

**Bess Lomax Hawes Keynote Address
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Transcription

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Bess Lomax Hawes: Now, is this about right? Can you hear me? You okay? I can't see you very well, so if, if I get off mic or it begins to squeal or something, you have to holler. Just – it doesn't bother me – just holler out. I call this paper, "Cowboy Poetry and Song: Collecting and Re-collecting," or "Recollecting," whichever way you want to pronounce it. And I guess I originally thought of doing this talk for my own personal reasons. My father was John A. Lomax, and he used to lecture about cowboy poetry and songs all through the western states. That was the way he made his living for a while. Now, no copy of his old lectures has survived to this day. So I thought it might be fun to try to rethink what he did and just how he managed it. And maybe I could make my talk a bit of a testimony to my cantankerous, complicated, and ever-courageous father. And also speak a little bit about what has happened since his day and time.

But what I'd forgotten what just how long ago his day and time was. And working up this material, I found myself needing to explain to present day listeners the situation of people who I never knew directly myself, because they were even before me. So here I am, sitting squarely between separated generations, armed really with nothing but a few stories, things I've heard second hand.

But I guess that's the classic folklorist position. We collect and we re-collect, people tell us things that people told them, we tell them back. We've even made up a nine dollar word for the process: *oral transmission*, we call it. It's the main way, though, that traditional items and materials survive and spread like some great cosmic game of gossip, out through vast quantities of space and time, without ever having to be formally validated or approved of by any institution or by anybody. It's a terribly strong and absolutely strong process.

Now I am seventy-three years old – seventy-five years old, I'm sorry – I just got there. A couple of days ago. [laughs]

[audience applauds]

I had a birthday and I just have to tell you, my kids got together and they gave me a ride in a hot air balloon for my birthday. And I'm still way up there, kind of floating a little bit, to the point, frankly where I forgot my glasses. And I'm going to have to ask somebody backstage to go and dig them out of my purse. They're in a green, they're in a green case. I can get along pretty well with them, without them, but every once in a while when it gets to the nitty-gritty I need those specs.

But I was born in twenty-one when my father was fifty-four. By the time I got to know him, he was more like a grandfather than a father. He was born in 1867. Now you

count that up – thanks so much – and it’s a whole century and a quarter ago. You know, America’s history is just so short. I remember once at the Library of Congress, listening to a 1940 filed recording of an old Virginia gentleman singing the *Rhyme of Darby*. It’s an ancient lying, jokey ballad about an enormous sheep, each verse telling a bigger whopper than the one before. And this old gentleman singing it stopped and laughed and he said, “You know, my granddaddy always used to say that George Washington held him on his knee and sung him that old lying song when he was just a little one.” And I thought to myself, “Well, you old liar.”

[audience laughs]

But later I realized, counting back, it was just possible within the four generations, counting mine. And then whether he decorated things up or not, this old gentleman was certainly a better rememberer than I am. I just recall bits – kind of isolated little flashes. I remember for instance how my father used to end his cowboy song lectures – he always ended with an isolated verse, whose origin I don’t know, but I can still hear his voice saying it:

*I been where the lightning, the lightning tangled in my eyes
The cattle I could scarcely hold, I think I heard my boss man say,
“I want all brave hearted men who ain’t afraid to die
To hoop the cattle from morning ‘til night
Way up on the Kansas line!”*

Oh, boy, that was the stuff to feed the troops. I remember roars of applause from his young college audiences of the twenties and thirties as I sat there in the dark, thrilled to be let stay up beyond my bedtime, and I remember the great blues man Ledbelly singing out our side porch in Austin:

*When I was a cowboy out on the western plains
When I was a cowboy out on the western plains
I could rope a streak of lightning and ride a shower of rain
Come a-cow cow yicky, come a-cow cow yicky-yicky yea.*

I just –

[audience applauds]

-- threw that in for you, mostly to remind you that people in, used to just sing a song when they wanted to sing a song when they wanted to sing a song, without having to go look for their guitar and plug it in and get themselves an audience and make everybody hush up and – you know? Some people still do.

Well, I’m already getting ahead of my things. Let me start all over again, back with my father John A. Lomax. He was born the last of seven children in the Black River country of west central Mississippi in 1867. When he was two years old, his family loaded all their possessions into two wagons. One pulled by two mules named Jack and

Fan, and the other by two oxen named Bright and Berry. And they all started out on the five hundred mile trail for east Texas. My grandmother wrote about it in her diary. They bought timbered land there on the edge of the Bosque River, near a spot which was to be a fording place on one of the southeastern branches of the Chisholm Trail, and they built a two room log cabin and settled in to raise children and wheat, corn and chickens, cotton and horses.

In my father's autobiography, he described waking up in the night as a little boy and hearing cowpunchers camped for the night down by the Bosque River, joking and singing and telling stories. And I think I remember him telling of how he would sneak out of the house sometimes and creep through the bushes in the dark night and get closer and hear them better, but you know, I can't find that in his writings now so maybe I made it all up. But I do know that at that time, he did a really remarkable thing. He began when he was just a little boy to write down the words of the songs he heard the men singing so he wouldn't forget them. And I'll get back to that later.

He loved to tell stories about his life in Bosque County, and he told them well, but what he used to tell about with the greatest affection it seems to me now, were the tournaments that were then the high point of any local celebration. Tournaments were Texas recreations of a, antebellum Southern custom, in which mounted riders carrying six-foot lances would thunder down a two hundred yard track, each trying to spear all twelve of the small brass rings that hung from poles along the way. Each rider wore the ribbon favor of a local young lady. Each one had curveted his horse in special tricks before the crowd as his name was called by the master of ceremonies:

George Scrutchfield, the Knight of the Golden Spur! Johnny Rundell, the Knight of the Lost Cause! Ed McCurry, the Knight of the Morning Star! Bob Hannah, the Knight of the Slim Chance!

[audience laughs]

He was my father's buddy.

The winner, my father said, crowned his lady love before all the spectators and then together they would lead the dance that started afterwards. Now though father clearly had an eye for the fair ladies, it was the horsemanship and the skill of the young riders he talked about most, and it was possibly then that he became so taken with those hard-bitten, skillful, rowdy, adventurous, to him truly romantic young men, many of them vanishing up the long trail that he was too young and too burdened with family responsibilities to follow. And now it's time to remind you a little bit about that Chisholm Trail and the whole era of the cattle drives, and why they happened when they did and faded away when they did. I hope you won't be insulted. I may have been living with tenderfeet in the East too long, but generally I find that almost everybody needs to be reminded a little bit about that hazy and complex period over which Americans have fanaticized for so long. Here's how my father, writing in 1910, began to describe it:

From 1870 to 1890 one million mustang ponies and twelve million head of longhorn cattle were driven up the trails from Texas to market in Kansas, Wyoming, Montana, and other western states. The herds numbered usually from

one thousand to three thousand, though at times as many as five thousand cattle made up a single trail herd. Behind and around and ahead of each bunch of cattle rode a group of men, mostly very young, bold, youthful Vikings of the seas of sage grass through which they pushed their way.

They came to be known as cowboys, the boys who take care of the cows from the Spanish *vaquero* and *vaca* – that means cow – but you know, where did all those cows come from? They hadn't been here to begin with, you know?

Now J. Frank Dobie in his great book *The Longhorns* tells us that Columbus, on his second voyage in 1493 landed cattle in Santa Domingo, and in the next years, their offspring were shipped throughout the developing Caribbean. Cortez himself stocked a hacienda in Cuba and importing cattle from it to his estate in Mexico, which he had named *Cuernavaca* – that means horn of the cow. Only fifty years later, the explorer Coronado assembled more than five hundred head of cattle, as well as sheep and hogs and drove them along on his great expedition north of the Rio Grande as feed for his troops. Fighting and breeding bulls were imported to the New World from Spain throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Actually, wherever the Spanish went they took cattle and horses, a good number of which escaped or were just let go as too exhausted to continue on the long marches required through the Southwest. So since the Spanish like most Colonials kept most of their male animals un-castrated, small populations of wild cattle began to develop across the vast empty grasslands of Texas, Louisiana, and California.

In 1767 a French traveler crossing Texas observed, "Horned cattle, originally tame that long since became wild and now roam in large herds all over the plain." They were frequently rounded up in those days and sold for hides and tallow. Essentially during those times they were considered game animals. But after the establishment of the republic of Texas, the ever increasing colonization of the Southwest by English speakers brought with it an increase in large animal ranching. For newcomers could claim much more land if they declared their intention was to ranch rather than to farm. And Texas was according to many the best stock raising country in the world. With grass that was green almost the year round, cattle multiplied on the ranches and in the wild until local prices dropped to less than five dollars an animal in the mid nineteenth century. And at the same moment, exploding post Civil War population markets in the Northeast were offering ten times as much for a steer on the hoof.

The problem was clear for Southwestern ranches. The cattle had to be got north, and at that time there was only one way: they had to walk. As they had walked from Mexico up to Texas in the centuries before, now they had to walk from Texas to Kansas. The Kansas Pacific Railroad line which had connections into Chicago eventually chose to build cattle shipping stations in Abilene, Kansas, and by 1885 a million cattle had been shipped to market from Abilene and another five million trailed north to stock to western ranges. Texas, cattlemen said, had the best breeding grounds. But the lush, summer grasses of Montana, Wyoming and Colorado and Nevada were more nutritious for fattening the growing animals.

It was all over before the turn of the century. It only lasted for about twenty years really, from about 1870 to about 1890; such a short time. As unclaimed land fell into new and profit-hungry hands, ranges once open were fenced, trail routes were cut and

newly built roads and railroad lines made lengthy drives economically unprofitable. The whole panorama – the great cattle drives like rivers of living animals – the fabled long horn steers who could walk to hell and back again; the young knights of the slim chance and the golden spurs. The frontier towns were the money they earned on the long trail vanished too soon. All of this faded away or settled down, or maybe just began to seem everyday, and sometimes even kind of grungy. But it made a great story. One from which Americans, actually the peoples of the entire world are still drawing excitement, romance and vitality, and the primary authors of that story, no matter how much it was changed later, were the cowboys, the vaqueros, the expert herders and animal husbandry men, who my father described in the romantic language of his day as “bold, youthful Vikings of the seas of sage grass.”

My brother Alan, writing seventy-five years later from that perspective, saw the cowboys differently.

These anonymous, badly paid hired hands, who lived hard and usually died poor, served as unpaid irregular cavalry in the long and cruel struggle during which the United States snatched western lands away from its Indian and Mexican inhabitants.

When we look back it is important I think to keep *both of these perspectives in mind, for both are true* at the same time. And we must above all keep listening to the old time trail herders themselves. Their songs, their recitations, and thankfully the several autobiographies some left behind. For today, whenever I read a book about that era – and there is about a billion of them – it’s rare to come across an author who doesn’t say something about the west that never was. The romantic stereotype of the cowboy, the mythic past of the cattle drives and things like that.

But I grew up around my father who was indeed a romantic of deepest dye. He used to read aloud to us every night Shakespeare and Alfred Lord Tennyson and Charles Dickens and Robert Browning and his voice would husk up at the sad parts. But he believed in letting the cowboys speak for themselves. Look at his books: the poetry with occasional music notation added, stares stark and bare up from the pages of his two earliest cowboy collections. And nothing to do with those books, but read the language as it was spoken and as father wrote it down.

I said earlier that he had begun to write down the songs he heard the cowpunchers sing when he was just a little boy, but what I didn’t say then was how almost unheard of such a thing was at the time. Educated nineteenth century Americans were deeply convinced that *all real culture, all real art* came from western Europe. Well, Greece got in there a bit and maybe the Egyptians were allowed to have done a few worthwhile things, but the only intellectual distinctions truly available to Americans they believed came through their absorption of old world literature, history and values. Walt Whitman, Emerson, Melville, Mark Twain thundered their defenses of the originality and creativity of the new Americans, for the new Americans generally didn’t believe it themselves. And I must remind you that the struggle goes on to this day expressed in the very real ambivalence that most Americans feel about art, as evidenced in part by the continuing problems of the National Endowment for the Arts where I used to work. And my father ran into this intellectual barricade very early.

At the age of twenty-eight he had finally saved enough money to get out of Bosque County to the University of Texas and he hit the ground running as they say, and managed to compress his AB degree into only two years. But before he graduated, he had taken his collection of cowboy poetry to a scholar at the University of Texas English Department. As he wrote about the episode later:

Timidly, I handed Dr. Calloway my role of dingy manuscript, written out in lead pencil and tied together with a leather string. Courteous, and kindly gentleman that he was he thanked me and promised to report the next day. Alas, the following morning Dr. Calloway told me that my samples of frontier literature were tawdry, cheap and unworthy. I had better give my attention to the great movements of writing that had come sounding down the ages. There was no possible connection he said between the tall tales of Texas and the tall tales of Beowulf. His decision, exquisitely considerate, was final. Absolute. No single crumb of comfort was left in me. I was unwilling to have anyone else see the examples of my folly or know of my disappointment, so that night in the dark, out behind Breckenridge Hall, the men's dormitory where I lodged, I made a small bonfire of every scrap of my cowboy songs.

For the time being, my father abandoned folklore and began making his living as an English teacher at several Texas universities, but he never stopped thinking about it, and in fact he began learning songs again from his students. Many of them country boys in those great days of the free land grant colleges.

*Oh, slow up doggies
Quit your roaming around
You've wondered and trampled
All over the ground*

*Oh, graze along doggies
And feed kind of slow
And don't be forever
On the go.*

Move slow little doggies move slow

*I've circle herded, trail herded
And night herded, too
But to keep you together
That what I can't do*

*My horse's leg weary
And I'm awful tired
But if I let you get away
I'm sure to get fired*

Bunch up little doggies bunch up

Harry Stevens, a student of my father at Texas A & M, told father he had made that song up night herding for the Wiley Company in Yellowstone Park and father wrote later:

One day in the spring of 1909 in College Station, Harry leaned over the gate of my home and called to me. "Professor, I come to say goodbye," he said. "Grass is a rising and I've got to move on."

They corresponded for some years but never met again, and for the time being and years later, the legendary Harvard scholars Barrett Wendell and George Lyman Kittredge encouraged my father to start over again. They were Shakespeare men, and they understood about vernacular literature, and they endorsed a proposal that he sent off to newspapers across the western states, looking for materials that could be put into a complete collection of the native ballads and songs of the West. This project which got him involved in correspondence and visits to people all over the Southwest was realized in his very first book, *Cowboy Songs*, which was published in 1910, with a preface by President Theodore Roosevelt. And he ended his manuscript with a floating stanza that had been recited to him by a rider on the Dime a Day Ranch in New Mexico.

*Oh, the cowpuncher loves the whistle of his rope
As he races over the plains
And the stage driver loves the popping of his whip
And the rattle of his concord chains
And we'll all pray the Lord that we will be saved
And we'll keep the golden rule
But I'd rather be at home with the girl I love
Than to monkey with this goddamn mule.*

[audience laughs and applauds]

Now [laughs], now that was pretty daring for those days. And it was certainly far from the lush romantic language of many of the other period songs and poems he collected and printed. Songs like *Home On the Range* with all that lofty language. *Laska*, the *Red River Valley*. Both poetic styles: the plainspoken and the flowery, represented for father the authentic voices of the creative, competent, scantily educated but widely experienced men who were changing the face of the west. All his life he wanted to give them a bigger voice, one that would carry beyond the limits of simple oral transmission – my mouth to your ear – that would give them the broad scale audience that he thought they deserved, and would also provide the whole United States with a creative and passionate vernacular poetry that everyone could not just enjoy but feel proud of. Father wanted people exposed to the real words, even if sentimental, even if rough. And the real voices, even if raucous.

And so when the RCA Victor Company began putting out those marvelous newfangled Victrolas that could capture sounds and transfer them to incised, spiral lines on wax cylinders, father was one of the first in line. Armed with some Harvard money,

he purchased one of these magical machines, all equipped with a big flaring horn, that thing like a morning glory, like the one you still see with the dog listening to on the RCA logo.

By the way, when you recorded on one of those cylinder machines you really needed to put your face as far down in the horn as you could get it, so as to block out as much ambient noise as possible and then you started to sing. It was really uncomfortable and kind of unnatural, and father ran into quite a number of cowpunchers who simply refused to take any part whatever in such a dubious enterprise.

[audience laughs]

Now other collectors of course used recording machines, too, and some of those early cylinders have survived and are at the folk archive at the Library of Congress and at the sound archives at the University of Indiana. But it was such early times, nobody knew what they were doing exactly. Not long ago, my sister who is now age ninety-two, remarked to me, “You know, honey? That exhibit we went to see in Washington at the Library with those cylinders in it? It called to mind one time before you were born when we used to have a big old wooden box out on the sleeping porch back in Austin. And I remember one day mother went to open it up and it was just a big old puddle of melted black wax. It was awful hot that summer, and of course we didn’t know.”

But some of the cylinders stayed intact long enough for father to play them for musicians who notated the tunes for him – he couldn’t read music – and when *Cowboy Songs* was published in 1910, it was not only his first book, it was the first collection of native American folksongs that was printed along with the music of the songs. Even though the publishers would print the music of only eighteen of the hundred or more tunes he gave them.

What happened to the rest of them? Nobody really knows. The cylinders are long since gone, the papers have been scattered, and that might seem kind of careless, but I ought to remind you that few people during those early years did their folkloring as a full time professor – profession. Father started out as an unpaid amateur, and when he got himself a wife and four children to support, in a desperate attempt to make some genuine money, he went into banking and did pretty well at it, too. During my childhood he wasn’t doing folklore, he was the Vice President of the Republic National Bank in Dallas. The crash of 1929 almost destroyed him, psychologically and fiscally – he left his job and tried to recapture some of his old triumphs, undertaking lectures on college campuses all over the country. Already in his early sixties, he negotiated with the Rockefeller Foundation and the Library of Congress, and finally began his last major project, to record now the traditional music of the entire South. Overall he produced six books, several of them in co-authorship with his son, Alan.

For folkloring in those days was pretty much a family affair – everybody had to help out. With a healthy, clamorous family to raise and without institutional support of any kind, father became a warm man with a dollar. I’m sure that every now and again he must have had to hire a secretary, but I don’t ever recall seeing one. What I do recall is seeing him forever at his desk, writing letter after letter, ten and twenty a day in his beautiful, Spenserian long hand with a dip pen. Most are long since gone – nobody had time to copy them. For I also recall sitting down at the old family Remington typewriter,

the first thing I did whenever I came home from college and starting in on the typing, almost always copies of the texts of songs that father and Alan were working with. There were no Xerox machines then, you know, only me. And any other family member or friend or the odd WPA worker who could be pressed into the never ending toil of copying one word at a time, all the hundreds and hundreds of songs, notes, letters, manuscripts, *each and every time you needed a copy*. People asked me sometimes where a particular unusual verse in one of father's songs came from and I have a pretty good notion. He probably cut it with scissors out of another version somebody else sent him or that he'd collected from another singer and he pinned it in with a straight pin. There wasn't any Scotch tape, either.

Mother made beautiful, orderly files my brother tells me, but he and father raiding them whenever they needed a copy. And somehow the work got done and the books got out and years later in the 1960s and 70s, when I was teaching folklore in California, an occasional student would bring me a tattered copy of the old *Cowboy Songs* or *Songs of the Cattle Trail*, and *Cow Camp* book, and they'd tell me how much their dad had loved it, or that their uncle had left it to them in his will; because old timers kept father's books and they referred to them when they forgot the words. And they read from them to their children. They had need to try to keep the story straight because by the beginning of the twentieth century, journalists, novelists, and showmen of all description – later including radio and film producers – had decided that the West was where the great American adventures had taken place. That the big American story was the opening up and settling of the west and that the cowboy was the heroic figure in the center of all that action, and represented what all Americans secretly longed to be. And when the history didn't quite fit, they began to make it up. And they made up such wonderful, creative things that their inventions began to sound more real than the history. And a lot of the old time cowpunchers couldn't even recognize themselves when they went to see Tom Mix in the picture show, or heard their own songs coming back at them over the radio.

Of course, most of the old time cowpunchers had done their own bits of improving reality in their songs and stories, but theirs entered the great stream of cowboy oral transmission and were remembered and forgotten in little bits and pieces. My brother calls that *creative forgetting*. And they got put back together again by the next singer and then by another until sometimes they became a composition of the many and you couldn't tell who had written it to begin with. And I myself think that father was so use to this process that he saw his own editing as just another part of it.

But there were other forces at work, too. You see, the old time cowboy songs were work songs. As a group, they came into being because of the nature of the work to be done. And there are two big kinds of songs associated with work. First, the *work song* proper – the kind that are sung while the work is going on – coordinating or prolonging the effort. The demands of the particular task at hand completely control work songs at that time. The song stops for instance right in the middle, if and when the task is done. Nobody feels that the song has to be sung all the way through to the end, assuming it even has one. And then there are songs about work that are typically sung after the job's all done and it's being thought about in tranquility. Songs that often glorify the job by telling exciting stories about an accident or a comic event maybe – songs that show how tough and skillful the workers are. These are more formal, poetic constructions. Some people call them occupational ballads. *Bury Me Not On the Lone*

Prairie, or *Tying a Knot in the Devil's Tail*, those are occupational songs that you might have heard.

But because of the nature of trail herding itself, many cowboy songs combine these two types. As father always carefully pointed out, on the day to day level, cattle droving was a pretty boring proposition. A trail drive wasn't a race. The whole idea was to get a lot of cows from one place to another in as good physical condition as possible. So you move kind of slow most of the time, letting the cattle graze as they went, because you're going to get paid at the end, not at the beginning. So the long, lonely, tedious hours in the saddle often produced long, lonely, and sometimes tedious songs. In fact, one of the criteria for a good, old time cowboy song was simply length.

[audience laughs]

The Old Chisholm Trail was of course the hands-down champion in that department. An old timer who had just sung my father sixty-nine verses of *The Old Chisholm Trail* explained at the end that it was just as long of the trail from Texas to Wyoming. You started it in Texas, you ended it up when you got to Wyoming. Father's own collection eventually number well more than two hundred verses. As it was indeed the primary song about trail life, it had to be trail-long and the laconic, direct detailing of event after event, telling you just exactly what happened always makes it for me the realest of all of them.

*Come along boys and listen to my tale
I'll tell you all my troubles on the old Chisholm Trail
Come a-ki-yi-yippy-yippy-yea-yippy-yea
Hi-yi-yippy-yippy-yea*

*I started up the trail October 23rd
Started up the trail with the 2-U herd
Come a-ki-yi-yippy-yippy-yea-yippy-yea
Ki-yi-yippy-yippy-yea*

*It's cloudy in the west and a-lookin' like rain
And my damned old slicker's in the wagon again
Come a-ki-yi-yippy-yippy-yea-yippy-yea
Ti-yi-yippy-yippy-yea*

*Well, the wind began to blow and the rain began to fall
And it looked by grad like we're gonna lose them all
Come a-ti-yi-yippy-yippy-yea-yippy-yea
Ti-yi-yippy-yippy-yea*

*Well, I jumped in the saddle grabbed hold of the horn
I'm the best damned cowboy even was born,
Come a-ti-yi-yippy-yippy-yea-yippy-yea*

Ti-yi-yippy-yippy-yea

*And I don't give damn if they never do stop
I'll ride as long as an eight-day clock
Come a-ti-yi-yippy-yippy-yea-yippy-yea
Ti-yi-yippy-yippy-yea*

*And we herded and we hollered and we done very well
'Til the boss said boys, "Just let them go to hell."
Come a-ti-yi-yippy-yippy-yea-yippy-yea
Ti-yi-yippy-yippy-yea*

And...

Well, as you can see, this is a...

[audience laughs and applauds]

This is a song that was made for the trail. It could lope along fast or slow – I took it fast for time purposes, but it could go just as slow as you want it. Any number of verses could be fit into its scheme of rhyme couplets, it could be sung by one person or a group, and it was infinitely expandable to fit the length of any ride – a truly classic work song. And at the same time, it told one or more stories like an occupational ballad, with as much detail as the most demanding audience could wish for. One of my grandchildren required it as his bedtime song for years.

[audience laughs]

Not just because it was so long I think, but because it was so interesting. And he always made me tell him about the doggies – I hope this doesn't bore you, but I have to put it in because so many people don't know about it. An old timer once defined the word *doggie* for father as a newborn calf whose mammy was dead and his pappy had run off with another cow.

[audience laughs]

The baby trail-born calves were indeed a special responsibility of the punchers on the drives, since mother's milk was not available to these orphans, they had to eat grass before their digestive systems had matured. Their bellies swelled and they staggered along at the end of the herd, prey for coyotes and buzzards. The cowboys called them *little dough-guts*, and talked and sang to them and about them almost constantly. *Roll on, little doggies, roll on!* They were constantly trying to move them. Every now and again even picking one up and carrying him horseback for a ways.

*Whoopie ti-yi-yo, get along you little doggies
It's your misfortune and none of my own*

*Whoopie ti-yi-yo, get along you little doggies
For you know Wyoming will be your new home.*

For me that was always the great one, the single most beautiful cowboy song that ever was. And my brother Alan Lomax has traced its long journey and many changes from an ancient Irish lullaby that the old ladies of Cork say was the one that Mary sang to rock the baby to sleep. He tells all about it in *Folk Songs of North America* if you want to look it up. It's a beautiful story.

For whatever songs the cowboys already knew regressed for their creative mills. They changed old songs around and borrowed tunes or never bothered with tunes at all. Just sort of hollered or chanted verses ad lib – who cared? Being on the trail was like being on a baseball field. When every player is supposed to put up a line of chatter to help keep the action lively and spirits high, and incidentally to keep everybody aware just where everybody else is. And there is clear historical testimony that American cowmen who sang out got jobs quicker and kept them longer than the more stern, silent types.

The cows seemed to like the singing too, although I have heard present day musicians scoff at the idea that cattle have anything resembling musical taste.

[audience laughs]

But old time cattlemen talked about signing to the cattle almost the same way current teenagers justify playing music during their homework time. Both groups claim that music covers up potentially disturbing and distracting ambient sounds. Here's how father said night herding yodeling sounded: Not a bit Swiss style, not peppy. More of a crooning and calming sound, way up in the women's range.

Ooo-ooo-oo-oo

Ooh-Woo-oo-oo-oo

Ooh-Woo-oo-oo-oo, Ooh-Woo-oo-oo

And certainly other peoples in the world who handle large animals from the milkmaids of the British Isles to the cattle herders of central Africa, they all worked their herds while singing. And so Irish tunes turned up in the American cowboy stew. They just sung what they already knew, along with African American and Spanish songs, for the cowpunching population was polyglot. There were southern Rednecks, ex-slaves, south-of-the-border Spanish speakers, English remittance men, Mormons, Indians, sodbusters, New England adventurers. Father took down both *Home on the Range* and the classic *Sam Bass* from black trail hands. People used to think in the old days that that was comical when I said it, but it was true then and it is true right now.

So now what has happened to this stream of song and what has happened to the cowboys since their brief, glorious star burst over the western plains? They have survived, they have changed. Cattle are still raised for beef, and experienced men and women are still required to handle them – they do not raise themselves. They even require occasional herding from point to point, although I have heard of ranches in Hawaii where the Paniolos – that's Hawaiian for *cowboys* – use mini motor bikes instead of horses. I did see a group of young Paniolos having a round of beer in a roadside café

on the big island one time, all of them poking hilarious fun at one of their numbers who was solid mud from his Stetson to his boots. Apparently you can still get throwed, even off a motor bike.

[audience laughs]

It's even more striking though how the songs have survived and changed. The first and most fundamental change is that people began accompanying them with musical instruments. You may have noticed I didn't bring along my guitar this morning, and old time trail drivers didn't either. When they were singing work songs, they were busy. I never herd of a cow puncher taking a guitar on the trail. There was the rare fiddle stashed in the chuck wagon – fiddles are small, lightweight – but never the guitar; although many Mexican American cattlemen undoubtedly played at the ranch houses. The multiple forms of the guitar developed in Mexico, now sound not just in a way, but all the way around the world.

But when cowboy songs began routinely to be sung with accompanying instruments, they underwent a fundamental change. It turned them from work songs into occupational songs, and that undoubtedly had to happen. When the work pattern changes, there's no longer need for the work song. But then the insatiable demands of the music industry, as opposed to the cattle industry, began to be applied and gradually the pickers and grinders took over. You had to be able to play or at least harmonize to sing a cowboy song in public, and the way you sang or played it had to fit the current tastes of the professional music sellers. Cowboy singing became less and less associated with southwestern ranches and more and more with Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley.

But another fascinating thing happened, too. As I've already said, not all the cowboy songs were actually sung. Many of them didn't really have exact tunes, but tended to be chanted or recited. Most of the cowpunchers in the trail driving days had been educated in so far as they had been in one room country school houses of the period. And that's a very important thing to remember because they had in those places a single teacher who had to expose a group of mixed aged children to learning, armed only with a few readers and a few slates. Oral recitation therefore was frequent and essential, for there were not enough books, and elocution classes were offered in college in father's day.

Local entertainments featured the recitation of classic poetry, or sometimes from great public addresses, and original poems that had been composed in the honor of the occasion. So today, we know the real names of many cowboy authors. Lots of them wrote poems or songs themselves. There wasn't anything special about them in those times. And do you know to this day there still isn't? I firmly believe that *every single American*, has at some time or other written at least *one poem*. Ask yourself if that isn't true in your case. It certainly is one of the first things we all think of to do when something unimaginable happens. I understand that the broadcast stations of the nation were flooded with poems written by angry citizens immediately after the Kennedy and King assassinations. And even if we're too shy to admit writing poems, we still love them. The number of wallets that contain of *The Shooting of Dan McGrew* or another favorite classic poem, suitable for taking out and reading aloud, I believe to this day

there's still lots of them around. I wonder if there aren't a few here with us tonight – this morning, I mean.

And nowadays, in line with our tendency to organize things, you can actually go to cowboy gatherings and listen to the fellows reciting their poetry, always from memory. They go on for days, these events. It's like being back in Homer's time, where the bards fill you in on what's been going on and remind you of the glories of the past and the opportunities of the future. The granddaddy of these remarkable events, of course, takes place in Elko, Nevada, where we are right now, every January. Smack in the middle of winter, when people can take time off from their ranch jobs.

The Oregon poet Kim Stafford had this to say about it all, and I like it so much I'm going to read it to you if you don't mind, even though it's a little bit late.

*I've come to watch all year for that first sight of Elko at dusk,
Late January, that distant neon Ruby glittering like a star as come down South
Off Adobe Summit.
I know I'll be soon treated to round after round of poems and stories.
Voices to teach me the pleasures of solitude and
the raw work of hoof and hand.*

*When the poets get started,
Rhymes in the poems stand like little street lights, every half block along Idaho
Street
Every little light earned like a season's wage.*

*An old fellow at Capriola's told me last winter
"Son, you can have more fun in Elko by accident
Than you can anywhere else on purpose."*

[audience laughs]

*"Because you can do anything you're big enough to get away with
And after a couple of drinks you feel pretty damn big in this town."*

*I knew he'd said that many times.
His stating of it had the polish of old leather braid.
And the rhymes I heard at the Gathering, yes I could predict them,
But that didn't dull their pleasure.*

*When you lift the coffee cup to your lips for the tenth time on a cold day,
You get so you can predict its bitter kiss
But that doesn't make you ever want to stop.*

*I remember one rhyme at the end of a poem about an old dog
The kind of good dog you remember and brag about
And as the reciter came cantered slower towards the poems end
We could see the glow of that last rhyme like moonrise over the horizon*

And then it was there.

“And now I walk these hills alone.”

*The tough lady editor beside me ran out of Kleenex then
And I had a little trouble myself.*

Woody Guthrie would have liked that piece that Kim Stafford wrote. Father always said that Woody was the best cowboy song singer of the modern times and I think I know why. Woody never worried about singing that corny, old timey line cantering up over the horizon. He wanted you to face that rhyme and all its human inevitability. He wanted you to hear and understand the shared humanity of the story it was bringing you.

I once had a student who choose Woody Guthrie as the subject of his term paper. But it turned out that he just heard about Woody and he'd never heard any of his records. So I said he better give him a listen and he did and he came back all upset. “I just don't like them, Ms. Hawes. I sing some of his songs myself and I thought I'd like him, but I really don't, and so what do I do now?”

Well, I suggested he give it another week. You've met another human being, warts and all when you hear Woody. He played a totally straight forward unornamented guitar, in a totally straightforward unornamented way, sometimes getting on to a chord and not changing it for an entire song. That takes some stamina to listen to, I'll admit.

[audience laughs]

But after a while you begin to take to it, and Woody sang the way cowboys used to sing, father said, without guile or seductiveness. Flat out tense, masculine, serious, strained. “Cowboys used to ball and holler,” father said.

Well, my student finally came back and told me that in desperation, he had tried playing Woody's records with the volume turned way low, so it would kind of fade into the background and he thought he could maybe kind of get on to it if he heard sort of subliminally. And he said to me in total despair, “But that didn't work either, Ms. Hawes. Woody *wouldn't let me not listen to him.*”

[audience laughs]

“I had to turn up the volume and pay attention if I was going to listen at all.” That's the great ballad style, the narrative voice that cuts away everything extraneous to the story that's being told, and tells it to you in a way that makes you listen.

My brother Alan's cross-cultural research shows that this is one of the great vocal styles of the planet and that it's moved around the globe in rough alignment with the herders of the big animals – the horsemen, the men and women who have daring and important stories to tell. We in the United States are lucky to have hosted it in our western states. And I think that we are also lucky that my father, along with the other intrepid folklorists of his day and later, was there to record it in its classic development, for it is no longer there in the old way, nor will it ever be exactly again. But who knows what musicians and singers of tomorrow may take inspiration from these spare, beautiful and rugged songs? Today as we struggle to help maintain the variety of natural life

around the planet, we must concern ourselves also, with the support of cultural variety while we can still catch the echoes of these varied musical systems and varied poetic systems and hear them speaking to our deepest hearts.

Thank you very much.

[audience applauds]

Thank you. Thank you.