

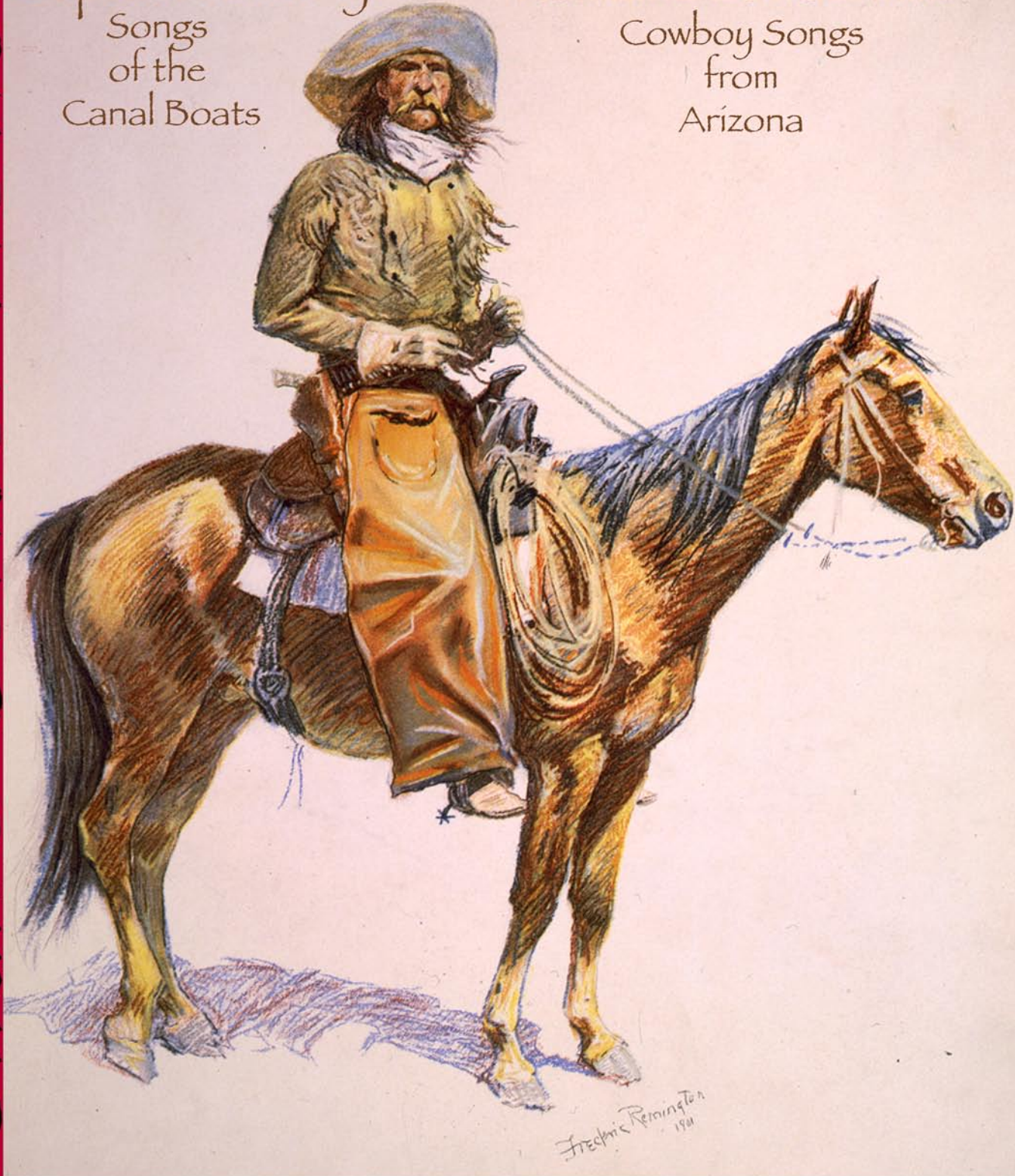
# Cowboy Poetry

Captain Pearl Nye

Songs  
of the  
Canal Boats

Romaine Lowdermilk

Cowboy Songs  
from  
Arizona



American Folklife Center  
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# FOLKLIFE CENTER NEWS

AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER

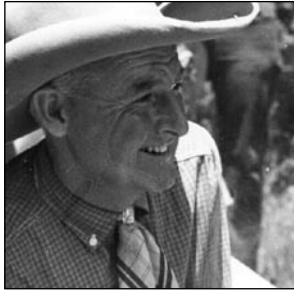


## COWBOY POETRY: THEN AND NOW



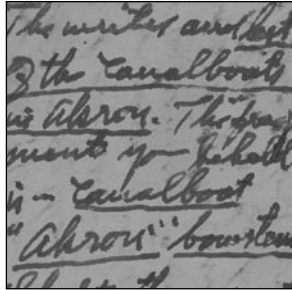
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# Cowboy Poetry Then and Now

By David Stanley

**I**N 1985, ON A COLD WINTER WEEKEND, THE FIRST COWBOY POETRY GATHERING—an event planned, researched, and created cooperatively by public-sector folklorists from around the West—debuted in the little cattle town of Elko in northeastern Nevada. It marked the beginning of a true renaissance of a folk art that had existed for more than a hundred years, yet had previously escaped public notice in the overwhelming glare of publicity given to other media representations of the cowboy: Hollywood films, popular fiction and history, and cowboy music.

The Gathering—fully reported by media types attracted by the apparent oxymoron of “cowboy poetry” and the opportunity for extensive punning (“git along little doggerels,” “rhyme on the range”)—was attended by a few hundred observers, mostly from local ranches—a far cry from the roughly 8,000 who attend the Gathering today. But in 1985, the experience for the poets, reciters, and musicians

was electrifying. Many had been reading, reciting, and composing poetry about the cowboy life for years, using as their models poems in tattered books and verses clipped from western newspapers and magazines such as *Western Livestock Journal*. The subject matter, then as now, was the ordinariness of ranch life—its tediousness as well as its moments of joy, its dangers, its pleasures, and its losses.

Some cowboy poets, particularly during the heyday of the Hollywood “oater,” reflected the influence of cinema in poems about range wars, stagecoach holdups, outlaws, Indian raids, and shoot-outs. Poems were also set to music and recorded by Hollywood

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*Wyoming cowboys roping a gray wolf during an 1887 roundup. In the same decade, cowboy poet Allen McCandless wrote “The Cowboy’s Soliloquy,” containing the line: “My parson’s a wolf on a pulpit of bones.” LC Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-22483.*



actors, bluegrass and country musicians, classical composers, community choirs, and—occasionally—working cowboys. Today, cowboy poems decorate place mats in cafés, are découpaged onto varnished boards, and hang in bathrooms, barrooms, and living rooms all over the West.

Cowboy poetry can thus be described as a hybrid genre, one that borrows widely from traditional roots of folk poetry and song, but also incorporates aspects of popular poetry, music, fiction, historical writing, and, more recently, film and television. It has been influenced by academic poetry, country-western music, the Homeric epics, the plays of Shakespeare, and the Bible. Like the cowboy life, which has been in constant transition from the days of the trail drive and the open range to the advent of huge privately owned ranches to the mix

of small family ranches and large corporate outfits that we see today, cowboy poetry is constantly changing. It mirrors these economic shifts as well as contemporary western issues: rapidly increasing population, resort and second-home (“ranchette”) developments, nuclear and toxic waste storage, and the current boom in extractive industries like gold and coal mining, oil and gas production, and lumbering.

Cowboy poetry owes its origins to the cattle drives of the second half of the nineteenth century. After the Civil War, cowboy crews drove millions of cattle from Texas to other parts of the West—first to railheads in Kansas, later to grazing grounds and Indian reservations as far north as Montana and Alberta. Such drives lasted as long as six months; the trail drivers were a diverse bunch that included *vaqueros* from Mexico and south Texas, African-American former slaves from the South, Anglo-American Texans with origins in the upland South, young adventure-seekers from the East and Europe, and occasionally Native Americans. Camping out along the trail, they sang and played familiar music (fiddles and harmonicas were the most popular instruments because of their portability), told stories, and composed songs and poems, which were typically performed from memory.

A lot of the earliest poems and songs were undoubtedly in Spanish. Perhaps the oldest extant text—still sung and recited today—is “El Corrido de Kansas” (or “Kansas”), a narrative of the adventures of a group of *vaqueros* who drove a herd of steers northward from Texas. Individual volumes of poetry in English about cowboy life began to be published in the 1880s, and the first important collections of song, N. Howard “Jack” Thorp’s *Songs of the Cowboys* and John A. Lomax’s *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, were published in 1908 and 1910, respectively. Lomax followed with a collection of cowboy poetry, *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp*, in 1919. Between 1905 and 1935, the most respected cowboy poets—S. Omar Barker, Charles Badger Clark, Curley Fletcher, Gail I. Gardner, Sharlot Hall, Bruce Kiskaddon, Henry Herbert Knibbs, and Rhoda Sivell—published the majority of their work, often with major New York and Boston publishers. The genre was so popular that artists and writers better known in other areas, such as the poets Vachel Lindsay and Eugene Field and the painters Charles M. Russell and Maynard Dixon, wrote cowboy poems of their own.



COURTESY WESTERN FOLK LIFE CENTER

Charles Badger Clark, “The Poet Laureate of the Plains.” *World Wide Photos / Chicago Bureau*, October 20, 1927.

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*Editor’s Note: David Stanley teaches American literature and folklore at Westminster College in Salt Lake City. He co-edited, with Elaine Thatcher, a collection of essays, *Cowboy Poets & Cowboy Poetry* (University of Illinois Press, 2000) and produced, for Smithsonian Folkways, a CD, *Cowboy Poetry Classics* (2003). Formerly a public-sector folklorist employed by the Utah Arts Council, he has served as a staff member at all but one of the National Cowboy Poetry Gatherings. He is currently compiling a print anthology of classic cowboy poems, a project for which he was awarded a Parsons fund fellowship from the American Folklife Center in 2005. In addition to David’s fellowship, this article on Cowboy Poetry and its premiere venue, the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, celebrates the appointment to AFC’s board of trustees of Charlie Seemann, executive director of the Western Folklife Center, which produces the Gathering.*





## COWBOY POETRY

are the protective leather garments worn on the legs. The word is a shortened form of “*chapareras*,” just as “taps,” leather covers on the front of the stirrups, is derived from “*tapaderos*.” “Quirt,” a short whip used in riding, is from the Spanish “*cuarta*.” Even such clichéd cowboy terms as “mosey,” “vamoose,” and “hoosegow” are Spanish: the first two from *vamos*, “let’s go,” the last from *juzgado*, “jail.”

Even looking back at the poems and songs of the nineteenth century, we can see that same die-hard, inventive love of words that cowboys have carried in their saddlebags since the first cowboy poems were published in western newspapers in the 1870s. An example is “The Cowboy’s Dance Song” (ca. 1899) by James Barton Adams (1843-1918):

You can’t expect a cowboy to  
agitate his shanks

In etiquettish manner in aristocratic ranks

When he’s always been accustomed to shake the heel and toe

At the rattling rancher dances where much etiquette don’t go.

You can bet I set them laughing in quite an excited way,

A-giving of their squinters an astonished sort of play,

When I happened into Denver and was asked to take a prance

In the smooth and easy mazes of a high-toned dance.

But it’s not just a home-bred tradition. Cowboys, as Buck Ramsey liked to say, would argue over how to pronounce “oz.” on a can of tomatoes. Ranch cowboys were great readers, when they had time, shelter, and light, and all they needed were a line shack, a kerosene lamp, and a long winter. Cowboys would read Shakespeare and Homer, five-year-old magazines and newspapers, detective novels, King Arthur stories, the Bible, and, sure enough, cowboy stories—usually with a lot of disbelief and a few chuckles along the way. A lot of this reading found echoes in their poetry, as in Allen McCandless’s “The Cowboy’s Soliloquy,” written sometime in the 1880s:

My ceiling the sky, my carpet the grass,  
My music the lowing of herds as they pass;  
My books are the brooks, my sermons the stones,  
My parson’s a wolf on a pulpit of bones.



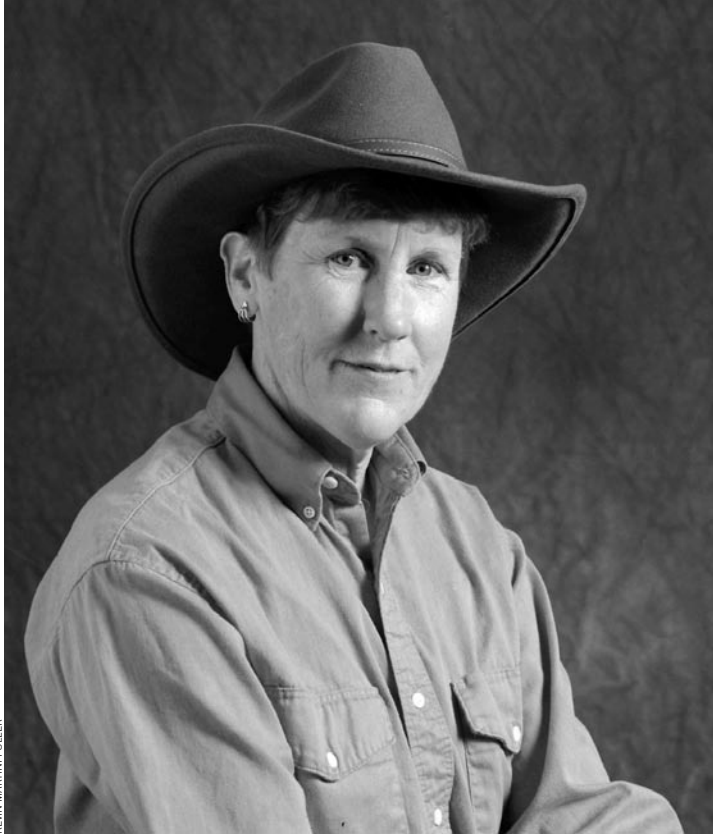
Cowboys gather at the XIT chuck wagon, in Utah or Colorado, ca. 1902. LC Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-74946.

Right, Rodeo poster from Kentucky, ca. 1930s. LC Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZC2-3676



But before that, as ranches were developed with barbed wire, bunkhouses, and line camps, eclectically minded cowpokes with a bit of spare time on their hands had taken the ballad tradition from the British Isles and mixed it in with the poetry and songs of soldiers and sailors and lumbermen, thrown in a dash of popular Victorian poetry that they might have heard recited in school or front parlor, added a lot of their own true-life experiences and a little bit of romanticized cowboy life from magazine articles and dime novels, stirred it all up, and produced cowboy poetry.

And what gave the poems their crackle and zing was the lingo, mostly borrowed from Spanish, a constant testimony to all that the American cowboy learned from the *vaqueros* of Mexico and, before them, the horsemen of Spain and the Moors of north Africa. Whenever you look in a cowboy poem, whatever you hear when you’re around cowboys, Spanish is the home ranch of cowboy talk: remuda and ramada, dally and lariat, chaps and taps, bosal, hackamore, and quirt. A remuda is a herd of horses, a ramada is a brush shelter, a bosal is a braided rawhide nosepiece for a hackamore (which in turn comes from the Spanish *jaquima*, and before that from the Arabic *šakīma*). “Dally,” to wrap a rope around the saddle horn to provide friction, is from “*dale vuelta*,” “to give (or take) a turn,” and “lariat” is a variant of “*la reata*,” “the rope.” “Chaps,” pronounced “shaps,”



KEVIN MARTIN/FULLER

Cowboy Poet Peggy Godfrey.

The imagery is from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, in which Duke Senior, living in the Forest of Arden, says:

And this our life, exempt from public haunt,  
 Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
 Sermons in stones, and good in everything:  
 I would not change it. (II, i, 15-18)

But even though a lot of cowboy poetry was influenced by music—gospel songs, hymns, old ballads, popular songs, vaudeville songs, and music-hall tunes—cowboys were never isolated from other kinds of poetry. They absorbed the popular poetry of their times—at first the long narrative poems of Byron, Tennyson, and Browning, then Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride," "Hiawatha," and "The Courtship of Miles Standish." Some of the New England poets probably got read, too—William Cullen Bryant, John Greenleaf Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes—and the Midwestern poets of the local color tradition such as James Whitcomb Riley, Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, and, later on, Carl Sandburg.

Did cowboy poets read Edgar Allan Poe? Sure. How about Walt Whitman? Some did. T. S. Eliot? Ezra Pound? Probably not—but they devoured (and assimilated) the poets who had powerful rhythms and exacting rhymes and who wrote about outdoor life, human bravery and endurance, and companionship. Think of the British poet of the sea, John Masefield, or Alfred Noyes, who wrote "The Highwayman," or Rudyard Kipling, whose poetry spoke of courage, mobility, and exotic lands. And, most of all, Robert W. Service, with his poems of men battling the elements, hunting for gold, and facing death—and usually finding it—in the Arctic. These tales of adventure and machismo found cowboy equivalents, as in a poem by Charles Badger Clark (1883-1957) called "From Town" (ca. 1906):

We acquired our hasty temper from our friend, the centipede.  
 From the rattlesnake we learnt to guard our rights.  
 We have gathered fightin' pointers from the famous bronco steed  
 And the bobcat taught us reppertee that bites.  
 So when some high-collared herrin' jeered the garb that I was  
 wearin'  
 'Twasn't long till we had got where talkin' ends.  
 And he et his illbred chat, with a sauce of derby hat,  
 While my merry pardners entertained his friends.

But most cowboy poets quickly abandoned such tough talk, and increasingly they wrote poems of memory and nostalgia, as the open range disappeared, trail driving was replaced by railroads and trucks, and the nineteenth-century cowboy aged into reminiscence. Still considered the greatest cowboy poet of them all, Bruce Kiskaddon (1878-1949) spent the last twenty years of his life working as a bellhop in a Beverly Hills hotel, composing, in his spare time, poems about his life on the cattle ranges of Colorado, Arizona, and Australia. His "The Old Night Hawk" (ca. 1924) recreates the musings of the "night hawk," the guard of the remuda, a job often assigned to men who were considered too old to ride the range:

I am up tonight in the pinnacles bold,  
 Where the rim rock towers high;  
 Where the air is clear, and the wind blows cold,  
 And there's only the horses and I.  
 The desert swims like a silver sea,  
 In the light of the big full moon,  
 And strong and clear there comes to me  
 The lilt of the first guard's tune.

The fire at camp is burning bright—  
 Cook's got more wood than he needs.  
 They'll be telling some awful tales tonight  
 Of races and big stampedes.  
 I'm getting too old for that line of talk—  
 The desperaters they knowed,  
 Their wonderful ways to handle stock,  
 And the fellers they've seen git throwed.

The poem concludes with a reference to the traditional proverb, "If you want to dance, you have to pay the fiddler":

The wrangler kid, he's out with his rope—  
 He seldom misses a throw.  
 Will he make a cow-hand? I should hope,  
 If they give him half a show.  
 They're throwin' the rope corral around,  
 The hosses crowd in like sheep.  
 I reckon I'll swaller my breakfast down  
 And try to furgit, and sleep.

Yes, I've lived my life, and I've took my chance,  
 Regardless of law or vow.  
 I've played the game, and I've had my dance,  
 And I'm payin' the fiddler now.

*These "hair chaps," also called "woolies,"  
were made of angora goat hide, ca. 1935.  
AFC Buckaroos in Paradise Collection.*





Rhoda Sivell (1873-1962) struck a similar theme of nostalgia in “They Keep A-Stealing on You in the Night” (ca. 1910):

When you think you have forgotten,  
And have lived the feelings down,  
And have shoved the best that’s in you out of sight;  
You don’t trouble in the daytime,  
When you’re busy up in town,  
But they keep a-stealing on you in the night.  
They keep a-stealing on you  
When the world has gone to rest,  
And bring the past before you bright as day;  
You can hear the horses neighing,  
You can hear the riders whoop,  
In the valley by the river far away.

The theme of the vanishing West—and the vanishing cowboy—has been a constant in cowboy poetry since the nineteenth century, and poets today continue that tradition. But they also remain in touch with modern popular and literary trends. They read and sometimes recite Stephen Vincent Benét, Robert Frost, and Beat poets like Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Even Bob Dylan’s lyrics are heard from time to time, along with environmental poets such as Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry. Like urban poets, cowboy poets are forced to confront the modern world, as Wallace McRae does in his poems about the industrialized strip mining around Colstrip, Montana, near his ranch; or as John Dofflemyer does in his poems about

ranching in the face of explosive population growth in the foothills of the Sierras; or as Peggy Godfrey does in considering the economic pressures afflicting ranchers in “Thoughts on Leaving the Land”:

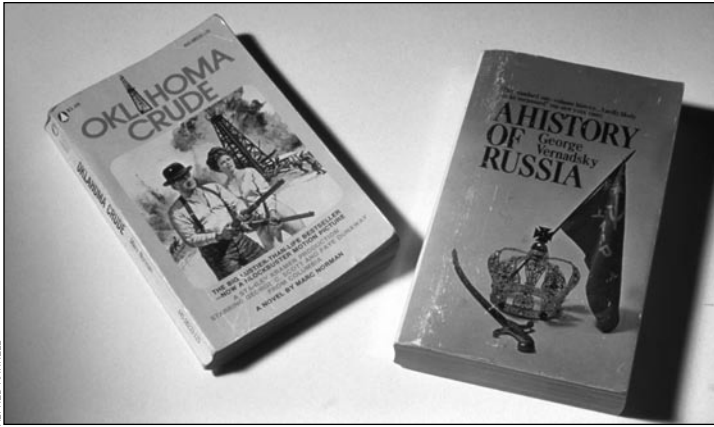
Fields, meadows, streams, reservoirs  
Cow herds, flock of sheep, remuda  
Interwoven community relationships  
With people, pets, wildlife  
WHO I AM is part of that  
Mostly invisible tapestry of wealth  
Inter-relationships with life and death  
Land, season, weather, one another  
And the spirit of the land.

The Elko Gathering—now, thanks to Congress, the “National Cowboy Poetry Gathering”—and the hundreds of other gatherings held all over the West, have changed—no question about it. The poets have changed, the audiences have changed, the poetry itself has changed. Some regret the loss of the good old days; others are energized by the present and hopeful about the future, and the role of cowboy poetry in defining it. It’s important to realize, though, that cowboy poetry, like all forms of folk art, is just as dynamic and changeable as the ranching business. Ranching has seen technology arrive in the form of ATV’s, helicopters, computers, and global positioning systems. Some ranchers are abandoning feed lots and going with leaner, range-fed beef. Some are raising bison, ostriches, emus, llamas, and elk. And some are sitting down with environmen-



Cowboys eat by a chuck wagon in this photo from ca. 1937. The place and photographer are unknown. LC Prints and Photographs Division, LC-USZ62-119371





These two books, found in Nevada cow camps, demonstrate the cowboy's broad taste in reading. AFC Buckaroos in Paradise Collection.

talists and officials from the government and talking hard and long about suburban sprawl, mining and logging, endangered species, failing water supplies, the looting of archeological and historic sites, vandalism and rustling.

Cowboy poetry reflects contemporary life. We don't hear many poems these days mocking environmentalists and vegetarians, and we don't hear much about outlaws, gunplay, or shooting up the town on Saturday night. Cowboy poetry has become a major medium of communication for people in the cattle business, but also for Westerners generally, people who care about the land and its beauty and the ways of life that go with it. Poets perform at stockmen's dinners, county fairs, rodeos, and regional, state, and local poetry gatherings and other festivals that attract locals and visitors alike.

It's not just the content that has changed. The forms of the poetry are more varied, the rhythms are more skillful, the rhymes more exact and more inventive (no more of that "Mr. Ed syndrome," as rodeo poet Paul Zarzyski says, where you always rhyme "horse" with "of course"). Poets have given up strict adherence to ballad form, thanks to the models provided by Charles Badger Clark, Henry Her-

bert Knibbs, and Bruce Kiskaddon, who refused to stick to the same shape and rhyme scheme in every poem. The late National Heritage Fellow Buck Ramsey (1939-1999) even borrowed his stanza form from the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin when he wrote his contemporary classic, "Anthem," which concludes:

So mornings now I'll go out riding  
Through pastures of my solemn plain,  
And leather creaking in the quieting  
Will sound with trot and trot again.  
I'll live in time with horse hoof falling,  
I'll listen well and hear the calling  
The earth, my mother, bids to me,  
Though I will still ride wild and free.  
And as I fly out on the morning  
Before the bird, before the dawn,  
I'll be this poem, I'll be this song.  
My heart will beat the world a warning—  
Those horsemen will ride all with me,  
And we'll be good, and we'll be free.

Thanks to the Gathering, cowboy poetry now has an international perspective. Twenty years ago, to quote rancher, poet, and National Heritage Fellow Wallace McRae, "a bunch of cowboys came together and found out that they'd all written the same poem about their favorite horse." The horizons are wider now, the knowledge deeper. Cowboy poets know a lot more about the Mexican and Spanish origins of the work and the gear. And Westerners are increasingly aware of the range poetry of other places and other peoples and of interests we share in common with Native Americans from the U. S.



Tapaderas, or "taps," are stirrup covers used by cowboys. These examples are both from Nevada and were in use in the 1970s. AFC Buckaroos in Paradise Collection.





RICHARD AHLEBORN

*Pete Pedrol, of Winnemucca, Nevada, demonstrates the type of chaps known as “batwings,” in 1978. AFC Buckaroos in Paradise Collection.*

and Canada, *vaqueros* and *charros* from Mexico, shepherds from the British Isles, drovers and bush poets from Australia, *paniols* from Hawai'i, nomadic herders from Mongolia, *gauchos* from Argentina, Uruguay, and southern Brazil, and—to be featured at the 2007 Gathering—*gardians* from the Camargue in southern France, land of black bulls and white horses. It's an amazing world, especially if you look at it from the back of a horse.

What most people don't realize is that the fertilization goes in both directions, not just one. The popularity of cowboy poetry and other forms of recited poetry may very well be contributing to a renewed interest among mainstream poets in closed forms, regular rhythms, and rhyme. The enormous popularity of poetry slams and performance poetry—and storytelling festivals, for that matter—says something about a developing taste among the public for oral literature recited and performed for live audiences. The massive festival in New York City called the People's Poetry Gathering, organized by the nonprofit organization City Lore, has brought together in the last few years slam poets, performance poets, street poets, cowboy

poets, logger poets, fisher poets, and half a dozen other species.

There's another big change in cowboy poetry as well. Most of the poets who achieved a limited fame in the West before World War II were men, and in the early days, virtually every session at cowboy poetry gatherings highlighted male poets, although women such as Georgie Sicking, Yula Sue Hunting, Gwen Petersen, and a few others demonstrated that women could cowboy—and write about their experiences. Hardly anyone back in the '80s had heard of Sharlot Hall except for the folks from Prescott, Arizona, and absolutely no one had heard of Rhoda Sivell, Canada's first cowboy poet, male or female. Women have stepped into the cowboy world with renewed strength and authority. They run their own ranches, drive trucks, doctor cattle, deliver calves, train colts, and negotiate with buyers. They publish books of poetry and make recordings, perform at and often organize gatherings, appear in anthologies devoted to women poets, and “cowboy up” on the range and on the stage. Women writers have brought to cowboy poetry a deeper sense of the realities of the western life—not just its beauty and its satisfactions, but also the hard realities of isolation, bankruptcy, loneliness, and even abuse. Linda Husa describes a married couple whose ranch has just been foreclosed by the bankers:

The brutal silence of retribution  
of computer models projecting failure to pay  
sell down or else  
as years of work wadded up in pages of red ink.

And when those men are gone  
two stone people  
in bitter silence  
the hurt so deep  
there is no solace  
in each other's arms

Cowboy poetry is not only a hybrid form but a dynamic one as well. Its changes in content, form, mood, and tone reflect its contexts—the economic and political realities of the West, the ebb and flow of popular culture, the influence of other cowboy poets, past and present. It remains a major expressive form in a region of isolation, aridity, and distance, a form that allows Westerners to express their deepest feelings about their lives, their families, their communities, and their futures. ○

*Note: The 23<sup>d</sup> National Cowboy Poetry Gathering will be held in Elko, Nevada, January 27-February 3, 2007. For more information, see the website of the Western Folklife Center, sponsor of the Gathering: [www.westernfolklife.org](http://www.westernfolklife.org).*

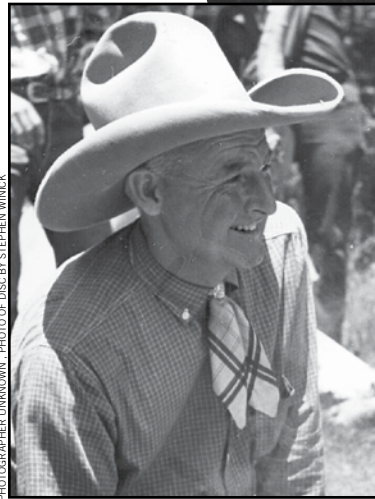
# Long-Lost Twins: the Curious Case of the Romaine Lowdermilk Discs

By Stephen Winick

One of the most interesting pieces of cowboy lore in the American Folklife Center's archive is a 33 rpm, aluminum-based acetate disc containing thirteen songs by the pioneering cowboy performer Romaine "Romy" Lowdermilk (1890-1970). Although known as a singer, a songwriter, and an author of western yarns, Lowdermilk never made any commercial recordings of his music. We assumed that this disc was a one-off recording made at the request of a friend or collector. But on November 29, 2006, an unlikely event occurred: its twin, another disc by Lowdermilk, with identical content, cut some years after ours at the same studio, was identified in Safford, Arizona. Further research revealed that we were dealing with two discs made from the same master recording, and led to the discovery of even more material by Romaine Lowdermilk.

Like many of the treasures in the archive, our Lowdermilk record arrived through the personal connections of a staff member, in this case automation specialist Stephanie Hall. In the mid 1990s, she received an email from her brother, Geoffrey. A resident of Austin, Texas, Geoffrey knew that the Archive collected cowboy lore. When a friend at work mentioned a recording, owned by an uncle, of an unusual cowboy singer named "Romy Lowdermilk," he contacted Stephanie by email.

"From my brother's email this recording sounded like it might be appropriate for our archive," Hall remembered. "We do have quite a good representation of traditional cowboy songs in our collection, but I didn't know anything about this singer. I went to



PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN. PHOTO OF DISC BY STEPHEN WINICK

see the director of AFC at the time, Alan Jabbour. I poked my head in his office and asked him if we might want a recording of a cowboy singer called Romy Lowdermilk. 'Romy Lowdermilk!' he exclaimed, 'who's got a recording of Romy Lowdermilk?'"

Jabbour took Hall into the archive and showed her a copy of the book *Git Along, Little Dogies: Songs and Songmakers of the American West* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), written by Lowdermilk's friend John I. White. The book features a chapter on Lowdermilk and a picture of his cowboy band. Hall replied to her brother, who contacted his coworker, John Waite, and Waite's uncle, Edgar Gerould. A deal was worked out: Waite had the disc digitized and much of the surface noise removed by Austin-based sound engineer John Nash, and the original disc came to the American Folklife Center in 1999, as a generous gift of Mr. Gerould. AFC also received a CD copy, as did both Waite and Gerould.

The songs on the AFC disc are a cross-section of traditional cowboy tunes, including "Tyin' Knots in the Devil's Tail," "The Dude

Wrangler," "Jake & Roany," "New Strawberry Roan," "José Carlos' Daughter," "Cowboy's Lament," and the seven visible in the photo above.

Until recently, AFC staff believed that this disc was a unique record of an individual recording session. The newly discovered twin, however, made that scenario unlikely. That disc came to my attention during routine research on Lowdermilk for this article. On November 26, 2006, Arizona Republic columnist Clay Thompson published a letter from a reader who had found an LP of Lowdermilk and wanted to know more about it. Thompson was able to find a good deal of information on Lowdermilk himself, but nothing at all about the LP. Running across this column, three days after it had been published, I contacted Thompson, who put me in touch with Norm Johnson, owner of the second Lowdermilk disc. Johnson kindly sent me photos of his disc. On the photos I was able to read the center labels, from which I determined that it contained exactly the same songs, in the same running order, as our disc. Furthermore, although the studios



Left: Romaine Lowdermilk in the 1950s. AFC Ray M. Lawless Collection. Above: AFC's Romaine Lowdermilk disc.



listed on the two discs had different names, both had the same Phoenix address. Johnson later informed me that it was the same studio: Ramsey's Recording Studio became Audio Recorders of Arizona in 1957. The AFC's disc, made at Ramsey's, was therefore the older of the two. Given what I knew by the 30th of November, it seemed most likely that we were dealing with two separate discs representing the same recording session.

A day later, confirmation came in the form of another email message. In looking for more information on Lowdermilk, I had contacted the Arizona Music and Entertainment Hall of Fame. One of the organization's founders, Arizona music historian John P. Dixon, returned my note. Dixon is in contact with Tim Ramsey, son of the owner of Ramsey's Recording Studio, where the original recording

took place. According to Dixon, Lowdermilk sat for two recording sessions with Tim's father Floyd Ramsey, a well known Phoenix record producer. Each session was recorded onto a 7-inch reel of tape. "As people asked for copies," Dixon explained, "[Lowdermilk] would just ask Floyd to make an acetate of the songs to sell to them. They were never pressed, as you noted. The tape with ten songs would fit on a ten-inch blank and the thirteen-song tape would need a twelve-inch blank for the songs to fit." The most exciting thing about Dixon's account is the fact that, in his words, "There are two 7-inch tapes, one with ten songs and one with thirteen songs, both recorded in 1951." This means that in addition to our thirteen songs, there are another ten recordings of Romaine Lowdermilk, now in the possession of Tim Ramsey.

None of this would be very significant, except that Lowdermilk's performances are both artistically and historically interesting. "What is most memorable about the disc is that Romaine Lowdermilk has a wonderful voice," Hall said. "He also presents the lyrics so that they are as fresh and accessible today as when he first sang them. Some of the songs he sings are standards of the genre today, but in some cases the tunes or the lyrics are a bit different." Historically, the recordings are important because, while Lowdermilk himself was a pioneering performer

and a hit songwriter in the genre of cowboy music, he was seldom recorded.

Lowdermilk filled out a questionnaire for the folksong scholar Ray M. Lawless in 1954, which came to the AFC archive in 1970 as part of the Ray M. Lawless Collection. Visitors to the Center can consult this first-hand account of the cowboy singer's career. Born in 1890 in Chetopa, Kansas, Lowdermilk began learning songs "by ear around ranches and cow-camps." A lifelong rancher and amateur singer, Lowdermilk wrote and published a number of cowboy



Letterhead from the Arizona dude ranch at which Lowdermilk worked in 1954. AFC Ray M. Lawless Collection.

songs, including "Back to Arizona" (which was performed by Patsy Montana as "Back to Old Montana"), "Mr. Cowboy Goes to Town," and "Rodeo Parade." However, Lowdermilk is clear about one point: he never made any commercial recordings of his music.

Lowdermilk ends the questionnaire with a moving summation of his life as a cowboy:

*I was just lucky to be born early enough to get acquainted with some of the cowboys who had worked the ranges through the '70s and '80s. To see occasional actual long-horns on the open range. To see cattle bred up into white-face range cattle and then sideways into anything else. Saw the open range and big round-ups and drives. Now the improved methods. Saw the old backyard Cowboy Reunion commercialized into the modern rodeo. Saw bands of wild horses on several ranges of both mountain and plain and the gradual change to the genuine Spanish Mustang, through the Bronco era to fine quarter-horses, and am now seeing quarter-horses ruined by too much thoroughbred blood. Have seen altered brands, cow thieves, black-leg, ticks, pink-eye, screw worms, bad men in high places and good men on the dodge, stampedes, range arguments, water troubles, storms, droughts, and lots of fine sunshine and fair weather when "Everything's lovely and nothing is wrong And I'm just lazy-like, lopin' along."*

*Git Along, Little Dogies* fills out more details of Lowdermilk's career. His main vocation was in operating dude ranches, a fitting career for a man with great skills as both a cowboy and an entertainer. Through visits to the ranches where he worked, many tourists became familiar with Lowdermilk, singing around the campfire at night. Lowdermilk also did a two-year stint as a professional entertainer at the Arizona Biltmore Hotel, in Phoenix, from 1928 until 1930. In addition to singing and songwriting, Lowdermilk was known for writing novellas, and one of his works, *Tucker's Top Hand*, was made into a silent film in Hollywood in 1924.

Most importantly, White's book establishes that Lowdermilk wrote the words to a popular cowboy song often taken to be traditional, "The Big Corral." Borrowing the tune from the spiritual "Press Along to Glory

Land," Lowdermilk wrote the words for a local talent show in 1922, to make fun of himself and other residents of Hassayampa, Arizona. The song was first published in a 1929 song folio by White himself, who neglected to credit Lowdermilk. Its appearance alongside other traditional songs in White's folio created the impression that the song was traditional. From there, other collections, recordings, and even textbooks picked up the song and listed it as a traditional folksong. White, writing after Lowdermilk's death, repeats Lowdermilk's own point from the 1954 questionnaire: "For some reason, Romaine himself never made any commercial recordings of the songs he loved to sing." White was correct in this, but we now know that Lowdermilk did make two cowboy albums, which were cut on demand by the Ramseys and given or sold to Lowdermilk's friends and acquaintances.

In learning about the Lowdermilk sessions, we have also found a worthy addition to the Archive; through Dixon, Tim Ramsey has indicated that he is willing to lend AFC the original master tapes for us to copy. We hope that this will come to fruition, so that we can provide researchers with better-quality copies of the thirteen songs we currently possess, as well as ten more songs by Lowdermilk. In the meantime, visitors to the Center can hear the original Lowdermilk disc, and consult our files of writings about this important singer and songwriter. ○

# “A Big, Breezy, Wholesome, Smiling Man”: Captain Pearl R. Nye Goes Online

By John Barton and Stephen Winick

This fall, the American Folklife Center will release a new American Memory presentation called *Captain Pearl R. Nye: Life on the Ohio and Erie Canal*. The heart of this online collection consists of digitized versions of seventy-four manuscripts and twenty-two audio discs; the manuscripts consist of transcribed lyrics and personal correspondence, and the discs contain a total of seventy-five songs. Through Captain Nye’s letters and songs, the presentation captures the culture and music of the men, women, and children who worked and lived along the Ohio and Erie Canal, which connected Ohio with points east from 1825 until 1913.

Pearl R. Nye was born on the canal boat *Reform* near Chillicothe, Ohio, on February 5, 1872, and grew up on the canal. His parents were William and Mary Nye, who owned and operated several canal boats, including the *Reform*. Although he came from a large family (he was the fifteenth of eighteen children), Nye never married or had a family of his own. He lived and worked on the canal and eventually became captain of one of his family’s boats after his father died. Pearl happily continued in this role until the canal ceased operating in 1913.

Traffic on the canal peaked during the 1850s, and steadily declined for the next sixty years. This was due, in large part, to the ever-increasing presence of the railroad, which provided faster, more reliable, and less expensive shipping services than did the canal boats. Canal operations were often interrupted due to freezing or flooding and repairs could take months, causing significant delays in shipments. Eventually, the cost of maintaining the canal became too much to bear. Severe flooding in the spring of 1913 created widespread and extensive damage to the canal, which led to its closure.

After the canal closed, Nye followed several pursuits including carpentry, writing, and singing at local establishments around Akron, Ohio. However, he never lost his love of the “Big Ditch,” and devoted



*Pearl R. Nye at “Camp Charming,” the home he constructed on an abandoned canal lock near Roscoe, OH. It was partially constructed from an old canal boat. AFC Captain Pearl R. Nye Collection.*

considerable time and energy to preserving its songs and stories. In the 1930s, Nye contacted local historical organizations and libraries about preserving his materials and collaborated with an author to write a book about his life on the canal.

Characterized by folklorist Rebecca Schroeder as “an informant in search of a collector,” Nye had a large repertoire of traditional lyrics and music, and wrote his own songs as well. Nye’s constant advocacy for the history and culture of the canal brought him to the attention of an Akron newspaper reporter, who in turn alerted Library of Congress fieldworker John A. Lomax. In June 1937, Lomax traveled to Akron and recorded thirty-three of Nye’s songs, along with Nye’s spoken commentary, for the Library of Congress. His opinion of Nye is made clear in a segment of his “Ballad Hunter” radio series from 1941, which is also included in the online presentation. In this segment, Lomax recalls his visit with Nye, calling the captain “a big, breezy, wholesome, smiling man.” Lomax’s praise for Nye continues: “The Library of Congress has eighty-three versions of ‘Barbara Allen,’ but none is more beautiful than the tune Captain Nye sang for me.” In November 1937, Alan and Elizabeth Lomax recorded thirty-nine more songs from Captain Nye, and in September 1938, Ivan Walton



The writer and boat  
of the Canalboat  
is Akron. The boat  
is - Canalboat  
"Ahron" - low down  
I had to throw most  
of my weight on right  
side - as "Hammer"  
(plank-appearing  
substance) would  
not bear me - things  
in 1912. What a mess

give them! Many people are  
calling for those "Big Days"  
all up and down the State  
these days - and a "bird" is be-  
ing introduced to make a lunch  
Dad along the Canal from to  
to Cleveland - if the Canal  
will have good water.

Pearl R. Nye in both portrait and full-length views. A note on the back of the photo at right suggests that it has been printed in mirror-image, and that the buildings to the left are the B.F. Goodrich Co. The notes at right are in Nye's hand. AFC Captain Pearl R. Nye Collection.

recorded three additional songs. The recordings were made in Akron, Ohio, and are all included in this online presentation.

Like these collectors in the 1930s, any contemporary researcher or performer looking for unusual folk music will find a lot of interesting and beautiful material in this collection. There are audio files of Nye singing uncommon versions of many well-known folksongs, including classic British ballads (e.g., "The Demon Lover," "The Wife Wrapped in Wether's Skin," and "Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard"); broadside ballads of British origin (e.g., "The Butcher Boy," "Banks of the Sweet Dundee," and two very different variants of "The Unfortunate Rake"); American historical ballads (e.g., "The Cumberland's Crew," and "Perry's Victory"); animal ballads (e.g., "Who Killed Cock Robin?" and "Mr. Frog"); lyric love songs (e.g., "Early in the Spring" and "Dark-Eyed Sailor"); comic songs (e.g., "The Bald-Headed End of the Broom" and "I Owed Ten Dollars to O'Grady"); songs from minstrel shows (e.g., "Jawbone Walk, Jawbone Talk" and "Dandy Jim of Caroline"); and spirituals (e.g., "The Gospel Train" and "The Resurrection Car.") In addition, there are purely local songs of canal life, such as "Take a Trip on the Canal" and "We're Going to Pump Out Lake Erie." Lyrics to all the songs have been transcribed by Library of Congress staff and are available as a complement to the audio files.

In addition to singing these songs, Nye transcribed hundreds of others and sent the words to the Library of Congress. Nye's transcriptions are titled "Song Transcriptions by Pearl R. Nye" and appear as manuscript items in the presentation. One of the notable aspects of these transcriptions is that Nye taped them together creating

"scrolls"—the longest in this collection is approximately 14 feet. In this part of the collection, once again, researchers will find very unusual versions of traditional songs; for example, Nye's version of "A Man You Don't Meet Every Day," a well-known drinking song of Scottish origin, contains the verses

I am an old skipper but I love my clipper  
Whatever her speed by the way  
I'm most democratic but never dogmatic  
I love the bright sunshine each day  
So fill up your glasses and have one with me  
Whatever the damage I'll pay  
But be easy and free when you're drinking with me  
I'm the man you don't meet every day

Nye was also a prolific letter-writer, and he corresponded with the Lomaxes frequently after meeting them in 1937. Many of Nye's letters to the Library are included in the presentation as well, along with a timeline and a brief silent film clip of Nye at the 1938 National Folk Festival in Washington, D.C.

This online collection does not exhaust the riches of Pearl Nye's repertoire. The American Folklife Center also has microfilms of a manuscript estimated to be several hundred pages in length. This manuscript, created by Nye, includes transcriptions of many more songs; it is not currently available in any other format. Nevertheless, the digitized parts of Nye's collection provide a fascinating snapshot of the repertoire of an extraordinary singer, and intriguing insights into the culture of the Ohio and Erie Canal, a way of life that vanished long ago. ○



# The Veterans History Project at the National Book Festival.

By Anneliesa Clump

Staff from the American Folklife Center's Veterans History Project (VHP) took part in the 2006 National Book Festival. The festival, organized and sponsored by the Library of Congress and hosted by First Lady Laura Bush, was held on Saturday, Sept. 30, 2006, on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. It was free and open to the public.

An extensive VHP area was located in the festival's Library of Congress pavilion, where staff members shared highlights from the collection with the festival's many visitors, and encouraged veterans and their families to record their wartime stories. In addition, VHP conducted a variety of programs throughout the day to interpret and explain the project's collections and its mission. They included the following:

- High school teacher Marty Potts, accompanied by a student, demonstrated how to conduct an oral history interview. Their interview subject was Ezra Hill, who served as a Tuskegee airman. Following his interview, Hill signed copies of his book, *The Black Red Tail Angels*, in the pavilion.

- Author and VHP historian Tom Wiener interviewed Darlene Iskra, who served in the Persian Gulf War and was the first woman to command a ship in the U.S. Navy. Her story is among those included in the VHP's second compilation of war stories, *Forever a Soldier*, whose paperback edition was unveiled at the festival.

- VHP Director Bob Patrick interviewed Kevin Hymel, author of *Patton's Photographs: War as He Saw It*, a book containing hundreds of pictures shot by controversial General George S. Patton, whose collection resides in the Library of Congress.

- Daun Van Ee, a military historian in the Library's Manuscript Division, moderated a panel of authors, which included Donald L. Miller (*Masters of the Air: America's*



VHP director Bob Patrick (l.) interviews author Kevin Hymel.

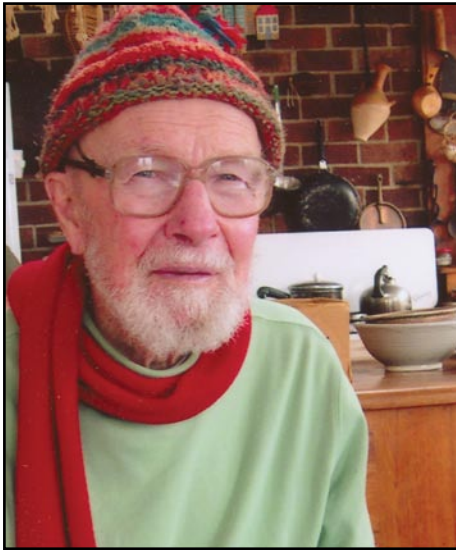


Author and veteran Ezra Hill signs copies of his book, *The Black Red Tail Angels*.

*Bomber Boys Who Fought the Air War Against Nazi Germany*), and Rick Newman and Don Shepperd (*Bury Us Upside Down: The Misty Pilots and the Secret Battle for*

*the Ho Chi Minh Trail*). They discussed their own books, as well as the insights their research gave them into the situation of today's military. ○

# Seeger Concert and Symposium, March 15-16, 2007.



Pete, Mike and Peggy Seeger, along with many scholars, musicians and friends, will be joining AFC and the Library's Music Division for a tribute to the Seeger family on March 15-16, 2007. Panelists will discuss Charles and Ruth Crawford Seeger, as well as Pete, Peggy and Mike Seeger, and their impact on American music and cultural life. The events are free and open to the public, but registration is limited, and on a first-come, first-served basis. Please visit our website for more details: [www.loc.gov/folklife/](http://www.loc.gov/folklife/)



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