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Review of *The Ranchers: A Book of Generations* By Stan Steiner

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lapsed in various sections of a country cemetery after a full-blown drunk. One of the celebrants had fallen into a two-foot depression of a collapsed grave and there slept off his condition. He woke up at the crack of dawn, sat up in the grave, surveyed his situation, and shouted, "Hurray! It's Halleluja Morning and I'm the first one here!"

In *The Ranchers* Steiner presents us with a long, fragmented, maudlin obituary for a culture just about as moribund as that cowboy. He jumps from one narrator to another in an erratic manner that reduces the book to bathroom reading.

We are given only the vaguest impression of ranching and ranchers, and an incorrect impression at that. These ranchers and Steiner, unlike ranchers I know, are in a constant funk, lamenting the loss of those good old days. Steiner and his informants seem to accept the conclusions of all those movies in which the nesters—hardy yeomen—push fences and thus civilization right over the top of the wild and free cattlemen. Well, look again. After spending a futile year or two trying to farm ranch land, a good proportion of those frontier dirt farmers sold out, and the land then reverted to grassland ranching. Steiner is like some of my Nebraska students who, straining at making Nebraska modern, laugh at the European or easterner who is silly enough to think there are still cowboys and Indians in Nebraska—missing the point that there are indeed cowboys and Indians in Nebraska. If you close your eyes, you can make anything disappear, and in this book Steiner has closed his eyes to a vital and vibrant American subculture.

He has neither employed the techniques of scientific oral historians nor taken advantage of the freedom of the popular oral historian. The result is a confusion, with little poetry, little substance. *The Ranchers* serves no audience well.

The Ranchers: A Book of Generations. By Stan Steiner. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980. Illustrations. 241 pp. \$13.95.

There is a story in the Wyoming WPA files (for which I thank James Dow of Iowa State University) about some cowboys who col-

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