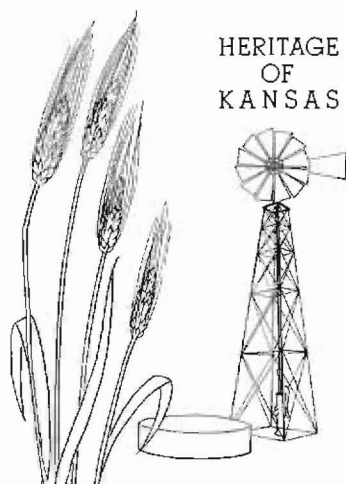


Kansas History and Folksong



The *Heritage of Kansas* is made available to Kansas schools and libraries for use by students and teachers. It is hoped that interest in Kansas' cultural heritage will be stimulated in the hearts and minds of its readers.

Whenever possible, each issue will be built around one topic, with three approaches. One section will be a factual essay contributed by an authority on the subject. The second approach to the subject will be an "eyewitness" account; the third section will deal with the folklore of the subject. The combination of these three approaches to the central theme should contribute something different—and something vital—to an understanding and appreciation of Kansas and its people.

Editor, P. J. Wyatt, Department of English; cover design by Department of Art, Kansas State Teachers College, Emporia, Kansas.

VOLUME V

MAY, 1961

NUMBER 2

HERITAGE OF KANSAS is published four times a year, February, May, September, November, by the Department of English of the Kansas State Teachers College, 1200 Commercial Street, Emporia, Kansas. Application for entry as second-class matter made February 1, 1957, at the post office at Emporia, Kansas, under the act of August 14, 1912. Entered as second-class matter at Emporia, Kansas. Postage paid at Emporia, Kansas.

photo books
of pioneer westward
travel on the river
and the trail



A typical scene on the banks of the Arkansas at Great Bend as the pioneers made their new trails into the unknown West. (Courtesy of George Brannon Studios, Great Bend)

Facts and Fiction

“I used to be a pretty good singer,” a fellow up in McFarland said a while back, “—until tunes came into fashion.” Poker-faced, tongue-in-cheek Kansas humor.

Well, a lot of people used to be “pretty good singers”—even *after* tunes came into fashion. Kansans, coming to the virgin plains in the last century, came singing. They brought old songs with them: songs passed down from generation to generation, songs from the Old World, and from “back East” in the New World.

They came singing new songs, often putting fresh words to old familiar tunes. There was “Kansas Land” sung to the tune of “Beulah Land,” and “The Song of the Kansas Emigrant” sung to the tune of “Auld Lang Syne.” They brought the old and the new with them, and sometimes made up songs after they got here.

Our predecessors sang (and many of us still do sing) while working and relaxing in the evening after the day’s work. Gramophones were scarce before 1900. There were few radios before the 1920’s, and little television before the 1940’s.

. . . People need music So our people sang—for themselves and for their families, and they used to be “pretty good singers.” They sang about their new land, sometimes satirically, sometimes sentimentally. They sang about heroes and bad men, about love and murder, about jealousy and sorrows.

Dad sang as he swept out the store or mended harness. Mother sang as she did up the dishes or mended socks. Sis sang while she slopped the pigs or sewed quilt blocks, and Brother sang or whistled as he rode his horse to town or while he milked. In the cool summer evenings out on the porch (or around the kitchen table in the winter), the whole family often sang the songs together.

Music is an important part of our Kansas heritage—not only the folk-songs, with which this issue deals, but music in more “formal” forms, too. Nearly every community had its band (and its bandstand in the park) up till about twenty-five years ago. Many towns boasted glee clubs, to say nothing of church choirs and school groups. There were the early day singing schools which nearly every one in the neighborhood attended. There were small dance combos consisting of a fiddle, a harmonica, a guitar, and maybe even a piano. There were family orchestras with the mother chording at the piano or pump-organ, the father leading out with the violin, and the kids chiming in on the cornet or trombone or second violin.

Certainly most of these early musicians didn't have the polish and technique of professionals. Maybe they were a bit out of tune; maybe they didn't keep strict time. But by gollies, they had the desire and the will to have music. And so Kansans sang and played.

The instrumental groups and big singing groups used printed music ordered from the cities or laboriously copied from music books owned by someone in the area. But the individual singers sang songs which didn't come from books. They sang and passed on what are called folksongs—songs learned by word of mouth.

These latter are the songs discussed in this issue, against the backdrop of historical events affecting the state.

“Kansas History and Folksong” was written by two very knowledgeable people in the field of Kansas lore—Mr. William E. Koch, Assistant Professor of English at Kansas State University and his wife, Mary. Neither Mr. Koch (pronounced “cook”) nor Mrs. Koch is a native Kansan, but they have thoroughly adopted the state by now.

Bill Koch, who claims he is nothing but a “misplaced cowboy,” was born and raised in South Dakota. He was around singin' and story tellin' and horses and raw country while he was growing up, but he never took a real interest in folklore until he went to North Dakota State Teachers College to get his bachelors degree. He has been collecting and singing and writing in the field ever since. In fact, he has done advanced work in comparative folklore at Indiana University.

Mr. Koch is pretty well known around these parts for his work in Kansas material. He has been doing a radio program once a month for several years over the Manhattan station, called Legends and Lore of the Great Plains. He has sung folksongs and given talks for schools, 4-H groups, scout groups, and various clubs throughout the area. He helped found the Kansas Folklore Society (along with Sam Sackett of Fort Hays State College), and has been president of the society for two terms now. He's a rugged, wiry individual with a quick grin and a Stetson hat.

Mary Koch is a good-looking brunette who met Bill at college in her home state of North Dakota. Her interest in folklore came about from being with him—a kind of self-defense, as she puts it. In her spare time (when she's not busy with their two teenagers, or with her job as financial secretary at Manhattan Junior High School), she stays busy with folk music and stories and in helping her husband write articles.

So there you have a brief introduction to Bill and Mary Koch. Now for their story of "Kansas History and Folksong."



Bill Koch sings Kansas ballads to 4-H Club group at their ranch near Junction City. His dog, Louie, is one of the audience.