly material about the life and times of the Southwest and Great Plains cowman. In fact, reading a few volumes of *The Cattleman* is one way—and a very pleasant way, at that—of obtaining an education in the history and culture of the Southwest and Plains regions. One significant aspect of that culture is, of course, folklore, and *The Cattleman* contains a wide variety of folk material. Let me read to you a partial list of the kinds of things to be found here, pausing occasionally to elaborate on some particularly interesting items.

The Cattleman contains many articles about ghost stories, haunted ranches, and phantom steers; accounts of lost treasure; frontier religion; superstitions, folk beliefs, charms, and animal lore (e.g., roadrunners and rattlesnakes); freighter and mule skinner yarns; mustang and horse legends; prairie fires and the methods of fighting them; range terminology, sayings, and etymologies (I learned, for instance, the origin of the term “toolies” from *The Cattleman*—it refers to swampy, brushy river regions where wild cattle hid; the term came to denote a snipe-hunting type of trick played by cowboys on tenderfeet, and, indeed, more than one gravestone bears the inscription, “Gone to the toolies,”) [originally from Latin *Thule*, designating a distant place, prob. Greenland. Ed.].

The Cattleman also contains some tall tales and some true tales that sound like tall ones. Reading about John R. Abernathy, who is reputed to have caught 1000 wolves with his bare hands, can help one see the origin of tall tales in apparently true accounts. Along this same line, the Swift Company ran a series of advertisements that featured tall tales about both legendary and real life figures: Pecos Bill, Big Foot Wallace, Judge Three-legged Willie.

Two major concerns of the rancher were the weather and the health of his livestock. As one might expect in a dry region, many of the folk articles in *The Cattleman* deal with rain making and water witching. People believed, for instance, that rain followed the plow, that it was attracted to cabin smoke and telegraph wires—even to prairie fires. Articles concerning folk veterinary medicine practices include accounts of working cattle according to the signs of the zodiac, of letting blood in horses to cool them and help them gain their wind, and, strangest of all, of “talking” screw worms out of cattle.

A wide variety of Indian lore is included—humor, rituals, the making of pemmican, dances. I have, in addition, found in narratives of whites captured by Indians an intriguing recurring motif. Many times the search for the captured person will be successful only after someone in the area being searched has a dream telling the location of the person being sought. This motif has some rather interesting mythical and sociological implications, it seems to me, and someday I hope to study it further.

The major portion of the material deals, naturally, with cowboy lore. West Texas cowboys, for instance, are more bowlegged than those from the Southeast part of the state because there are prairie dogs in West Texas, so cowboys there ride a shorter stirrup in order to be thrown clear should their horses stumble in a prairie dog hole. The shorter stirrup causes a more bowed leg, or so affirms more than one author in *The Cattleman*. One also gets a sense of the cowboy's feeling of superiority because he rode a horse (some even rode from the bunkhouse to the outhouse), of his sense of humor (faking gun-fights for the benefit of tenderfeet, pretending to have lice, rabid skunks, and ghosts in order to get rid of unwelcome guests), of trail driving and chuckwagon etiquette (always picking up a handful of sticks or chips when coming in to eat, never riding a horse in from the upwind side), and, finally, of cowboy cooking. One especially popular indigenous culinary delight is the renowned "son of a gun" stew, a mystery dish that, perhaps, should best remain a mystery—its chief ingredient is marrow gut, and it also includes sweet breads, heart, liver, tongue, brains, some tenderloin, mountain oysters (if made from a bull calf or yearling), a double handful of paunch fat, and some salt and pepper. While the ingredients and their proportions may vary, all of them spoil quickly, and this dish is one that will utilize them efficiently. According to the code of the West, son of a gun stew always tasted better if it was made from another man's calf. Maybe some year the Kansas Folklore Society can hold its meeting somewhere on the plains and have son of a gun stew around a camp fire!

When one realizes that the topics I have just mentioned are only a partial list gleaned from less than half of the issues of *The Cattleman*, and when one further realizes that the folklore articles therein are not nearly so numerous as the historical articles—biographies, oral histories, etc.—then one begins to get an idea of the scope and the importance of the material to be found in this journal.

I promised at first to suggest a practical application of this type of study. I have a feeling that *The Cattleman* is not the only journal with folk life material in its pages. If your students could locate in the

attics of their houses, the basements of their grandparents' houses, old issues of other magazines—Farm Journals, Harper's Weeklies, even such things as True Romances and Weekly Readers—then you would have the material with which to begin a search similar to the one Professor Keller and I have undertaken. I have been greatly excited by the discoveries we have made in what really amounts to a buried source; I think your students could experience this same excitement and reward.

I will close with a plea for assistance. Our collection of *The Cattleman* is not complete. If you have, or know of any, copies that you would be willing to donate for our study (we will place them in our library when the study is finished) please contact me in care of the English Department, Emporia Kansas State College.

