

## SONGS FROM WESTERN CANADA

MICHAEL J. WEISS

*Weiss:* Could you sing me any ranching songs?

*Patton:* Oh I don't know. It wouldn't be any good. Sometimes I can remember singin' to myself hours at a time. On the other hand, sometimes I can't remember nothing to sing.

It was only after ninety-six year-old Tom Patton gave me this apology and slammed the door so no one would hear that he let loose with a half-a-dozen square-dance calls and a bawdy chant about a cowboy's hardships. His singing performance, however, was well worth the wait – for quantity as well as quality. Throughout the summer of 1971 I had encountered only three other singers while recording the gold miners and ranchers along the Rockies between Alberta and British Columbia; the rest of my tapes contained oral narratives in the form of stories, personal histories, and anecdotes.<sup>1</sup>

In this article, I will present the songs that I recorded<sup>2</sup> and a brief commentary about each singer. Since the paucity of my data will not support any generalizations concerning the genre of song in western Canada, I shall gladly take a back seat as an analyst and let the lyrics speak for themselves. As a whole, they represent modern versions of North American songs that were popular at the turn of the century. While I have not been able to discern the origins of every tune, all of the informants conceded that they had had contact with early phonograph records, so the histories of some of these songs have probably included a rendition from a record player.

And now for the singers and their songs. . .

– Tom Patton –

From cook to boss, Tom Patton has worked on a dozen ranches, at different times raising sheep, cattle, and horses. He was born in Virginia in 1876 and made his way to the ranches of western Canada while still a teen-ager. For many years he was a square-dance caller around Dog Creek, B.C., where dances were held “two nights in a row”. And when he wasn't calling, he would often sing for the ranch cowboys – an activity which created a bit of friendly trouble after working an eighteen-hour day:

I was camped one night, right close to town. I was cookin' that time for the cowboys. And I was layin' in the tent singin' and a couple of them came in; and there's about a half dozen in town. And they

<sup>1</sup>My folklore project in western Canada was carried out with the sponsorship of the University of Maryland's General Honors Program. Currently the original tape recordings and accompanying transcriptions are housed in the Maryland Folklore Archives. In this article, all future references to the data collected will be noted by the cassette on which the material was recorded.

<sup>2</sup>A special thanks goes to my friend and colleague, Sharon Gnatt, who furnished the musical notations for each song. Her patience and assistance were invaluable during this transcribing process.

come in and sit down. I sang a song or two for them and one of them took his six-shooter off and lays it down beside of me on the bed.

He says, "Them fellers will come in from town. You just take this and tell 'em to get the hell out." Well, they come by and they saw me layin' down with that thing on my hand and they never said nothing; pulled the flap shut. I never heard a sound. (Tape 12; Side 1)

I recorded Mr. Patton on July 26, 1971, in Kamloops, B.C. when he gave me his version of "The Horse Wrangler" (also known as "The Tenderfoot") and six square-dance calls. Those familiar with "The Horse Wrangler" will note the language differences between Mr. Patton's view of the infamous Brown and earlier versions from the 1890's. While boss Brown was formerly presented as telling the tenderfoot,

*"And you're doin' fine," says Brown.  
"And if tomorrow you don't die,  
I'll have another for to try,"<sup>3</sup>*

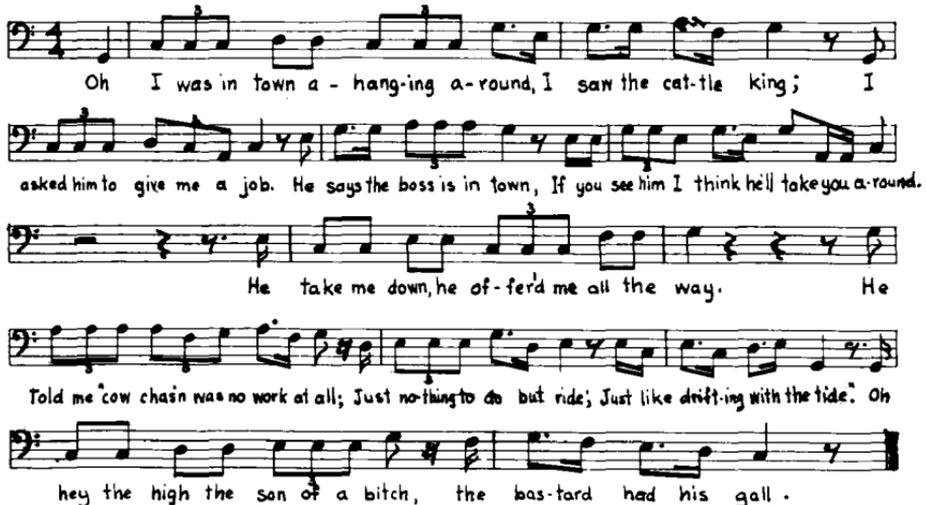
Mr. Patton's boss is portrayed in a vulgar vein:

*Says Brown, "You're doin' well.  
And if you don't dodge it more,  
Then all God's shit we'll give you for to try."*

Of the six pieces of square-dance calls that Mr. Patton sang, the third and fourth texts seem closely related to excerpts from "Old Arkansaw" and "Lady Go 'Round and the Gent Cut Through". The rest of the calls have been amassed over the years from popular and original sources. One comment indicates that Mr. Patton created some of these calls himself:

I called one out here one night, "Swing the heifers in the center and the stags outside," and some of the girls didn't like that. Oh, I used to call a lot of them.

### "THE HORSE WRANGLER"



Oh I was in town a - hang-ing a - round, I saw the cat-tle king; I  
asked him to give me a job. He says the boss is in town, If you see him I think he'll take you a - round.  
He take me down, he of-fer'd me all the way. He  
Told me 'cow chain was no work at all; Just no-thing to do but ride; Just like drift-ing with the tide.' Oh  
hey the high the son of a bitch, the bas-tard had his gall.

<sup>3</sup>Jules Verne Allen, *Cowboy Lore*, San Antonio: The Naylor Co., 1933, pp. 93-5.

He put me in charge of a cattle yard,  
 And told me not to work too hard.  
 All I had to do was mind a horse from getting away  
 I had three hundred and seventy head,  
 And oft times wished that I was dead.  
 If one was to get away, then hell would be to pay.  
 They saddled me up on an old gray hack  
 With two set tracks on his back.  
 They padded him down with a gunny sack, my bed he'd  
 taken all.  
 He left the ground and when I came down  
 I got an awful fall.  
 They carried me out and rubbed me down  
 With an iron stake pin.  
 (Chorus was chanted)  
 Says Brown, "You're doin' well.  
 And if you don't dodge it more  
 Then all God's shit we'll give you for to try."  
 "Oh can I walk?"  
 "Yes." I bound back to town.

## SQUARE DANCE CALLS

1.



First la-dy out to the right and swiag the man that stole the sheep. Now the one that ate the meat



Now the one that gnawed the bone, Now the one that'll take you home. Everybody swing.

2.



Ev'-ry bo-dy dance, if you cant dance pret-ty dance pret-ty as you can.



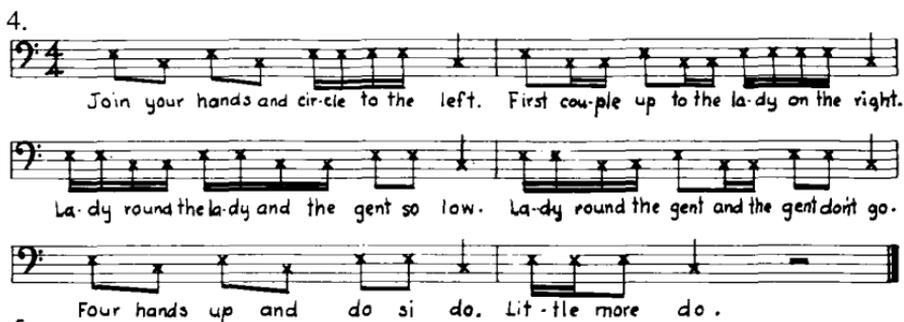
Dont for-get that left al-le-mande, And the right and left grand.

3.



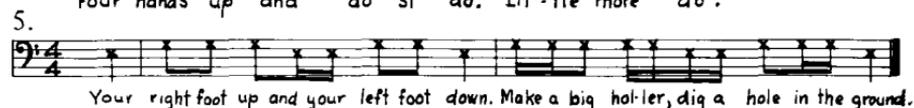
First la-dy out to the right, Swing grand-ma and now grand-pa and dont for-get old Ar-kan-saw.

4.



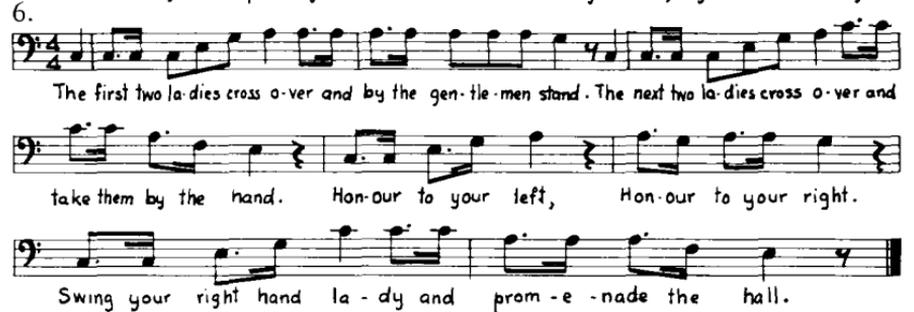
Join your hands and circle to the left. First couple up to the lady on the right.  
 Lady round the lady and the gent so low. Lady round the gent and the gent don't go.  
 Four hands up and do si do. Lit-tle more do.

5.



Your right foot up and your left foot down. Make a big holler, dig a hole in the ground.

6.



The first two ladies cross o-ver and by the gen-tle-men stand. The next two la-dies cross o-ver and  
 take them by the hand. Hon-our to your left, Hon-our to your right.  
 Swing your right hand la-dy and prom-e-nade the hall.

— J. Angus McKinnon —

The son of a pioneer rancher on the Alberta prairie, J. Angus McKinnon has led a varied life in addition to working his family's grain and cattle ranch. He has been active in the local government of Calgary in recent years as well as administrating a provincial oil development company. An avid historian, Mr. McKinnon has already published one book about the development of the McKinnon and neighbouring ranches, and was working on a second when I recorded him on August 17, 1971.

During the interview, three songs were taped: one original and two popular tunes. Although Mr. McKinnon has rarely performed before audiences in the past,<sup>4</sup> he has sometimes composed lyrics to celebrate a birthday or similar occasion. The wedding anniversary of his ranch neighbours, the Evanses, prompted his writing of "The Mansion by the Bow," sung to the tune of "The Little Old Sod Shanty."<sup>5</sup> In this composition, the lyrics of a pioneer's hard life in "the sod shanty on my claim" are ironically

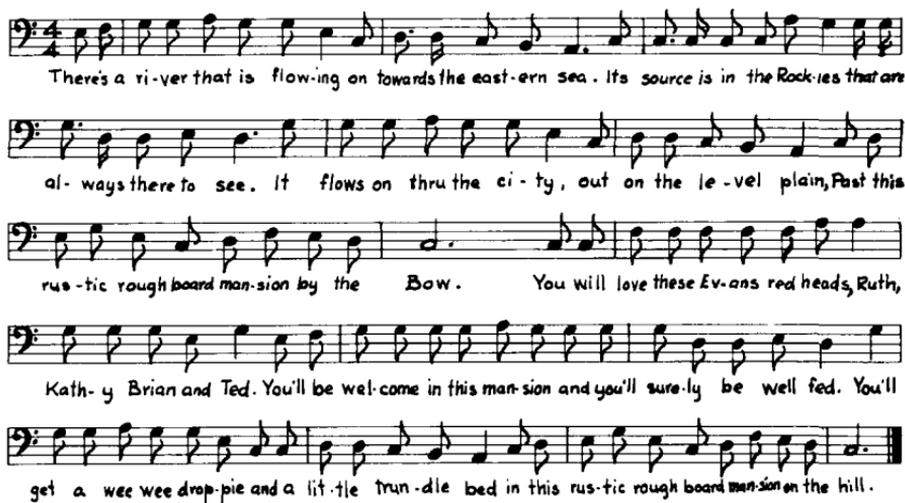
<sup>4</sup>Mr. McKinnon consented to my recording his singing on the condition that I "don't play them (the recordings) for the President of the United States, or he might send me off to Vietnam."

<sup>5</sup>Allen, p. 109.

transformed into the splendor of “the rustic rough-board mansion” of the Evans’ Bow River ranch.

The other songs are his renditions of American pieces that were popular at the turn of the century. Mr. McKinnon’s version of “The Last Great Round-Up”<sup>6</sup> (also known as “The Cowboy’s Heaven”) was similar to a number of offshoots sung throughout Texas and the Southwest between 1890 and 1922.<sup>7</sup> “The Preacher and the Bear,” was composed in 1904 by Joe Arzonio of Philadelphia.<sup>8</sup> Both of these songs, he explained, were learned “from the old phonograph, years and years ago.” (Tape 1, Side 1)

#### “THE MANSION BY THE BOW”



There's a ri-ver that is flow-ing on to-wards the east-ern sea. Its source is in the Rock-ies that are  
al-ways there to see. It flows on thru the ci - ty, out on the le - vel plain, Past this  
rus-tic rough board man-sion by the Bow. You will love these Ev-ans red heads, Ruth,  
Kath- y Brian and Ted. You'll be wel- come in this man-sion and you'll sure-ly be well fed. You'll  
get a wee wee drop-pie and a lit-tle trun-dle bed in this rus-tic rough board man-sion on the hill.

*You might see the hungry coyote as he sneaks up  
through the grass.*

*He may also be howling on the hill.*

*You'll enjoy the evening silence, just before the  
setting sun.*

*In this rustic, rough-board mansion by the Bow.*

*The cattle will be grazing in contentment on the flat.*

*The calves will be a-crawling through the fence.*

*The corn will be a-bloomin' and a-fillin' later on,*

*Near this rustic rough-board mansion by the Bow.*

<sup>6</sup>“The Cowboy’s Heaven” is found in Margaret Larkin, *Singing Cowboy*, N.Y.: Oak Publications, 1963, p. 106.

<sup>7</sup>Larkin, p. 109.

<sup>8</sup>Newman White, *American Negro Folk-Songs*, Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates, Inc., 1965, p. 40.

## “THE LAST GREAT ROUND-UP”

Two staves of musical notation in 6/8 time. The first staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat. The melody is written in eighth and quarter notes. The lyrics are: "Last night as I lay on the prai-rie,— I gazed at the stars in the sky.— I". The second staff continues the melody and lyrics: "won-dered if e-ver a cow-boy Would land in that sweet by and by."

*They say there will be a great round-up,  
Where cowboys like dogies will stand,  
To be cut by the riders from heaven,  
Who are noted and know every brand.*

*The road that leads down to perdition  
Is narrow and dim so they say.  
And the road that leads up to God's kingdom,  
Is staked out and blazed all the way.*

*I wonder if ever a cowboy,  
Would prepare for that great judgment day,  
Could say to the boss of the riders,  
"I'm ready to be driven away."*

*They say we will never forsake you,  
For He knows every action and look.  
So for safety you'd better be branded,  
And have your name in the old valley book.*

## “THE PREACHER AND THE BEAR”

(Ed. note: The tune to which this song was sung is the one most commonly used and as it was learned from a phonograph record it is not reproduced here. The words show some minor variations.)

*Oh, the preacher went a-hunting; 'twas on a Sunday morn.  
It was against his religion, but he took his gun along.  
He shot himself some very fine quail and a wise and a measly  
hare,  
And on his way returning home met a great big grizzly bear.  
The bear stood up on his hind legs, and went for the  
coon, you see.*

*The coon got so excited, he climbed up a cinnamon tree.  
The bear walked out on the middle of the road, and  
the coon climbed out on a limb.  
And he raised up his eyes to the gods in the skies  
and these words said to him:*

*Oh, Lord, did you deliver Daniel from the lion's den,  
Also deliver Jonah from the belly of the whale, and then*

*The Hebrew children from the fiery furnace as the good book do declare.*

*Oh, Lord, if you don't help me, for goodness sakes, don't help that bear.*

— Jens Hansen —

Jens Hansen has been finding gold — accidentally or on purpose — since a morning in 1929 when he chanced upon his first nugget in British Columbia. In his own words, he had found his profession:

I didn't know the first thing about the ground up here. And I'm down there, panning. I got maybe ten cents in the pan. But I took my cigarette, it's all soaking wet, and I put it right on a ten dollar nugget.

I says, "Hi!"

From then on, I looked for nuggets. (Tape 2; Side 1)

He is still popularized for the \$500 strike he dug up in 1937, and has earned the name "Lucky Swede" throughout the Cariboo area of B.C. (although he was actually born in Norway). Immigrating to Canada when he was nineteen, he has been placer mining ever since he first set foot in British Columbia in 1929.

I recorded these parts of songs on July 6, 1971, in Wells, B.C. Although I am uncertain about the origins of both songs, Lucky commented that he learned them "off an old music box. We used to sing them a lot during the 'hungry thirties' up here."

1.



There's gold up-on the Tu-la-meen, Plati-num in the sun. Fish-es in the ri-ver and there's  
years up-on the land. — Ber-ries for your pick-in; And there's grou-s-es at your door; There's a  
dear — old Pol — ly, Why go roam - ing a - ny more.

2.



I'm on-ly a cra-zy old muck-er. — My life in the mines — I spent.  
Freed, fooled for a suck-er — And my back, she is ti-red and spent.

*No peaday was my heyday, as beer and rum I did drink.  
Wake up in the morning, drunk, feeling punk.  
I scoffed a man in that office, I called him belittlin'  
names,  
But I realized as I grew older, I just might back  
where he is his grave.  
I can see my last days, they're nearing; I can see them  
only so clear,  
When I been working, sweating, swearing, with a pick  
and a shovel in hell.*

*Silver Springs, Maryland*

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Résumé: *M. Weiss, qui étudie le folklore à l'Université de Maryland, a effectué des recherches au Canada, au cours de l'été 1971. Aux frontières de l'Alberta et de la Colombie-Britannique, il a enregistré sur bandes sonores, des interviews qu'il a eus avec un certain nombre de fermiers et de fouilleurs des mines d'or. Dans cet article, il présente les chants et les appels des danses carrées qu'il a recueillis auprès d'eux.*

## **A REFERENCE LIST ON CANADIAN FOLK MUSIC**

The following is a revised and updated version of the reference list prepared for the Canadian Folk Music Society by Barbara Cass-Beggs and Edith Fowke in 1966. It is selective rather than complete: it includes most books of traditional songs and records by traditional singers, along with representative articles on various aspects of Canadian folk music, and some folk-song records by non-traditional singers. A more detailed bibliography of both published and unpublished material is planned for the future.

The published material has been divided into language groupings, and general works that include songs in two or more languages have been included in the English section. Asterisks indicate items which include more extensive bibliographies.

The list of compositions based on folk music is necessarily limited, but it includes most published works, and some unpublished works available through the Canadian Music Centre, 1263 Bay Street, Toronto, Ontario. The Music Centre can also supply information about other unpublished compositions. (For this section we are indebted to Henry Mutsaers.)