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Cowboy Folktales about Cowboys

by *Richard M. Dorson*, Bloomington, Indiana

As both a real and a mythic figure the American cowboy has attracted a host of biographers and interpreters. Long after his heyday during the great cattle drives of the 1870's and '80's from south Texas across the open ranges to northern delivery points from Kansas to Montana, the cowboy lives on in the phantasies of cinema and television. Latter-day cowboy film heroes, notably Tom Mix, Roy Rogers, and Gene Autry, have made familiar the image of the horseman in chaps and sombrero silhouetted against the plains, often as not singing one of the now famous cowboy ditties such as "The Old Chisholm Trail," „Git Along Little Dogies," and „Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie." The historical cowboy did indeed sing—badly, according to his best friends—while herding cattle on the long drive, to calm them it was said, and collections of cowboy songs have regularly appeared since 1908, when N. Howard „Jack" Thorp privately printed a little booklet of *Songs of the Cowboys* at Estancia, New Mexico. John Lomax quickly followed suit and even helped himself to some of Thorp's songs in 1910 in his *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, and both Thorp's and Lomax's volumes went through subsequent expanded editions. Austin and Alta Fife are presently engaged upon an exhaustive codification of cowboy balladry. Meanwhile the storytelling side of the cowboy has been all but ignored by folklorists.

That cowboys yarned is evident enough, for every book about the long drive and life on the range mentions as a favorite form of relaxation their swapping stories around the chuckwagon campfire after the evening meal. Each cowpuncher was called on to sing a song, tell a tale, do a dance, or incur the penalty, namely receive a taste of the leggins (the thick, heavy leg sheaths worn by the cowhands) across his bare backside. Range authors frequently reproduce the form of oral yarnspinning in their writings. Andy Adams introduced twenty-one campfire settings into his works of fiction, beginning with his classic *The Log of a Cowboy* in 1903, and his biographer, Wilson M. Hudson, brought together fifty tales from these sessions in an edition titled *Why the Chisholm Trail Forks*, unfortunately without folklore notes¹. The pioneer collector of cowboy songs, Jack Thorp, privately

¹ Andy Adams, *Why the Chisholm Trail Forks and Other Tales of the Cattle Country*, edited by Wilson M. Hudson. Austin: University of Texas Press 1956. The other fictional sources are *A Texas Matchmaker* (1904); *The Outlet* (1905),

printed *Tales of the Chuck Wagon* in 1926, and these seem on the whole closer to folk tradition than Adam's campfire tales². The celebrated cowboy artist Charles M. Russell wrote *Trails Plowed Under* in 1927 as a series of orally delivered anecdotes and recollections, and some can be recognized as traditional, particularly in the chapter on „Some Liars of the Old West”. An academic folklorist on the University of Texas faculty, Mody C. Boatright, published a small book of one hundred pages in 1934 titled *Tall Tales from Texas Cow Camps* (on the cover; the title page reads *Tall Tales from Texas*), but it follows literary rather than folkloristic procedures. In the manner of novelist Andy Adams, Boatright seats three cowpunchers around a campfire and has them awe a greenhorn out of high school with lies about poisonous snakes, fast runners, mythical animals, extraordinary weather, and marvelous escapes from wild animals and natural hazards. All these are stock themes in American *Lügenmärchen*, and can be found in Arkansas just as well as Texas, in Vance Randolph's *We Always Lie to Strangers*. But Boatright names no informants and rewrites his texts, which he heard himself or obtained from his students. His final three chapters are an elaboration of the fakelore saga about the giant cowboy Pecos Bill, based on the 1923 article of fictionist Edward O'Reilly. In later books Boatright adopted a more conscientious attitude toward folk materials.

Two other book-length collections of modest size and achievement can be mentioned. In *The Humor of the American Cowboy*, published in 1958, Stan Hoig culled comic anecdotes strewn through the rich autobiographical literature of the cowpunchers and grouped them according to such themes as high winds, violent death, animals of the cow country, food, greenhorns, and the animus between cowhand and railroader. Most of these jests are demonstrably traditional, but their telling suffers because the author paraphrases narratives that are themselves paraphrases or rememberings of oral versions. By contrast, *Pecos Tales*, written down—and also written up—by Paul Patterson in 1967, concentrates on one area of the cattle country bounding the Pecos River in west Texas for a hundred miles or so east and west, and derives from the personal contacts and experiences of the writer. His miscellany of incidents and episodes may have enjoyed some currency in the land of the Pecos, but they are too localized and specialized to

and Cattle Brands (1906), while four tales are taken from an unpublished manuscript and one from the Breeder's Gazette (1905).

² Some were reprinted by Thorp in his autobiography, *Pardner of the Wind*, written in collaboration with Neil M. Clark. Caldwell, Idaho 1945, 212–227.

interest outsiders. In addition Patterson admits to inflating his oral sources, as in the story „Stay Cool, John Pool” which he enlarges from four terse, crisp, conversational sentences to five literary paragraphs. Only in the last half dozen pages does he allow one range veteran to talk directly into the tape recorder.

If no satisfactory book of cowboy folktales yet exists, several scattered articles and chapters bring us close to actual oral tradition. In the 1931 publication of the Texas Folklore Society, the daughter of a Colorado rancher, Honora DeBusk Smith, made a conscious effort to set down Rocky Mountain campfire cowboy yarns told by two identified narrators³. A splendid chapter in a history of *The Chisholm Trail* by Sam P. Ridings (1936), „Tales of a Cow-Camp and Breaking in a Cowboy”, conveys verisimilitude in a sequence of oral texts, familiar in tradition and told by named, or nicknamed, cowboy narrators.

Just to show the possibilities for collecting tales told by cowboys, there is the sheaf of eighteen Montana yarns printed by the experienced American folklorist, Herbert Halpert—the only folktales recorded and annotated by scholarly standards in the whole cowboy bibliography—made not on any extended field trip but during his tour of duty in the army in 1942. Some of the tales he obtained during an afternoon’s layover between plane flights in Billings, Montana, when he just walked from bar to bar hunting up oldtime cowhands. Halpert hypothesizes that „the entire cattle region from Texas, north through Montana, into southern Alberta is a distinct folklore area”⁴. This inference needs some qualification, since various of his tales, and others in the sources, are general American, and one can find tall tales about changeable weather and clever animals from all parts of the country. Actually only two of his eighteen texts deal with cowboys at all. Of course the stories and songs of occupational groups, whether cowboys, lumberjacks, sailors, miners or whoever, for the most part draw from a general store of floating tradition, and only on occasion reflect the circumstances of their callings. In this article I shall consider only those tales told by cowboys that turn the spotlight on themselves.

³ Honora DeBusk Smith, *Cowboy Lore in Colorado*, in: *Southwestern Lore*, ed. J. Frank Dobie. Publications of the Texas Folklore Society 9. Dallas 1931, 27-44.

⁴ Herbert Halpert, *Montana Cowboy Folktales*. *California Folklore Quarterly* 4 (1945) 247.

In the myth of the cowboy, toughness and callousness became conspicuous traits, exemplified by insensitivity toward death. There is a seeming ambivalence here, for in ballads such as „Little Joe the Wrangler” the cowboy mourns in sentimental fashion his fellow killed in the line of duty. But the cowboy code accommodated loyalty to friends and courtesy to women on the one hand, and steeliness under pressure on the other. Comic anecdotes play up the casualness with which the cowboy killed his man, as in the widely dispersed yarn of „Breaking the News.” In one of its cowboy forms, ascribed to Teddy Roosevelt, a posse of cowboys discover they have hung an innocent man whom they took for a horse thief. One cowhand reputed to be a diplomat was entrusted with the task of telling the widow. Riding up to her home, he asked, „Are you the wife of Jack Smith?” „Yes, I am,” she replied, a bit huffily. „No you ain’t,” he replied. „You’re jest his widder. We got his body out there in the waggin, and it’s dressed up mighty nice. We hung him for a horse thief, but please don’t feel bad about that. He was plumb innocent. After we strung him up we found out he wasn’t the guy we was looking for at all. We’re all ready to swear he was innocent.”

A version attributed to Mark Twain contains a more elaborate prologue, with a rancher on a spree riding his horse into Cheyenne and right through the swinging doors of „The Cowboy’s Delight.” To the dozing bartender he yells out, „I’m a thirsting like the Prodigal Son. Pour me a straight and smell one yourself.” The bartender raised up his head and his six-shooter and plugged the prodigal son through the head. A committee headed for the widow’s house with the coffin, and the most tactful member accosted her, „Does Joe Toole live here?” „Yes,” she responded. „Bet he don’t,” retaliated the spokesman, waving his hand toward the approaching wagon and coffin⁵.

A similar casualness toward the dead crops up in a memorable shooting incident in Dodge City reported in the reminiscences of Bill Jones of Paradise Valley in Oklahoma. The Dodge marshal, Mysterious Dave Mather, outdrew and plugged a tinhorn gambler in a dispute over cards in a saloon. The death of a tinhorn sport would have aroused no interest, but the bullet that penetrated him went on to lodge in a sleeping hound that belonged to the saloonkeeper, a fierce Irishman nicknamed „Dog Kelly” because he owned a hundred canines. Kelly demanded an inquest into the dog’s death, a jury was

⁵ J. Frank Dobie, *The Traveling Anecdote*, in: *Folk Travelers: Ballads, Tales, and Talk*, edited by Mody C. Boatright, Wilson M. Hudson, Allen Maxwell. Publications of the Texas Folklore Society 25. Dallas 1953, 10–12.

impaneled, and returned a verdict that the shooting had been done in justifiable self-defense since any dog should know better than to go to sleep in a Dodge City Saloon. Several witnesses testified that they had never seen the animal take a drink, and that he therefore had no business in the saloon. The dog was buried with military honors at Boot Hill where he was carried in a rigged-up hearse accompanied by the Dodge City Cowboy Band. A sermon was preached, the mourning cowpunchers sang „The Cowboy’s Lament,” and Dog Kelly wept. After the burial, Mysterious Dave ordered the undertaker to remove the gambler’s carcass from the floor of the saloon and bury it without further ado⁶.

The theme of „the quick and the dead” forms a chapter in Stan Hoig’s *The Humor of the Cowboy*, and the saying gave rise to one apt anecdote. At the burial of a cowboy who had not drawn his six-shooter fast enough, a mourner read a verse from a Church of England prayerbook about the quick and the dead, prompting one cowhand to comment, „Ol’ Bill wasn’t very quick, but he sure is dead.”⁷ The same attitude gives point to the yarn about a cowboy who corresponded with a „Heart-and-Hand” woman through the columns of the matrimonial newspaper of that name, invited her out to Montana, and taught her how to ride. But one day the horse fell down and broke his wife’s leg. „When a horse fell down and broke a leg, cowboys would always shoot ’em, put ’em out of their misery—and he done the same with his wife. That’s the way the poor fellow’d been raised.”⁸

The *machismo* of the cowboy found expression also in yarns about his zest for whiskey and rare steaks. His ability to consume booze and his compulsion to blow his wad in the saloons of cow towns became proverbial. Buck Winters blew fifty dollars in town one night, and next morning told his pals how it happened. He went into one saloon and set up drinks and eats for the crowd. That was ten dollars. He repeated this in another saloon for another ten and in a third for fifteen. A listener remarked that this only came to thirty-five dollars. Buck pondered. “I don’t know boys. By that time I uz gettin’ pretty

⁶ Adapted by Stan Hoig, *The Humor of the American Cowboy*. Lincoln, Nebr. 1958, 70–72, and by Austin and Alta Fife, eds., *Songs of the Cowboys*, by N. Howard (Jack) Thorp. New York 1966, 148–149, from John H. Callison, *Bill Jones of Paradise Valley, Oklahoma*. Oklahoma 1914.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 94, from Albert W. Thompson, *They Were Open Range Days*, *Annals of a Western Frontier*. Denver, Col. 1946, 179.

⁸ Herbert Halpert, *Montana Cowboy Folktales*. *California Folklore Quarterly* 4 (1945) 247. Told by Mark Newman. Halpert cites three variants.

drunk. I'm afraid I must have spent that other fifteen dollars foolishly!" This is also told as a lumberjack story⁹.

The cowpoke's love of booze generated its share of anecdotes. Charles Russell, the artist and raconteur of the old West, retells a sly story of a cowboy deriding the Indians' passion for liquor. "It's funny how crazy an Injun is for whiskey," the cowboy muses. "A few days ago I'm riding along—I got a quart of booze in my saddle pocket. I meet an Injun. He sees what I got, and offers me the hoss he's riding for the quart. To a man that wants a saddle hoss, this one is worth a hundred dollars. I paid six for this moonshine." "Did you make the trade?" "Hell no! It's all the booze I got."¹⁰

Kindred in theme is the tale of the Arizona breakfast, as related by a range humorist named Rip Van Winkle, "the drolliest man I ever saw," as one cowhand described him. Rip told how Arizona citizens feted a visitor representing a big New Mexican cattleman with a brass band, elegant hotel accommodations, and a splendid breakfast of a big bologna sausage, a bottle of whiskey, and a yellow dog. What was the dog for? asked a bystander. "To eat the bologna!"¹¹

A classic of the cow country concerns the rare steak. In one version the irate cowpoke yells to a waiter, "Take that steak back to th' kitchen and have 'em cook it some more. Why I've seen 'em git well that uz hurt worse'n that!"¹² A more elaborate form of this, "one of the oldest of all cowboy stories," in the words of the cattle country historian Edward Everett Dale, has some fashionable customers in a Kansas City restaurant asking for successively rarer steaks. The last to order tells the waiter to make the steak extremely rare: "Just sear the outside a little." When the waiter came to the cowboy at the next table, he told him, "Just cripple him and drive him in."¹³

The tale of the rare steak reached its climax in an account printed in 1885 of "A New Mexico Cowboy in London." A Cowboy named Red Pugh in London with a wild west show ordered a rare beefsteak from the waiter, who brought him one so rare that it jerked about

⁹ Edward Everett Dale, *Cow Country*. Norman, Okla. 1942, 1965, 140. Adapted by Stan Hoig, *The Humor of the American Cowboy*. Lincoln, Nebr. 1958, 181–182. This is also known as a lumberjack tale; see Wright T. Orcutt, *The Minnesota Lumberjacks*. *Minnesota History* 6 (1925) 17.

¹⁰ Charles M. Russell, *Trails Plowed Under*. New York 1940, 34.

¹¹ N. Howard (Jack) Thorp and Neil M. Clark, *Pardner of the Wind*. Caldwell, Idaho 1945, 200–201.

¹² Edward Everett Dale, *Cow Country*. Norman, Okla. 1942, reprinted 1965, 141. Stan Hoig (cf. note 6) 128, cites a variant from Frank M. King, *Wranglin, the Past*. Pasadena, Cal. 1935, 97.

¹³ Edward E. Dale, *Cow Country*, 141–142; adapted by Stan Hoig, 141.

on the plate. Thereupon Red drew out his gun and fired several shots into the flopping sirloin to kill it dead. A general pandemonium ensued, which led to the arrival of fifty London bobbies and the arrest of Red, by this time calmly eating his inert steak¹⁴.

Such was the *machismo* of the cowboy as illustrated in yarns about his he-man drinking and eating habits. But there was another side to the range rider reflected in the folktales. If he was a king on the prairie, he was a babe in the city. Individualistic, self-reliant, confident in his horse, his rope, and his six-shooter, the cowboy as trail driver and ranch hand held his head high. But on the occasions when he must go to town, he lost his *mana* and, like the Yankee in earlier yarns, stumbled and fumbled his way through an alien culture. Now he is the fool character, the noodle, the simpleton. In Chicago a cowhand, the aforementioned Rip Van Winkle, went to an eye doctor to get a pair of reading glasses. The oculist tested Rip on numbers on a board, then gave him a set of spectacles for ten dollars. "When I got back to my hotel," Rip recounted, "I bought a nickel newspaper and went upstairs and laid down on the bed and held the paper up in front of me. And fellows, I couldn't read a word." A buddy pointed out that Rip did not know how to read. "Well," countered Rip, "that's no reason for that doctor swindlin' me. He said plain as could be, he'd guarantee I could read with them ten-dollar glasses."¹⁵

Then there was the sad case of the cowpoke John Cox who took his bride of a few weeks, Eda May, into town to see the circus and enjoy a belated honeymoon. In their cabin in the lonely Arizona salt flats they had lived far away from cities, and knew nothing of them except a lurid description of an urban kidnapping gang they had read about in a wild west magazine. They checked into a hotel, and John decided to get a haircut. Terrified of being left alone, Eda May asked John to lock her in and take the key with him. Once on the street John got shanghaied into a poker game by cowpuncher friends, and rode a lucky streak that lasted all night and into the following afternoon. Peering over a mountain of chips, John drew two queens to add to the pair in his hand. The four women on the cards brought to his mind a fifth he had forgotten. He jumped up and rushed out of the room, calling back to the boys, "I done left Eda May locked up in

¹⁴ From: American Cattle Ranching, in the Breeder's Gazette (Chicago, February 5, 1885) 194, reprinted in Clifford P. Westermeier, ed., Trailing the Cowboy: His Life and Lore as Told by Frontier Journalists. Caldwell, Idaho 1955, 307.

¹⁵ N. Howard (Jack) Thorp and Neil M. Clark, Pardner of the Wind. Caldwell, Idaho 1945, 199.

a room for twenty-four hours, *an' I ain't neither fed nor watered her!*" Poor John arrived too late to undo the damage. Eda May went back home to Utah and John reverted to bachelordom¹⁶.

Another yarn of a cowboy in difficulties with a hotel presumably transpired in 1886 and found its way into print in 1894. A puncher from the Texas panhandle wandered into a Denver hotel resplendent in store-bought clothes and a red necktie. The clerk gave him a room with a folding bed, which the cowboy pretended to know about. He checked out in the morning without a word, and the chambermaid on entering his room discovered the bottom drawer pulled out as far as it would go, with all the rugs in the room piled in it and on the end a towel for a pillow. Pinned to the mirror he had left this note: "Gol dern yore folding beds. Why don't you make 'em longer and put more kivers onto um? Mebbe you expect a man to stand up and sleep in your durned old cubberd."¹⁷ He had had a rough night.

One theme of cowboy folk yarns dealt with the identity of the cowboy himself, as a type *sui generis* who could always be recognized, whatever his disguise, by anyone familiar with him on his home ground. The daughter of a Texas cattleman asserted that she could walk along the streets of any town or city and pick out the real cowboy, not by his clothes but by his open countenance and clear eyes and mouth, stamped by the out-of-doors¹⁸. "Teddy Blue" Abbott, an oldtime cowboy, once told Charlie Russell at a roundup in Calgary, Canada, that he had spotted a Texasman. "See that droop of his shoulders? He got that coming up the trail riding on three joints of his backbone." Teddy accosted the stranger, and sure enough he was from Mobeetie, Texas, and a veteran of the long trail. "I believe I would know an old cowboy in hell with his hide burnt off," mused Teddy Blue. "It's the way they stand and walk and talk. There are lots of young fellows punching cows today (Teddy Blue wrote this in 1938) but they never can take our place, because cowpunching as we knew it is a thing of the past."¹⁹ Charley Russell had his own story to tell about being recognized for a cowboy. Back in 1883 he made a killing at a gambling house in Cheyenne, went off to Chicago

¹⁶ Ibid., 209–211; adapted by Hoig (cf. note 6) 161–162.

¹⁷ The Cowboy and the Folding Bed. *Field and Farm* (June 30, 1894) 6, reprinted in Clifford P. Westermeier, ed., *Trailing the Cowboy*. Caldwell, Idaho 1955, 308.

¹⁸ Bulah Rust Kirkland, in: *The Trail Drivers of Texas*, ed. J. Marvin Hunter, 2nd ed. rev. Nashville, Tenn. 1925, 548.

¹⁹ E. C. Abbott ("Teddy Blue") and Helena Huntington Smith, *We Pointed Them North*. Norman, Okla. 1939, 230.

on a spree, and ended up sleeping off a great jag in a strange rooming house with an unfamiliar bunkmate. "Neighbor, you're a long way from your range," comments the stranger. "You call the turn," says I, "but how did you read my iron?"

The stranger explains. "It's your ways, while I'm layin' here, watchin' you get into your garments. Now, humans dress up an' punchers dress down. When you raised, the first thing you put on is your hat. Another thing that shows you up is you don't shed your shirt when you bed down. So next comes your vest an' coat, keepin' your hindquarters covered till you slide into your pants, an' now you're lacin' your shoes. I notice you done all of it without quittin' the blankets, like the ground's cold. I don't know what state or territory you hail from, but you've smelt sagebrush an' drank alkali. I heap savvy you. You've slept a whole lot with nothin' but sky over your head, an' there's times when that old roof leaks, but judgin' from appearances, you wouldn't mind a little open air right now."

And the stranger staked Charlie back to the cow country²⁰.

The most original tall tale to issue from the cow camps involved a turtle herd. Jack Thorp retold it in his *Tales of a Chuck Wagon and Pardner of the Wind*. The yarn begins on the level of the soberest realism, as told by Pete Johnson, a foreman of the Bar W ranch in Texas, about two cowpunchers, Yost and Larrimore, who fell out over a girl. Larrimore won the girl, but Yost bit off a piece off his ear, and Larrimore nursed the insult.

Dining in a fancy San Antonio restaurant, Yost learned about the high price of turtle soup, and conceived the idea of rounding up a herd of land terrapins to drive to market, like a herd of cattle. He and his Negro cowpunchers rounded up 14,986 turtles from the sand hills in gunny sacks, which at the expected price of twenty-four dollars per turtle would bring a return of over \$359,000.00. The herd could only make a few hundred yards a day, so that to cover the fourteen hundred miles to the Kansas market would take about fifteen years, but Yost plugged on, overcoming new difficulties as they arose. When the nights grew cold, he had his hands turn the turtles on their backs to keep from stampeding, then found they kicked their legs all night and were too tired to travel the next day. So he decided to make camp for the winter, hired a ranchman to plow furrows in a sandy bottom, the turtles lay down in the furrows, the rancher dragged loose dirt over them, and they were safe for the winter.

²⁰ Charles M. Russell, *Trails Plowed Under*. New York 1940, 6.

Come spring, Yost started out again with his herd, now doubled with the birth of many small turtles, and reached Red River, where his former rival Larrimore had settled. Seeing his opportunity for revenge, Larrimore rode out to the center of the river and deposited a diving mud turtle on a stump in between the banks. As the herd of turtles entered the water in a long line, the lead turtle swam across the river until he encountered the mud turtle on the log, which dove into the stream, followed by every turtle in the herd. So Yost lost his whole herd which, including the natural increase over the next fourteen years, he calculated would have brought him at market at least sixty million dollars²¹.

This is the great parody on the saga of the long cattle drive, narrated with realistic detail and deadpan solemnity. It is a traveled tale. In Arkansas the turtle-herder shod his tenderfooted turtles, whose iron shoes caused them to drown fording a stream, whereupon the herder dammed the stream, threw in heated rocks, boiled the water, and made turtle soup.

Supernatural legends rarely appear in the yarnfests, but there is evidence that the cowboy had his occult side. One autobiography of an old "waddy," as the cowboy was sometimes called, designates a haunted grove along the Pecos River. "Boy, in later years there were so many durned cow rustlers and hoss thieves hanged from the limbs of them cottonwood trees, the grove came to be plumb ha'nted. Night horses staked out with a rope would get scared, break loose, and run off. And even old chuck wagon mules would hightail and *vamoose*. I've heard cowpunchers claim they could hear chains rattling at night, and sounds like someone gasping for breath with a rope around his neck."²²

Also there is the legend of Stampede Mesa in Crosby County, Texas, where irate cowpunchers backed a nester off the bluff on his

²¹ N. Howard ("Jack") Thorp and Neil M. Clark, *Pardner of the Wind*. Caldwell, Idaho 1945, 221-226, "Terrapins". In his *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America*. The Hague 1966, Ernest W. Baughman assigns the following motifs to this tale: X101.1*(a) and X1322*(a), "Man drives turtles as he would cattle"; X1091.1*(aa), "Man drive turtles three hundred yards the first day"; X1091.1*(ab), "Man has to bed his turtles underground when winter comes"; X1091.1*(ab), "Rival puts diving turtle on log at ford; all turtles dive, drown."

In addition to Thorp's *Tales of the Chuck Wagon*, Baughman also cites a turtle-herding tale from James R. Masterson's *Tall Tales of Arkansas*. Boston 1942, 331, reprinted in Vance Randolph, *We Always Lie to Strangers*. New York 1951, 143-144.

²² V. H. Whitlock (*Ol' Waddy*), *Cowboy Life on Llano Estacado*. Norman, Okla. 1970, 77.

horse to lie with the mangled carcasses of the steers he had stampeded. Ever after ghostly steers were seen on the mesa, and no herd could bed there without upset²³. An oldtime, gun-scarred Texan, Alvin Reed, related on tape a hant he had seen in Black Canyon of a snow-white dog that would run twenty steps and disappear, and other hants he had heard about on *la Loma de la Madre* in old Mexico where one would hear “dogs-a-barkin’ and chickens a-crowin’ ...and big ol Meskin (Mexican) spurs a-rattlin’, ridin’ and a-rattlin’... and you couldn’t see nothin’ or find nothin’.”²⁴

From the scattered, somewhat unsatisfactory sources one can still establish the vitality of oral narration among the cowboys and reconstruct central themes in their repertoire of tales. Their narratives run largely to humorous anecdotes and tall tales, but there are traces of somber legends of places haunted by the spirits of men hanged and gunned down. Besides general American whoppers of hunting, the weather, and the animal kindgom, cowboys yarn about themselves. These self-centered tales delineate a figure readily identifiable by his gait, posture, and personal habits as a rider of the open range; a giant on horseback but a tenderfoot in town; a lover not of women but of whiskey and rare steaks; and a scorner of death. The sentimentality pervading cowboy lyrics and ballads yields in the tales to an almost sick humor mocking lethal gunplay and violent killings. Cowboy folktales cemented the fraternal bonds among the herders of cattle who appeared curt and laconic to the outside world but turned garrulous among their own kind.

²³ John R. Craddock, *The Legend of Stampede Mesa*, in: *Legends of Texas*, ed. J. Frank Dobie. Hatboro, Pa. 1964; first published 1924, 111-115.

²⁴ Paul Patterson, *Pecos Tales*. Austin, Tex. 1967, 94-95.