

KANSAS FOLKSONGS

Tom Isern

The songs comprised here are folksongs--the designation "folksong" being a matter of degree, but still a worthwhile distinction. The marks of classic folksong are folk origin (author unknown or obscure--not a professional writer or performer) and folk transmission (by the oral tradition or some other informal means). The fifteen songs we include: all to some degree meet these requirements. Additional criteria for inclusion are identification with Kansas--by authorship, subject, or currency--and English expression. Other language groups have rich heritages of folksong, too, but this is an English-language collection.

Folksongs are good vehicles for celebrating Kansas because of their attributes as historical documents. Folksongs characterize the state's historical culture; they are consensus documents. They have to express the people's true beliefs, or they never become folksongs. Often they offer clues to cultural traits otherwise hidden. Like Christians in denominations accustomed to speaking creeds rather than making individual testimonies, people put into folksongs sentiments that they could not speak in simple prose. Finally, unlike most historical documents, folksongs are evolutionary. They change through time to reflect changes in their host culture. Captured in folksong, then, is the cultural history of Kansas, highlighting especially the tense relationship between culture and environment that constitutes the core of the state's story.

A final caveat: this publication is intended as a singer's anthology and will not stand scrutiny as a study in academic folklore. The only valid attribution of the particular texts and tunes here set down is "as sung by Tom Isern."

1. The Kansas Emigrants

Handwritten musical score for "The Kansas Emigrants". The score is written on ten staves of music in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The lyrics are written below the notes, and guitar chords (E, A, B7) are indicated above the staff lines. A "Chorus" section is marked with a double slash and the word "Chorus" written above the staff.

We cross the prair-ies as of old
 Our fath-ers crossed the sea,
 To make the West, as they the East,
 The home-stead of the free.
 The home-stead of the free, my boys,
 The home-stead of the free.
 To make the West, as they the East,
 The home-stead of the free.

1.

THE KANSAS EMIGRANTS

We cross the prairies as of old
 Our fathers crossed the sea,
 To make the West, as they the East,
 The homestead of the free.

The homestead of the free, my boys,
 The homestead of the free.
 To make the West, as they the East,
 The homestead of the free.

*We go to rear a wall of men
On freedom's southern line,
To plant beside the cotton tree
The rugged northern pine.*

*We're flowing from our native hills
As our free rivers flow,
The blessing of our motherland
Is on us as we go.*

*We go to plant our common schools
On distant prairie swells,
To give the Sabbath of the wild
The music of her bells.*

*Upbearing, like the Ark of old,
The Bible in our van,
We go to test the truth of God
Against the fraud of man.*

*No pause, nor rest, save where the streams
That feed the Kansas run,
And where our Pilgrim gonfalon
Shall flout the setting sun.*

*We'll cross the prairies as of old
Our fathers crossed the sea,
And make the West, as they the East,
The homestead of the free.*

Text: poem by John Greenleaf Whittier, the anti-slavery poet, 1854.

Tune: sung to the tune of "Auld Lang Syne."

Comments: "The Kansas Emigrants" is one of at least three poems Whittier wrote about the controversy over slavery in Bleeding Kansas of territorial times. It is perhaps the finest of all his poems, combining visual imagery with historical and Biblical allusion to produce a compelling plea for the cause of free soil. Its argument is that northern society--with its Puritan heritage, its free educational institutions, and the blessing of God--is morally superior to cotton-depraved southern society, and that free northern institutions, symbolized by the pine tree, must prevail in Kansas.

Whittier inscribed this poem and sent it to a party of settlers starting for Kansas under the auspices of the New England Emigrant Aid Society. They sang it to the tune of "Auld Lang Syne," thereby founding a folksong tradition upon the poem. Generations of schoolchildren learned the song and performed it on patriotic occasions. Since the 1950s, however, the song has been in eclipse, perhaps because of the amoral interpretations of the Civil War era propounded by revisionist historians in general and by Alice Nichols (Bleeding Kansas) in particular. The song deserves revival as a study in poetry and history.

2. Quantrell

Come all you bold rob-bers and o-pen your ears,
 Of Quan-trell the lion-heart you quick-ly will hear.
 With a band of bold raid-ers in dou-ble-quick time,
 He come to burn Law-rence just o-ver the line.
 All rout-ing and shoot-ing and giv-ing the yell,
 Like so man-y dem-ons just raised up from hell.
 The boys, they were drunk-en with pow-der and wine,
 And came to burn Law-rence just o-ver the line.

QUANTRELL

Come all you bold robbers and open your ears,
 Of Quantrell the lion-heart you quickly will hear.
 With a band of bold raiders in double-quick time,
 He came to burn Lawrence just over the line.

All routing and ehouting and giving the yell,
 Like so many demons just raised up from hell.
 The boys, they were drunken with powder and wine,
 And came to burn Lawrence just over the line.

*They came to burn Lawrence, they came not to stay,
They rode in one morning at breaking of day,
Their guns were a-waving, their horses a-foam,
With Quantrell a-riding his famous big roan.*

*They came to burn Lawrence, they came not to stay,
Jim Lane, he was up at the breaking of day,
He saw them a-coming and got in a fright,
And crawled in a corn-crib to get out of sight.*

*O Quantrell's a fighter, he's a bold-hearted boy,
A brave man or woman he'll never annoy.
He'd take from the rich and he'd give to the poor,
For brave men there's never a bolt to his door.*

Text: original ballad by Billy Edwards, probably of Council Grove, Kansas, 1864.

Tune: origin unknown.

Comments: This song lionizes the Confederate bushwacker, William Clarke Quantrill. Kansans traditionally have denigrated Quantrill as a ruthless cutthroat and a stooge of the corrupt Confederacy, but this song makes him a hero. Quantrill, perpetrator both of the famous raid on Lawrence and of the Baxter Springs Massacre in 1863, was indeed a commander of boldness and ability, but there is no evidence he ever patronized the poor, as the song contends.

"Quantrell" belongs in the long tradition of outlaw balladry that stretches back to Saxon patriots (Robin Hood, for instance), Scottish border raiders, and Irish highwaymen; extends into recent times to cover such characters as Jesse James, Sam Bass, and Pretty Boy Floyd; and continues yet today, as the recent appearance of "Freedom Fighter Gordon Kahl," a song glorifying the Posse Comitatus, testifies. Outlaw ballads make heroes of individuals, no matter how scurrilous, who serve a popular political purpose. Historians call such characters "social bandits." Quantrill, then, though a villain to most Kansans, was a hero to Missourians who favored the Confederacy and chafed under Federal occupation during the Civil War.

The earliest known version of this song, entitled "Quantrill's Raid on Lawrence," was published in the Council Grove Press, February 8, 1864. It calls Quantrill a "robber" and "ruffian," mourns the destruction of Lawrence, and makes Jim Lane the hero of the day. Circulation in the folk tradition, however, inevitably converted the devilish Quantrill into the stock hero of balladry.

3. Kansas Boys

The musical score is written on five staves in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. The melody is simple and folk-like. Chords are indicated by letters A and G above the notes. The lyrics are written below the notes.

Come, all young girls, pay at-ten-tion to my noise,
 Don't fall in love with the Kau-sas boys,
 For if you do, your for-tune it will be--
 John-ny-cape and ant-e-lope is all you'll see,
 John-ny-cape and ant-e-lope is all you'll see.

KANSAS BCYS

Come, all young girls, pay attention to my noise,
 Don't fall in love with the Kansas boys,
 For if you do, your fortune it will be--
 Johnnycape and antelope is all you'll see,
 Johnnycape and antelope is all you'll see.

They'll take you out on the jet-black hill,
 Take you there so much against your will,
 Leave you there to perish on the plains--
 That is the way with the Kansas range.

Some live in a cabin with a huge log wall,
 Nary a window in it at all,
 Sandstone chimney and a puncheon floor,
 Clapboard roof and a button door.

When they get hungry and go to bake bread,
 They kindle a fire as high as your head,
 Rake around the ashes and in they throw--
 The name that they give it is the doughboy's dough.

When they go to milk, they milk in a gourd,
 Heave it in a corner, and cover with a board.
 Some get plenty and some get none--
 That is the way with the Kansas run.

*When they go to meeting, the clothes that they wear
Is an old brown coat, all picked and bare,
An old white hat more rim than crown,
A pair of cotton socks they wore the week around.*

*When they go to farming, you needn't be alarmed,
In February they plant their corn.
The way they tend it, I'll tell you how--
With a Texas pony and a grasshopper plow.*

*When they go a-fishing, they take along a worm,
Put it on a hook just to watch it equirm.
The first thing they say when they get a bite
Is, "I caught a fish as big as Johnny White."*

*When they come a-courting, they bring along a chair,
The first thing they say is, "Has your daddy killed a bear?"
The second thing they say when they sit down
Is, "Madam, your johnnycake is baking brown."*

Text: Kansas texts of this song are localizations of a similar folksong sung throughout the Appalachian and southern states.

Tune: origin unknown.

Comments: This song illustrates what folklorists call "localization," that is, changing an old song so that it fits a new locality. Forerunners of "Kansas Boys" go back chronologically at least to the 1840s and geographically at least as far east as Virginia. The song traveled west with the agricultural frontier, the women of successive frontier localities thereby warning one another to beware of Carolina boys, Arkansas boys, Texas boys, Kansas boys, Cheyenne (Wyoming) boys, and even Mormon boys ("Johnnycake and babies is all you'll see"). Always the boys from the frontier--Kansas, in this case--are coarse, disreputable typee, and they hale from a bleak, desolate place. Although the song treats various localities, and it occurs set in various musical modes and melodies, its themes are constant.

As is characteristic of farmers' folksongs, this one is down-to-earth. It speaks of everyday things--baking, milking, plowing, courting, fishing with worms. Many of these prosaic details have geographic significance tied to the migrations of the song. "Kansas Boys" in several such respects appears to derive directly from an earlier "Texas Boys," where the poor women ate nothing but "johnnycake and venison" (changed to "antelope" in Kansas) and lived on a "blackjack hill" (changed to "jet black hill in Kansas). Texas antecedents also would explain why the foolish Kansas boys planted their corn in February.

4. In Kansas

Oh, they chew to-bac-co thin in Kan-sas.

They chew to-bac-co thin in Kan-sas.

They chew to-bac-co thin,

And it drib-bles down their chin,

And they lap it up a-gain in Kan-sas.

IN KANSAS

Oh, they chew tobacco thin in Kansas.
 They chew tobacco thin in Kansas.
 They chew tobacco thin,
 And it dribbles down their chin,
 And they lap it up again in Kansas.

Oh, they churn the butter well in Kansas,
 And the buttermilk they sell,
 And they get as lean as hell in Kansas.

Oh, potatoes they grow small in Kansas.
 And they dig 'em in the fall,
 And they eat 'em hides and all in Kansas.

Oh, they say that drink's a sin in Kansas.
 So they guzzle all they kin,
 And they throw it up again in Kansas.

Come, all who want to roam to Kansas.
 And seek yourself a home,
 And be happy with your doom in Kansas.

Text: adapted from "The Praties," an Irish immigrant folksong.

Tune: also adapted from "The Praties."

Comments: The origins of "In Kansas" are murky. A minstrel song of the 1840s spoke of hard times and small potatoes "Over There." Likewise, Irish immigrants, victims of the potato famine, sang of their own antecedents with a song explaining that "the praties" (potatoes) grew small in Ireland. Which song begat which is open to speculation.

Irish immigrants localized the song to Kansas in a manner similar to "Kansas Boys," depicting Kansas as a rude, coarse place. They also took a slap at Kansas's prohibition laws; Irish and other European immigrants were notable opponents of prohibition.



*Early Kansas Musicians
Courtesy of The Kansas State Historical Society*

5. Kansas Land

I've reached the land of corn and wheat,
 of pump-kin pies and po-ta-toes sweet.
 I bought my farm from Un-cle Sam,
 And now I'm hap-py as a clam.
 Oh, Kaa-sas land, sweet Kaa-sas Land,
 As on the high-est hill I stand,
 I look the pleas-ant land-scape o'er,
 For ac-res broad I'll sigh no more,
 Till Ga-briel's trump, in loud com-mand,
 Says I must leave my Kaa-sas Land.

KANSAS LAND

*I've reached the land of corn and wheat,
Of pumpkin piee and potatoes sweet.
I bought my farm from Uncle Sam,
And now I'm happy as a clam.*

*Oh, Kansas Land, sweet Kansas Land,
As on the highest hill I stand,
I look the pleasant Landescape o'er,
For acres broad I'll sigh no more,
Till Gabriel's trump, in loud command,
Says I must leave my Kansas Land.*

*My chickens, they are Plymouth Rock,
My horses, Clydesdale Norman stock,
My cattle, Durham, very fine,
And Poland China are my swine.*

*When first I came to make my start,
The neighbors, they were far apart,
But now there's one on every claim,
And sometimes three all want the same.*

*At first the grass was brown and bear
With drought and grasshoppers each year,
But now there's so much rain and snow,
The cowboy is compelled to go.*

Text: a parody of a religious poem, "Beulah Land," by Edgar Page Stites, c. 1875.

Tune: based on the hymnal melody, "Beulah Land," composed by John R. Sweney; also heavily influenced by the German carol, "Oh Tannenbaum."

Comments: "Kansas Land," like many folksongs, is a secular parody of a religious hymn. "Beulah Land," the hymn, refers to the promised land of Israel as depicted by the prophet, Isaiah. "Kansas Land," the folksong, refers to agricultural Kansas as experienced by its settlers. Some versions, such as the one here published, celebrate Kansas as a land of plenty; others condemn it as the "land of drouth and heat." This shows that the song evolved to fit good and bad times. Political versions extolled the virtues of the Republican Party, the People's Party, and other causes. Moreover, the song traveled with the farmer's frontier to all parts of the Great Plains, Texas to Alberta, everywhere localized to suit peculiar conditions--"Saskatchewan, the land of snow," for instance.

Certain details in the song are particularly historic of the farmer's frontier. The references to Plymouth Rock chickens, Clydesdale horses, Durham cattle, and Poland China hogs accurately record what pioneer farmers considered the best breeds of liveatock. The last stanza, noting an increase in precipitation, confirms the pioneer myth that "rain follows the plow."

G. Old Chisholm Trail

Come a-long boys and lis-ten to my tale,
 I'll tell you of my trou-bles on the Old Chis-holm Trail.
 Come-a ti-yi-yip-py yip-py yea, yip-py yea,
 Come-a ti-yi-yip-py yip-py yea.

OLD CHISHOLM TRAIL

Come along, boys, and listen to my tale,
 I'll tell you of my troubles on the Old Chisholm Trail.

Come-a ti-yi-yippy-yippy-yea, yippy-yea,
 Come-a ti-yi-yippy-yippy-yea.

I started up the trail October 23,
 Started up the trail with the 30 herd.

On a ten-dollar horse and a forty-dollar saddle,
 I'm a-going to punching Texas cattle.

I woke up one morning on the Old Chisholm Trail,
 A rope in my hand and a cow by the tail.

Old Ben Bolt was a blamed good boss,
 But he'd go to see the gals on a corks-backed hose.

Old Ben Bolt was a fine old man,
 And you'd know there was whiskey wherever he'd land.

My horse throwed me off at a creek called Mud,
 My horse throwed me off round the 20 herd.

Last time I seen him he was going cross the level,
 Kicking up his heels and a-running like the devil.

A stray in the herd and the boss says kill it,
 So I shot him in the rump with the handle of a skillet.

*It's cloudy in the west and looking like rain,
And my dammed old slicker's in the wagon again.*

*I jumped in the saddle, grabbed hold of the horn,
Best coupuncher that ever was born.*

*I popped my foot in the stirrup and I gave a little yell,
The tail cattle broke and the leaders went to hell.*

*My foot in the stirrup and my seat in the saddle,
I hung and rattled with the dammed old cattle.*

*I don't give a damn if they ever do stop,
I'll ride as long as an eight-day clock.*

*I stayed with the cattle and I done pretty well,
Till the boss says, "Boys, just let 'em go to hell."*

*We hit Caldwell and we hit 'er on the fly,
And we bedded down the cattle on a hill nearby.*

*We rounded 'em up and we put 'em on the cars,
And that was the last of the old 2-Bars.*

*I went to the boss to draw my roll,
He figured me out seven dollars in the hole.*

*I'll sell my horse and I'll sell my saddle,
You can go to hell with your longhorn cattle.*

*Going back to town to draw my money,
Going back south to see my honey.*

*With my foot in the stirrup and my seat in the sky,
I'll quit punching cows in the sweet bye and bye.*

Text: pure folk origin, pieced together by trail-driving cowboys.

Tune: also of cowboy origin.

Comments: This song of cattle trailing from Texas to Kansas has been termed by John Lomax, America's foremost collector of folksongs, the song "most universally sung by cowboys." Its tempo derives from the jog-trot of trail driving, its verses from adventures, real or concocted, along the trail. Although the song is a ballad, or story song, its plot is scrambled by deletions and additions through the oral tradition.

The stanzas presented above are less than indicative of the nature of the song, for two reasons. First, a good cowboy singer could spout far more verses than space here would admit. Second, many of them would have been too profane for publication.

7. The Cowboy's Lament

As I walked out by Tom Sherman's bar-room,
 As I walked out in Dodge Ci - ty one day,
 I spied a young cow-boy all wrapped in white lin-en,
 Wrapped up in white lin-en as cold as the clay.

THE COWBOY'S LAMENT

As I walked out by Tom Sherman's barroom,
 As I walked out in Dodge City one day,
 I spied a young cowboy all wrapped in white linen,
 Wrapped up in white linen, as cold as the clay.

I can see by your outfit that you are a cowboy--
 These words he did say as I boldly stepped by--
 Come sit down beside me and hear my sad story,
 For I'm shot in the chest, and I know I shall die.

'Twas once in the saddle I used to go dashing,
 'Twas once in the saddle I used to go gay.
 I took first to drinking, and then to card-playing,
 Got shot in the chest and I'm dying today.

So beat the drum slowly and play the fife lowly
 And play the death march as you carry me along.
 Take me to green valley and lay the sod o'er me,
 For I'm a young cowboy and I know I've done wrong.

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 sods as they fall.

Go write me a letter to my gray-haired mother,
 Go break the news to my sister so dear,
 But there is another who's dear as my mother,
 Who'd weep if she knew I were dying out here.

*Go bring me a cup, a cup of cold water
To cool my parched lips, the cowboy then said.
Before I returned, his soul had departed--
Had gone to his maker--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 loved our comrade, so brave, young, and handsome,
We all loved our comrade although he'd done wrong.*

Text: adapted to cowboy experience from an Irish song, "The Unfortunate Rake."

Tune: also based on "The Unfortunate Rake."

Comments: "The Cowboy's Lament" is among the saddest of cowboys' night-herding songs, all of which are mournful. It is commonly sung as "The Streets of Laredo," but the western roots of the song reach to Dodge City; cowboys subsequently carried the song home to Texas and localized it there.

The literary aspects of this song are superb. It is nicely framed by an anonymous narrator. Its main character is particularly intriguing: he is young, and relatively innocent (the "white linen" signifies this), but he recognizes that he has erred and is dying for his sins. So, unlike other dying cowboys of folksong, he considers himself unfit to be buried back home. He wants to be buried in the wicked west by gamblers and saloon girls (the reference to "pretty maidens" is ironic). But not before he delivers his death-bed monologue, as all dying cowboys must!

Country and western singers continue to perform this song, and folksingers, among them American soldiers in Viet Nam, still create new parodies of it. Christian songbooks print the song with Gospel stanzas. This is an interesting twist, inasmuch as the Irish song, "The Unfortunate Rake," on which the North American cowboy song is based, depicts an Irish soldier dying of syphilis. Thus the Irish progenitor shares with "The Cowboy's Lament" the common theme that sin will be punished.

8. Lane County Bachelor

Frank Ba-ker's my name, and a bache-lor I am,
My house it is built of the na-tion-al soil,
I'm keep-ing old batch on an el-e-gant plan;
The walls are e-rect-ed ac-cord-ing to Hoyle.
You'll find me out west in the coun-ty of Lane,
The roof has no pitch, but is le-vel and plain,
I'm starv-ing to death on a gov-ern-ment claim.
And I al-ways get wet when it hap-pens to rain.

Chorus

Hur-rah for Lane Coun-ty, the land of the free,
The home of the grass-hop-per, bed-bug, and flea.
I'll sing loud her pris-es and boast of her fame--
While starv-ing to death on a gov-ern-ment claim.

LANE COUNTY BACHELOR

Frank Baker's my name, and a bachelor I am,
I'm keeping old batch on an elegant plan;
You'll find me out west in the county of Lane,
I'm starving to death on a government claim.
My house it is built of the national soil,
The walls are erected according to Hoyle.
The roof has no pitch, but is level and plain,
And I always get wet when it happens to rain.

*Hurrah for Lane County, the land of the free,
The home of the grasshopper, bedbug, and flea.
I'll sing loud her praises and boast of her fame--
While starving to death on a government claim.*

*How happy I feel when I crawl into bed,
And a rattlesnake rattles a tune at my head,
And the gay little centipede, void of all fear,
Crawls over my pillow and into my ear.
And the little bedbugs, so cheerful and bright,
They keep me a-scratching two-thirds of the night.
And the gay little flea, with sharp tacks on his toes,
Plays why-don't-you-catch-me all over my nose.*

*But hurrah for Lane County, hurrah for the west,
Where the farmers and laborers are ever at rest,
For there's nothing to do but to sweetly remain,
And starve like a man on a government claim.*

*Now don't get discouraged, you poor hungry men,
For we're all here as free as a pig in a pen;
Just stick to your homesteads and battle those fleas,
And look to your maker to send you a breeze.
Now all you claim-holders, I hope you will stay,
And chew your hardtack till you're toothless and gray,
But as for myself, I'll no longer remain
And starve like a dog on a government claim.*

*Farewell to Lane County, farewell to the west,
I'll travel back east to the girl I love best.
I'll stop in Missouri and get me a wife,
And live on eom dodgers the rest of my life.*

Text: original composed by Frank Baker, Lane County, Kansas, c. 1888.

Tune: borrowed from "The Irish Washerwoman."

Comments: It is a commonplace that history is written by the winners, but this song is an exception: Frank Baker, who homesteaded in Lane County, Kansas, during the 1880s, was a failure as a pioneer farmer. His song, "Lane County Bachelor," is a precious account by one of the go-backs who went back east. The go-backs, after all, out-numbered the successful homesteaders on the plains. Where others saw the romance of the range or a future of agricultural plenty, Baker saw rattlesnakes and bedbugs. His only hope was to stick it out long enough that he could sell out and go back east. The varying choruses of his song are ironic parodies of the deceitful boomer literature that brought homesteaders out to the plains to starve.

9. The Old Bachelor



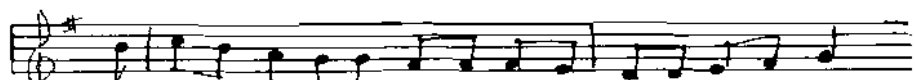
I am a stern old bachelor, my age is forty-four,



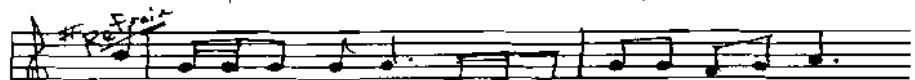
I do declare I'll never live with women any more.



I have a stove that's worth ten cents, a table worth fifteen,



I cook my food in an oyster can and keep my skillet clean.



Oh, lit-tle sod shan-ty, lit-tle sod shan-ty built for me,



For I'm a stern old bachelor from ma-tri-mo-n-y free.

THE OLD BACHELOR

I am a stern old bachelor, my age is forty-four,
I do declare I'll never live with women anymore.
I have a stove that's worth ten cents, a table worth fifteen,
I cook my food in a oyster can and keep my skillet clean.

Oh, little sod shanty,
Little sod shanty built for me,
For I'm a stern old bachelor
From matrimony free.

When I come home at night, I smile and walk right in,
I never hear a voice call out, "I say, where have you been?"
On a cold and stormy night, in my cozy little shack,
I sing my song and think my thoughts with no one to talk back.

I go to bed when'er I please and get up just the same,
I wash my socks three times a year with no one to complain.
At night when I'm in peaceful sleep, my snores can do no harm,
I never have to walk the floor with a baby in my arms.

*I live upon a homestead claim, from women I am hid,
I do not have to dress a wife or take care of a kid.
And when I die and go to heaven, as all good bachelors do,
I will not have to fret for fear my wife will get there, too.*

Text: origins uncertain.

Tune: derived from "Pure, Cold Water," a popular parlor song.

Comments: Although this song was common in the oral tradition of folksong, its origins are undocumented. A version published in the Dighton Republican, July 6, 1887, attributed authorship to an A. I. Stokesberry.

The most historically significant aspect of "The Old Bachelor" is that it documents the masculinity of early homesteading on the plains. A disproportionate number of homesteaders were bachelors or married men who came out ahead of their families to make a start.



*An Early Kansas Band
Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society*

10. Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim

I am looking rather seedy now while holding down my claim,
 Yet I rather like the novelty of living in this way,
 And my vittles are not always served the best,
 Though my bill of fare is often rather tame,
 And the mice play shyly round me as I lay me down to sleep
 And I'm happy as a clam in this land of Uncle Sam,
 In my little old sod shanty in the West
 In my little old sod shanty on the claim.
 Oh, the hinges are of leather, the windows have no glass,
 The roof, it lets the howling blizzard in,
 And I hear the hungry coyote as he sneaks up through the grass,
 Round my little old sod shanty on the claim.

Chords: D, G, A7, D, G, D, A7, D, G, D, A7, D

LITTLE OLD SOD SHANTY ON THE CLAIM

I am looking rather seedy now while holding down my claim,
 And my vittles are not always served the best,
 And the mice play shyly round me as I lay me down to sleep
 In my little old sod shanty in the West.
 Yet I rather like the novelty of living in this way,
 Though my bill of fare is often rather tame,
 And I'm happy as a clam in this land of Uncle Sam,
 In my little old sod shanty on the claim.

*Oh, the hinges are of leather, the windows have no glass,
The roof, it lets the howling blizzard in,
And I hear the hungry coyote as he sneaks up through the grass,
Round my little old sod shanty on the claim.*

*But when I left my eastern home, so happy and so gay,
To try to win my way to wealth and fame,
I little thought that I'd come down to burning twisted hay
In my little old sod shanty on the claim.
My clothes are pasted o'er with dough, I'm looking like a fright,
In fashion's world I would not care to roam,
And I fear, if my wife, she should get her eyes on me,
She would take me from my little cabin home.*

*I wish that kind-hearted wife would pity on me take
And extricate me from the mess I'm in,
The angel, how I'd bless her if she'd her home she'd make
In our little old sod shanty on the claim.
And when we've made our fortunes on these prairies of the West,
Just as happy as two could be we will remain,
And we'll forget our trials and our troubles as we rest
In our little old sod shanty on the claim.*

*If heaven should smile upon us with now and then an heir
To cheer our hearts with honest pride and fame,
Ah, then we'd be content for the years that we have spent
In our little old sod shanty on the claim.
When time enough has lapsed, and when these little brats
To men and modest womanhood attain,
It won't seem half so lonely, as around us we shall look,
And see other old sod shanties on the claim.*

Text: original composed by Everett Calvin Motz, of Beloit, Kansas, 1878, in parody of "Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane," by Will S. Hays, 1871.

Tune: borrowed from "Little Old Log Cabin in the Lane."

Comments: The best evidence attributes this song to a German immigrant, E. C. Motz. Its treatment of detail is superb and authentic--leather hinges, paper windows, monotonous diet, twisted hay for fuel. Like many other homesteaders, the persona of this folksong has gone out to Kansas ahead of his family. Unlike Frank Baker, the Lane County bachelor, this character is sustained by the vision of a successful future, which makes present hardship bearable.

"Little Old Sod Shanty," too, is a fine song to illustrate folksong employment of epithet, or common, formulaic phraseology. "Happy as a clam" and "If heaven should smile upon us" are examples.

11. The Dewey-Berry Feud

Way out on the plains of Kan - sas,
 Where the wind blows hard and hot,
 Stands a lit - tle old sod shan - ty
 Where the Ber - ry boys were shot.
 A man with age en - fee - bled,
 With a weak and trem - bling hand,
 Shot down, like a beef for slaugh - ter,
 By the Dew - ey cow - ard - ly band.

THE DEWEY-BERRY FEUD

Way out on the plains of Kansas,
 Where the wind blows hard and hot,
 Stands a little old sod shanty
 Where the Berry boys were shot.
 A man with age enfeebled,
 With a weak and trembling hand,
 Shot down, like a beef for slaughter,
 By the Dewey cowardly band.

Two men in the prime of manhood,
 A man with silvery hair,
 Were cruelly murdered that bright day
 By the outlaw millionaire.
 Oh! Grand and free America,
 In this land where live the brave,
 Is this the glorious country
 Our fathers died to save?

Must wives be changed to widows
 In the space of a fleeting breath?
 Must children be made orphans,
 And men be shot to death?
 It's hard to believe, but it's true,
 In this land we love so well,
 It's hard for us to believe
 That men will their honor sell.

Oh, is there no punishment
 For the murderous, blood-stained hand?
 Is there no court of justice
 In this glorious Christian land?
 I should think that the murderers,
 Although they may be free,
 Those pale and deathly faces
 In troubled dreams would see.

That aged and that furrowed brow,
 Those blood-stained locks so gray,
 I'd think that Chauncey Dewey
 Would see them right and day.
 The jury has cleared the savages,
 The court its verdict has given,
 But they'll find, when through with this life,
 That they can't buy the court of heaven.

Text: origin unknown.

Tune: sung to the tune of "The Jealous Lover," a traditional Anglo-American folksong.

Comments: This song commemorates one of the few range wars in Kansas, where conflicts between open-range cattlemen and fencing farmers seldom came to physical violence. The Deweys were a wealthy cattle-raising family whose operations sprawled from the Flint Hills of Kansas to southwestern Nebraska and northwestern Kansas, where they came into conflict with the Berrys, homesteaders on their domain. On June 2, 1903, the Deweys and the Berrys shot it out at the Berry claim in Cheyenne County. Three Berrys died in the conflict, but no Dewey ever was convicted in connection with the shootings. "The Dewey-Berry Feud" expresses outrage over this. Whoever composed the stanzas heightened their emotional impact by setting them to the tune of "The Jealous Lover," a traditional song of treacherous murder.

12. The Jail of Ellinwood

I ar-rived in town not long a-go from a-way out west of here,
 And feel-ing tired and wear-y, I drank some gin and beer.
 I was full of fun, al-so de-light, in fact was feel-ing good,
 Un-til the mar-shal ar-rest-ed me and locked me in the jail of El-lin-wood.

Chorus
 So com-bine your humble di-ties, as from ta-ern to tav-ern we stear.
 Like ev-ery hon-est fel-low, I drink my lag-er beer.
 Like ev-ery jol-ly fel-low, I takes my whis-key clear.
 I'm a ram-bling rake of pov-er-ty and a son of a gam-bo-rier.
 I'm a son of a son of a son of a son of a son of a gam-bo-rier.

THE JAIL OF ELLINWOOD

I arrived in town not long ago from away out west of here,
 And feeling tired and weary, I drank some gin and beer.
 I was full of fun, also delight, in fact was feeling good,
 Until the marshal arrested me and locked me in the jail of Ellinwood.

*So combine your humble ditties, as from tavern to tavern
we steer.*

*Like every honest fellow, I drinks my lager beer,
Like every jolly fellow, I takes my whiskey clear.
I'm a rambling rake of poverty and a son of a gambolier,
I'm a son of a son of a son of a son of a
gambolier.*

*They brought me up before the judge, who asked me for a fine;
I told him all of my money was out on the railroad line.*

*"All right," said he, "I'll send and see"; I answered,
"Very good."*

*And with that he told the marshal to lock me in the jail of
Ellinwood.*

*So now I have to lay in jail and work on the road, you see,
Until the judge can get some word about my railroad money.
It's thev, I guess, he'll let me go, at least he said he would,
And then, you bet that I'll steer clear of the jail of Ellinwood.*

*So now, farewell to some of the boys who so kindly treated me,
There was Bill and Joe and also young Henry Judd, you see;
Likewise the good old marshal, who always brought my food--
May he ever feed the prisoners confined in the jail of Ellinwood.*

Text: composed by Ed Duffy, an Irish tramp, in
Ellinwood, Kansas, 1882.

Tune: sung to the tune of "Rambling Rake of Poverty,"
a traditional Irish drinking song.

Comments: "Rambling Rake of Poverty," or "Son of a
Gambolier," is one of the most parodied ditties in the
history of folksong. Most versions are drinking songs
of one type or another, but not all are: "Dunderbeck,"
for instance, is a humorous song about a German butcher,
and "Rambling Wreck from Georgia Tech" is a school fight
song.

Ed Duffy, an individual otherwise obscure, tells his
own story in "The Jail of Ellinwood." It seems obvious
that the crime for which Duffy was imprisoned was not
drunkenness, for Ellinwood, an all-German town, was
notorious for its violations of prohibition. The problem
rather was that he was a tramp, and tramps were the subject
of a crack-down by local authorities in 1882. Besides, he
was Irish.

Fitting to one tune the irregular numbers of syllables
in the successive stanzas is a challenge to any singer,
but it can be done. "Jail of Ellinwood" is like many
other bawdy folksongs in this respect.

13. The Mortgage Foreclosed

Oh, I've heard of prairie Kan-sas,
 With its mines of choic-est treas-ures,
 That fair land so broad and free,
 There's the place for you and me.

Let us take our lit-tle sav-ings,
 Nev-er mind the lit-tle mort-gage,
 Just the right time to in-vest
 That can sure-ly do no harm!

For the coun-try's new and grow-ing,
 We will not be asked to pay it,
 And the spring-time is the best.
 Till they raise the price of corn.

THE MORTGAGE FORECLOSED

Oh, I've heard of prairie Kansas,
 That fair land so broad and free,
 With its mines of choicest treasures,
 There's the place for you and me.
 Let us take our little savings,
 Just the right time to invest,
 For the country's new and growing,
 And the springtime is the best.

Never mind the little mortgage,
 That can surely do no harm.
 We will not be asked to pay it
 Till they raise the price of corn.

So, with teams, our cows, and poultry,
 We went west to make a farm.
 Prairies lovely blessed our vision,
 Grass was green and sunshine warm.
 And the choicest blooming flowers
 With sweet fragrance fill the air.
 Pleasant streams with water flowing,
 Peace and plenty everywhere.

All our labors were incessant,
 And the plowman did his best.
 Rocks nor roots to check our progress,
 Little time we had for rest.
 Forest trees and orchards planting,
 Rapid growth soon brought us fruit.
 Fondest hopes our minds enchanting,
 Farming was our chief pursuit.

Granaries filled to overflowing,
 Bounteous harvest filled the barn,
 But the trusts put down the prices--
 Just ten cents is all for corn.
 Farmers, you can't borrow money,
 Ten percent a month don't pay.
 So we'll close and hold improvements--
 You can make some other way.

Farewell, they have closed the mortgage.
 To the law we now must yield.
 Robbed, distressed, and broken-hearted,
 We must seek some other field.

Text: by Florence Olmstead, a Populist song-writer of the 1890s.

Tune: sung to the tune of "Just Before the Battle, Mother," a popular song of the Civil War.

Comments: Rallies of the People's Party, or Populist Party, usually featured group singing of political stanzas set to old melodies--mostly Gospel hymns or, as in this case, Civil War songs. Florence Olmstead composed many songs of the Populist movement.

This song captures explicitly, yet poetically, the disillusionment of farmers in the 1890s. Promoters and land agents had lured them with promises of a Garden of the World to be created through plowing and tree-planting. The garden, though, was befooled by economic injustices--oppressive monopolies and usurious bankers. Blatantly melodramatic, "The Mortgage Foreclosed" was a fine instrument for stirring righteous political anger.

14. Way Out West in Kansas

There's a place where the birds sing bass,
Trains don't stop in my home town,

'Cause the wood-peckers pecked the
Rab - bits laugh in the bull - dog's face,
de - pot down.

There the girls grow tall and slim, The boys grow whiskers on their chin,

Their ears turn out and their toes turn in Out in that west-ern town.

C Verses 2-4 begin here:

Folks don't stay out ver - y late -- Way out west in Kan - sas.

They take the side-walks in at eight -- Way out west in Kan - sas.

It's some town, by heck I'll swear, You can stand on the old town square

And knock on eve - ry front door there -- Way out west in Kan - sas.

WAY OUT WEST IN KANSAS

There's a place where the birds sing bass,
Rabbits laugh in the bulldog's face.
Trains don't stop in my home town,
'Cause the woodpeckers pecked the depot down.
There the girls grow tall and slim,
The boys grow whiskers on their chin,
Their ears turn out and their toes turn in
Out in that western town.

Folks don't stay out very late--
 Way out west in Kansas.
 They take the sidewalk in at eight--
 Way out west in Kansas.
 It's come town, by heck I'll swear,
 You can stand on the old town square
 And knock on every front door there--
 Way out west in Kansas.

I know a girl from Abilene--
 Way out west in Kansas.
 She says she just turned seventeen--
 Way out west in Kansas.
 She's so old she's muscle-bound,
 Folks all say she built the town,
 I think she's seventeen turned 'round--
 Way out west in Kansas.

I know a girl named Cross-eyed Pat--
 Way out west in Kansas.
 You can't tell what she's looking at--
 Way out west in Kansas.
 When she cries, she's a total wreck,
 The tears run down the back of her neck.
 She don't look straight to me, by heck--
 Way out west in Kansas.

The sun's so hot the eggs all hatch--
 Way out west in Kansas.
 It popped the corn in the popcorn patch--
 Way out west in Kansas.
 An old mule saw it and held his breath,
 His hair turned gray and he shook himself,
 He thought it was corn and froze to death--
 Way out west in Kansas.

Text: published version, 1924, claims authorship by Carson Robison; song circulates in oral tradition.

Tune: likewise claimed by Carson Robison.

Comments: Although sheet music versions of this song circulated in the east, and its stanzas denigrate Kansas, "Way Out West in Kansas" has entered the folk tradition of the state. This is evidence of one of Kansans' better character traits--the ability to appreciate a joke at their own expense.

The version printed above derives from Joe Gray, proprietor of the Arkansas Market, a fruit-and-vegetable stand in Eureka during the 1930s. Gray sang folksongs and songs of his own composition to his customers. Many of them he had printed broadside-fashion on cards, which he inserted into bags of produce he sold.

15. Home on the Range

Oh, give me a home where the buf-fa-lo roam,
 where the deer and the an-te-lope play,
 where sel-dom is heard a dis-cour-ag-ing word,
 And the skies are not cloud-y all day.

Home, home on the range,
 where the deer and the an-te-lope play,
 where sel-dom is heard a dis-cour-ag-ing word,
 And the skies are not cloud-y all day.

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 2/4 time signature. The melody is simple and folk-like. Chords are indicated above the notes: E, E7, A, Am, C#m, F#m, B7, and B7.

HOME ON THE RANGE

Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam,
 Where the deer and the antelope play,
 Where seldom is heard a discouraging word,
 And the skies are not cloudy all day.

Home, home on the range,
 Where the deer and the antelope play,
 Where seldom is heard a discouraging word,
 And the skies are not cloudy all day.

*Where the air is so pure, the zephyrs so free,
The breezes so balmy and light,
That I would not exchange my home on the range
For all of your cities so bright.*

*How often at night, when the heavens are bright
With the light of the glittering stars,
Have I stood there amazed and asked, as I gazed,
If their glory exceeds that of ours.*

*I love the wild flowers in this dear land of ours,
The curlew I love to hear scream.
I love the white rocks and the antelope flocks
That graze on the mountain-tops green.*

*Then I would not exchange my home on the range,
Where the deer and the antelope play,
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word,
And the skies are not cloudy all day.*

Text: original, entitled "Western Home," by Brewster Higley, Smith County, Kansas, c. 1872.

Tune: by Dan Kelley, Smith County, c. 1872.

Comments: "Home on the Range" ranks as the finest piece of lyric folk poetry ever to grace the culture of the North American Great Plains. It was a fortunate act of good taste when in 1947 the legislature of Kansas designated it the state song.

The original version of the text was by Dr. Brewster Higley, an alcoholic physician on the farmer's frontier of Smith County, Kansas. Dan Kelley, a local string band musician, set it to a fine melody in a 3/4 tempo evocative of the Great Plains landscape. Higley's original text was ponderous and pretentious, but it expressed an honest appreciation of the countryside, including its flora, fauna, and physiographic features. As the song circulated orally, especially among cowboys, it retained Higley's sentiments and imagery, but simplified and improved in language.

Commercial recordings of "Home on the Range" during the 1930s were lucrative. Attempts by usurpers to claim royalties on the song, however, failed, for attorneys verified that the song was the creation of no commercial composer, but of the folk tradition of the plains.