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John A Lomax: Documenting the Myth of the American West

Katherine Hinchliffe Gschwend
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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JOHN A. LOMAX: DOCUMENTING THE MYTH OF THE AMERICAN WEST

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies

The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

by

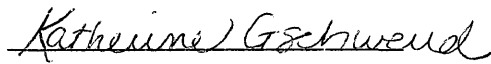
Katherine Gschwend

1995

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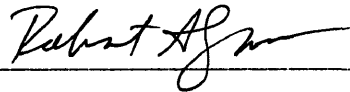
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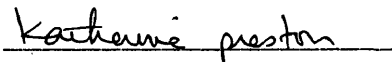


Katherine Gschwend

Approved, May 1995



Robert Gross



Katherine Preston



Kenneth Price

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to develop a cultural context for two collections of cowboy songs compiled by John A. Lomax in the early twentieth century, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (1910) and *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp* (1919). This work describes the contents of the collections and delineates the origins, forms, and social functions of cowboy songs. It addresses Lomax's collection methods and editorial decisions. This paper examines Lomax's expressed desire to document the "reality" of the American West with music and, by examining the representations of women found in the cowboys' repertoire, asserts that Lomax failed to achieve this goal. It analyzes the public reception of Lomax's collections and concludes that the popularity of cowboy song lyrics reflected early twentieth-century anti-modern sentiments and anxieties concerning the rapid social changes caused by industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. "John A. Lomax: Documenting the Myth of the American West" demonstrates that Lomax's work is a valuable mirror of the national consciousness at a particular historical moment. His collections record the American public's sense of loss at the perceived disappearance of the American frontier.

JOHN A. LOMAX: DOCUMENTING THE MYTH OF THE AMERICAN WEST

In the summer of 1908, with a fifty-pound recording machine balanced on the pommel of his saddle and a recording horn tied up in a slicker behind the cantle, John A. Lomax set out on a journey “to round up and ‘close herd’” on the songs of the American cowboy.¹ Traveling under the auspices of Harvard University’s Sheldon Fellowship, Lomax was on a mission to document the sounds of a culture he felt was quickly disappearing. Lomax went to great efforts to fulfill the expressed purpose of accurately recording the reality of the territory west of the 98th meridian. However, an examination of one subject in Lomax’s collection, the representations of women in the original cowboy songs, suggests that Lomax failed to achieve his stated objective of preserving the “true” frontier. Instead, he succeeded in documenting the myth of the American West. The volumes of cowboy songs were popular despite their unreality because the songs recorded what eastern and urban audiences wanted to believe about the West. Specifically, Lomax’s work responded to contemporary sentiments concerning industrialization, urbanization, and immigration. The collection was valued as “an escape from the complexities of a civilization which was over-scientific, over-capitalized, [and] over-mechanized.”² Thus, Lomax’s collection is a remarkable artifact from the oft-ignored field of music that epitomizes the mood of anti-modernism in early twentieth-century America.

Lomax had been a fan of cowboy songs since his boyhood in Bosque County, Texas, and firmly believed that the “rough songs of the southwestern frontier [needed to be preserved] as a revealing expression of the life and

¹ John A. Lomax, *Adventures of A Ballad Hunter* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1947), pp.65, 41.

² Lloyd Lewis as quoted in Lomax, *Adventures . . .* , p. 90.

experiences of cowboys at work on the open range and in trail-driving.”³ He believed that a collection of the cowboy songs that “are as true as the smell of saddle leather and the dust of the plains” would function as a source of knowledge for the American public.⁴ In terms of historic preservation, Lomax believed that the cowboys’ songs would provide an invaluable record of the “reality” of the West because their lyrics contained a description of the “true” frontier. Lomax wrote in the collector’s note to his first volume of lyrics that the songs he included in his collection were “chiefly interesting to [his] generation . . . because of the light they throw on the condition of pioneer life, and more particularly because of the information they contain concerning the unique and romantic figure in modern civilization, the American cowboy.” In addition, Lomax believed that, “Perhaps, these songs, coming direct from the cowboy’s experience, giving vent to his careless and his tender emotions, will afford future generations a truer conception of what [the cowboy] really was than is now possessed by those who know him only through highly colored romances.”⁵ Thus, Lomax collected cowboy songs for the expressed purpose of “accurately” recording a vanishing lifestyle.

Lomax’s collection efforts produced two volumes of western verse. The first, published in 1910, was titled *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*. Like its 1919 “by-product,” *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp*, the collection attempted to fulfill Lomax’s purpose of documenting the music of the

³ Lomax, *Adventures* . . . , p. 83.

⁴ Duncan Emrich, liner notes, *Cowboy Songs, Ballads, and Cattle Calls from Texas* (The Library of Congress Recording Lab, AFS L28, 198-?), p. 1.

⁵ John A. Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1910. Reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1927), Collector’s Note.

“skirmish line of civilization.”⁶ Lomax and his president Theodore Roosevelt viewed the collection as a means by which to ensure the survival of western culture. Roosevelt praised *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* as a “work of real importance to preserve permanently the unwritten ballad literature of the back country and the frontier.” In a handwritten endorsement of the volume reproduced in its inside cover, he wrote that the collection could keep alive that part of American national heritage that was being “killed by competition with the music-hall songs.”⁷ The fearful sense of loss that was conveyed in Lomax’s and Roosevelt’s statements was shared by their contemporary Frederic Remington. In a similar sentiment of preservation, Remington expressed his motivation in the art world as an urgent desire to document a disappearing realm. In *Collier’s Weekly* magazine of 18 March 1905, Remington wrote, “I knew the wild riders and the vacant land were about to vanish forever, and the more I considered the subject the bigger the Forever loomed. Without knowing exactly how to do it, I began to try to record some facts around me, and the more I looked the more the panorama unfolded . . .”⁸ All three of these men articulated an anxiety about a waning West that reflected the prevailing fear of their generation. They were products of “a specific set of historical circumstances: namely, a widespread turn-of-the-century antimodernism that equated an idealized ‘Old America’ with loss and distance.”⁹

⁶ Lomax, *Cowboy Songs*. . . , Collector’s Note.

⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, Introductory Letter, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*. By John Lomax (New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1910. Reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1927).

⁸ Frederic Remington, “A Few Words from Mr. Remington,” *Collier’s Weekly* 34 (18 March 1905): as quoted in “Frederic Remington: Within and Without a Past,” by Alex Nemerov *American Art* 5:1-2 (Winter-Spring 1991), p. 36.

⁹ Nemerov, p. 39.

There are several generalizations that may be made concerning the cowboy songs included in the collection of John Lomax. Most of the songs in *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* and *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp* were produced by cowhands from approximately the end of the Civil War until the turn of the century. They are categorized as one type of sung story and share the general characteristics of the American ballad tradition. Like other types of ballads such as those of miners, lumberjacks, sailors, and African-Americans, frontier ballads are narrative works that recount events distinctly American in origin. Often, cowboy songs' subject matter reflects the specific atmosphere of the West. As John Lomax stated, "They deal mainly with frontier experiences: the deeds of desperadoes like Jesse James and Sam Bass; the life of the ranger and the cowboy; the trials of the Forty-niners, buffalo hunters, stage drivers, and freighters going up the trail - in short, they are attempts, often crude and sometimes vulgar, to epitomize and particularize the life of the pioneers who peopled the vast region west of the Mississippi."¹⁰ Cowboy songs also share the general narrative style of American balladry, one that relates regional tales by reducing stories to their most vivid moments. As musicologist Kip Lornell puts it, the songs exercise "leaping and lingering": leaping over the background details in order to linger on the powerful and dramatic scenes."¹¹ This vivid narrative style accentuates the musical genre's story-telling function, placing an importance on content rather than music. The cowboys themselves asserted the importance of content over music by saying

¹⁰ Lomax, *Adventures . . .*, p.34.

¹¹ Kip Lornell, *Introduction to American Folk Music* (Madison, WS: WCB Brown & Benchmark Publishers, 1992), p. 53.

their songs. Those cowboys who could not carry tunes would recite the texts of songs, ignoring melodies altogether. In an interview with Lomax, Harry Stephens of Denison, Texas made reference to the presence of tone-deaf but music-loving cowboys on the range. He reminisced that some men “couldn’t hit any kind of a tune unless they’d pack it over their shoulder in a gunny sack, so they’d just have to kinda say it.”¹²

This emphasis of tale over tune in cowboy songs is reflected in the paucity of music in Lomax’s collection. Although *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* was the first collection of cowboy songs to include any musical notation, only eighteen of its one hundred and twelve songs are published with notation. There is no music at all in *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp*. In part, this is the result of an economically motivated publishing decision. It reflects the expense of printing musical notation and the reluctance Americans who could not read music had to purchasing a book with an abundance of notation. The absence of music in the collection also reveals the generic nature of cowboy song melodies. In general, cowboy songs borrowed their tunes from familiar hymns, folk tunes, popular songs, and English and Scottish ballads. Borrowing tunes is a trait of all types of American ballads and emphasizes the cowboy song genre’s connection to the American ballad tradition. As musician Jim Bob Tinsley puts it, “Nearly all of the early ballads were taken from popular songs or poems that cowboys had heard. They merely reshaped the source by changing the words, by adding verses to suit their own surroundings, by inserting names of familiar people and places, or by adapting incidents that

¹² Emrich, p. 11.

were well known.”¹³ In his book *Prose and Poetry of the Livestock Industry of the United States*, James Freeman explained that the “cowboy improvised words for . . . church-tunes, or adopted for them those of some doggerel song he knew . . .”¹⁴ For example, in the 1938 revised edition of *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* Lomax informs his readers that various songs in his collection are set to the tunes of “Beulah Land,” a gospel hymn, “Wearin’ O’ the Green,” a popular song, and four political songs.¹⁵ Often, the same text was set to several different tunes. With slight adjustments, an individual could sing the tuneless texts in Lomax’s collection to any favorite melody. The singer simply had to adjust his text by filling any lyric-less measures with humming or additional syllables. Jim Bob Tinsley explains, “If a borrowed tune had more notes than the cowboy had words, he would improvise by holding onto a syllable or word until the music ended, or else he hummed the rest of the melody when his words gave out. Sometimes he added a set of nonsense words like ‘coma ti-yi-yipee’ or ‘whoopee ti-yi-yo’ at the end of a verse while he thought of the next verse or to add variety to the short verses.”¹⁶ In general, cowboy songs are strophic (different words set to the same music) and monophonic (strictly melody). And despite a romantic misconception that the rhythm of cowboy songs is timed to the gait of a horse, most of the works are in 3/4 or waltz time. (Folklorist Guy Logsdon points out, “It would require a three-

¹³ Jim Bob Tinsley, *He Was Singin’ This Song* (Orlando: University Presses of Florida, 1981), p. xiii.

¹⁴ James W. Freeman, ed., *Prose and Poetry of the Livestock Industry of the United States* (Kansas City, MO:1905), p. 561-62, as quoted in Guy Logsdon, *The Whorehouse Bells Were Ringing” and Other Songs Cowboys Sing* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989.), p. 286.

¹⁵ John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1938), pp. 410, 189, 278.

¹⁶ Tinsley, p. xiv.

legged horse to accomplish a 3/4 gait.”¹⁷)

Another commonly misunderstood aspect of western music is that cowboy songs were work songs. In reality, cowboy songs functioned as entertainment in the everyday life of the cowboy. Cowboy songs were valued for their amusement and cannot be classified as occupational songs. The songs' meters are not geared to the meters of a particular task. In fact, the majority of cowboys did not even sing while they were working. As they went about their daily tasks, they might have made slight noises so that they would not startle their herds. Song collector Margaret Larkin believes that cowboys also “whistled and yelped at their cattle to keep them on the move, or at most employed the eerie, wailing Texas yodel.”¹⁸ Were a cowboy suddenly to sing while herding, he might cause a stampede. Cowboy songs were simply a form of recreation on an often lonely landscape. The cowboy sang “when he was not shooting Indians, hanging miscreants, or fanning the flanks of a bucking cayuse with his hat. Singing was something a cowboy did when time was heavy on his hands, and when he was not dressed up for Saturday night.”¹⁹ Men would sing a capella around campfires on the trail. Their singing was unaccompanied because popular instruments such as the guitar and fiddle were too bulky to carry. When cowboys did play instruments, they used those that fit into saddle bags such as the harmonica or Jew's harp. The cowboy's singing was an individual activity and would sometimes evolve into a

¹⁷ Logsdon, p. 292.

¹⁸ Margaret Larkin, ed., *Singing Cowboy: A Book of Western Songs* (New York: Oak Publications, 1963), p. 12.

¹⁹ Carl Carmer, foreword, *Cowboy Jamboree: Western Songs & Lore*, by Harold W. Felton (Eau Claire, WS: E.M. Hale and Co., 1951).

competition. As a diversion during off-duty hours, cowboys would challenge each other to see who knew the most songs from memory. Participants would take turns singing, possibly for hours, until one man remained and was declared the winner. Often, wagers were placed on a contest's outcome. Lomax learned about these "singing bees" from his friend Tom Hight who was a frequent competitor. In one letter, Hight wrote Lomax, "I sang against a fellow in Weatherford, Texas, in a wagon yard. His name was Ben Green, his and my friends done the matching for a quart of whisky. So we had quite a jolly time, about 30 men, and they sure got a kick out of it. I beet him in about 3 hours. He said he had never been beet before."²⁰

This musical competition provides an example of the situations in which cowboy songs were passed from person to person. Cowboy songs were an American oral tradition, part of the large body of songs, stories, and legends transmitted by word of mouth in the United States. They evolved in much the same manner that Brer Rabbit tales developed in African-American communities. When individuals shared cowboy songs, their lyrics and music changed through mistakes in communication or conscious efforts to suit certain songs to specific settings and audiences. In the dissemination process, various singers made contributions to the songs' evolving texts and therefore obscured many of the songs' origins. As a result of the shared nature of oral tradition music, John Lomax mentioned only one cowboy composer for the works in his *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*.²¹ Lomax noted that cowboy songs, "like the Masonic ritual, are handed down from one generation to another by

²⁰ Lomax, *Adventures . . .*, p. 50.

²¹ Lomax listed Harry Stephens as the author of "Night-Herding Song."

'word of mouth.'" ²² This recognition of an autonomous authorship appealed to Lomax's celebratory view of democracy. He praised cowboy songs because they were "of the people, sung by the people." ²³ Ironically, Lomax's appreciation of the oral transmission of cowboy songs should have made him recognize that the act of printing the songs' texts falsified their true nature. This recognition of the difficulty involved in the transformation of songs from an oral tradition to a written form draws attention to other liberties John Lomax took in his role as a collector.

Despite his asserted desire to collect cowboy songs "in the precise form which they have popularly assumed," Lomax did not adhere to accepted procedures for song collecting.²⁴ Lomax altered a majority of the works in his collection. He sanitized the cowboys' colloquial, and often obscene, language, those words that "so-called polite society is not willing to hear." ²⁵ For example, on the typescript of "The Bull Whacker" in the Lomax Papers in the Eugene C. Barker Texas History Collection at the University of Texas, the lines "She could fuck and she could suck" were changed to "She could smile and she could chuckle" and "To slip it up her water works" became "I'll carry her to my dugout." ²⁶ Lomax also combined lines from various versions of songs and

²² Lomax, *Adventures* . . . , p. 34.

²³ John Lomax, spoken introduction, *The Ballad Hunter: John A Lomax [1867-1948] Lectures on American Folk Music* (Library of Congress, AAFS L49).

²⁴ Lomax, *Adventures* . . . , p. 35.

²⁵ John Lomax, Collector's Note, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*. (New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1910. Reprint, New York: Macmillan Co., 1927).

For an extensive discussion of bawdy cowboy songs see Guy Logsdon's "*The Whorehouse Bells Were Ringing*" and *Other Songs Cowboys Sing*.

²⁶ Logsdon, p. 300.

“expurgated, bowdlerized, edited, and rewrote” others.²⁷ These alterations were self-conscious decisions made by Lomax in an effort to produce a saleable collection. In his 1947 autobiography, he retrospectively acknowledged his transgressions of the collectors’ code in statements such as, “Yes, I know I did wrong, but I rephrased some unmetrical lines.”²⁸ In his collector’s note to *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, he further explained his methods of constructing a readable product: “I have violated the ethics of ballad-gatherers, in a few instances, by selecting and putting together what seemed to be the best lines from different versions, all telling the same story. Frankly, the volume is meant to be popular.” For Lomax, the wish for profit proved to be more powerful than the desire for authenticity.

Lomax was provided with opportunities to editorialize as the result of the wealth of material his collection methods generated. Lomax could choose which songs, stanzas, lines, and words to include in his volumes because of the variety of songs he received through written correspondences. When Lomax began collecting cowboy songs, he sent a letter asking the editors of hundreds of newspapers in the West to request materials for his project from their readers. The request was reprinted in magazines throughout the United States, instigating an overwhelming number of written responses from which Lomax chose lyrics that suited his purpose. In addition, Lomax had complete control over those editorial decisions for the songs he collected first-hand on summer vacations. Funded by three consecutive \$500 grants “for the Investigation of American Ballads,” Lomax traveled from Texas to Montana in

²⁷ Logsdon, p. 300.

²⁸ Lomax, *Adventures . . .*, p. 62.

search of the “musical native poetry of America.”²⁹ The songs Lomax discovered were “jotted down on a table in a saloon back room, scrawled on an envelope while squatting about a campfire near a chuck wagon, or caught behind the scenes of a bronco-busting outfit or rodeo.”³⁰ These texts became part of the material on which Lomax exercised a great amount of editorial license. However, the letters Lomax received and the singers he heard also placed some limits on editorial possibilities.

Lomax was limited in his work by the silence of his inanimate and human sources. Those songs that he received through the mail as well as those he extracted from newspapers and pamphlets that printed cowboy song lyrics as poems were unnaturally static when he located them for the first time. Having been permanently recorded in written form, the songs’ natural poetic evolution had been arrested. They had ceased to develop as an oral tradition. The songs were also incomplete musical objects because they had been documented without their musical notation. One of Lomax’s correspondents drew attention to the musical limitation of songs printed as poems when he wrote, “I can sing the tones of the ones I am sending just as they were sung to me. But I don’t know how I could send you the tones by mail!”³¹ Lomax’s access to the entire cowboy repertoire was also limited by his self-selected sources. For instance, there is no evidence in Lomax’s autobiography that he spoke to minority or female cowhands. In addition, Lomax’s efforts were

²⁹ Barrett Wendall, Introduction, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, By John Lomax (New York: Sturgis and Walton, 1910. Reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1927).

³⁰ Lomax, *Adventures* . . . , p. 41.

³¹ Lomax, *Adventures* . . . , p. 36.

thwarted by many white male cowboy singers' resistance to his project. Some cowboys refused to sing into the horn of Lomax's cylinder recorder because they did not understand his desire to record what they considered ordinary tunes. A common uncooperative response that Lomax elicited was, "I'm not going to poke my face up to his blamed old horn and sing."³² One cattleman even told him, "I have been singin' them songs ever since I was a kid. Everybody knows them. Only a damn fool would spend his time tryin' to set 'em down."³³ Furthermore, the cowboys perceived Lomax, the scholar, as an outsider. Lomax reminisced that cowboys jocularly called him "the professor" and met him with "frank disbelief . . . and with little respect for the intelligence of a man undertaking the work of collecting such material."³⁴ In response to this, Lomax admitted that he had to resort to questionable methods of encouragement. He stated, "Not one song did I ever get from [the cowboys] except through the influence of generous amounts of whiskey, straight from the bottle or jug."³⁵

The resistance to Lomax's project was not limited to those individuals he asked to sing. The effort to collect cowboy songs was ridiculed in a variety of circles in the West, including political and academic realms. Texas Governor Jim Ferguson sneered at the song collection project, asserting that Lomax was a "sorry fool."³⁶ Likewise, the faculty at the University of Texas described the 1910 volume as "a crude product of the West [that] had no interest, no value, no

³² Lomax, *Adventures* . . . , p. 42.

³³ Lomax, *Adventures* . . . , p. 41.

³⁴ Lomax, *Adventures* . . . , p. 300.

³⁵ Lomax, *Adventures* . . . , p. 41.

³⁶ Lomax, *Adventures* . . . , p. 41.

charm whatever.”³⁷ Western elites deemed the popular culture of their region inferior according to cultural standards set in the East. (These Texans’ dismissal of the value of western folk culture may be compared to the rejection of jazz by educated African-American audiences Lomax encountered later in his collecting career. In his autobiography Lomax wrote, “Members of the [black] community, bolstered by the church and the schools, sneer[ed] at the naivete of the folk songs . . . unconsciously throwing the weight of their influence in the balance against anything not patterned after white bourgeois culture.”³⁸) Some eastern sources also dismissed the value of Lomax’s cowboy collection. The book reviewer for the *Boston Transcript* called the book “vulgar and cheap trash.”³⁹ However, a majority of America’s eastern population responded favorably, claiming to recognize the collection’s worth as a receptacle of the “real” values and ideals of the vanishing world of the cowboy. The sources of Lomax’s favorable reviews suggest that Lomax found the majority of his East Coast fans among urban and literary audiences. One newspaper favorably compared Lomax to Remington: “Frederic Remington had put the cowboy into art as Professor Lomax now puts him into literature. One painted pictures of the cowboy in action while the Texan has gone about lassoing the songs.”⁴⁰ Ultimately, the images contained in the lyrics of the western music endeared Lomax’s work to the public and *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* went through numerous printings. The volume, according to Guy Logsdon, “became the most widely circulated collection of cowboy songs ever

³⁷ Lomax, *Adventures* . . . , p. 41.

³⁸ Lomax, *Adventures* . . . , p. 129.

³⁹ Lomax, *Adventures* . . . , p. 80.

⁴⁰ Lomax, *Adventures* . . . , p. 80.

published.”⁴¹

Lomax's collection of cowboy music was a literary success because the songs' lyrics reproduced beliefs that were prevalent in the United States in the early twentieth century. Reflecting commonly held assumptions about frontier landscapes, larger-than-life cowboy heroes, and women's place in society, the images contained in the songs hit a responsive chord in the national consciousness. In particular, the songs reinforced the American public's romantic conception of the "real" West as a land of equality and freedom. The frontier landscape described in the songs represented the vast possibilities of democracy on an open terrain. For readers of the collection, the cowboy who inhabited the celebrated West embodied the individualistic attributes that spurred national expansion and fueled the American Dream. With only his trusted horse and six-shooter to accompany him, the cowboy personified youth, liberty, justice, duty, and chivalric honor. The songs portrayed the heroic cowboy existing in a community of other men like himself. This depiction resonated with a commonly held interpretation of the West as a masculine world. It presented the frontier not only as a wilderness free from female influences, but also as a realm utterly inhospitable to women. An oft-quoted saying claimed: "Texas is a good place for men and dogs, but its hell on women and oxen."⁴² A close examination of the lyrics in *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* and *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp* reveals that Lomax's reliance on contemporary female stereotypes prevented the emergence of any alternative image. Gender stereotypes obstructed the reality

⁴¹ Logsdon, p. 300.

⁴² Jack Weston, *The Real American Cowboy* (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), p. 22.

of the West as a place where women had a strong presence and played active roles. The lyrics of the cowboy songs precluded depictions of happy, content, satisfied western women. The following examination of the female stereotypes in the music collection serves as a case in point to suggest that Lomax recorded the mythical rather than the realistic West.

No form of popular culture can escape its social context, and the representations of women in cowboy songs drew on nineteenth-century attitudes concerning the place of women in society. The women in cowboy songs codified accepted gender roles and promoted a patriarchal ideology. In accordance with Barbara Welter's "The Cult of True Womanhood," the songs celebrated the attributes of the ideal woman as "piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity."⁴³ These standards were a constant reference point. Female images in cowboy songs were judged to be representations of perfect or imperfect women when held up to the prescribed female role. Furthermore, cowboy songs' representations of women were cultural constructs because they were manufactured by individuals who were self-conscious about their position in American culture. Cowboys continually measured themselves against their own popular image. As tales of wild heroism along the great cattle drives had drifted to urban areas, the cowboy's contemporary East Coast culture developed a romantic portrait of the cowboy of which the cowboy was aware. In response, the cowboys tried to convince themselves that they were the protagonists of the mythic tales. As the cowboys' image was promulgated in dime novels and Wild West shows, cowboys replaced their customary

⁴³ Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* (Summer 1966), p. 152.

bowlers with the popularized ten gallon hat and filled their songs with women who complemented their mythic status. The female portraits contained in Lomax's collections fall into four categories of stereotypes created by men. These stereotypes include the gentle tamer, the sunbonneted helpmate, the hell-raiser, and the "bad" woman.⁴⁴

The gentle tamer, more than any of the other stereotypes, supports the idea of the West as a male realm. The gentle tamer is portrayed as a woman who hates the frontier and is out of place in the wilderness because she is weak and helpless. She is an alien figure who has difficulty adjusting to the frontier and must be protected from its rough elements. She is associated with civilization and more specifically eastern culture. Wherever she goes, she is an ornamental creature identified with the constraints of established society. She embodies all that is regarded as "feminine," including religion. For example, the "Love Lyrics of a Cowboy" describes a gentle tamer as being "jes' sort o' like some holy thing."⁴⁵ Gentle tamers were held responsible for the introduction of society and culture on the frontier. They were associated with the construction of churches, school houses, and fences on the previously undeveloped landscape. The cowboys resented the female presence because it signaled the

⁴⁴ These four categories of women are identified by Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller in "The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West," *Pacific Historical Review* (May 1980): 173-213.

⁴⁵ Lomax, *Songs* . . . , p.71; unless otherwise notated, any citation from this source is a song lyric.

end of the wilderness that they had considered a male realm.⁴⁶ As a result, their songs depicted the hardships endured by the gentle tamer and promoted the idea that the West was no place for a lady. Their lyrics articulate their resentment of the presence of gentle tamers. In the song, "The California Trail," one cowboy laments:

The women have the hardest time
 who emigrate by land, . . .
 For when they cook out in the wind
 They're sure to burn their hand.
 Then they scold their husbands round, Get mad and spill their tea, -
 I'd have thanked my lucky stars if they'd not
 Come out upon this bleak prairie.⁴⁷

However, songs that bemoan the presence of women are not the only songs to include images of the gentle tamer stereotype. Cowboy songs also present the gentle tamer as that thing for which the cowboy longs in moments of despair.

With a tinge of loneliness and nostalgia, the cowboy often sang about his desire for the companionship of women associated with eastern society. Some songs are filled with female representations of the home that he left behind. These pieces express a desire to once again have the cowboy's mother and sister around to support him. The lyrics state that the cowboy wants someone "to weep and mourn for him." "By experience," the first-person narrator of one

⁴⁶ For an excellent literary example of a gentle tamer intruding on a male community in the West see Stephen Crane's "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," *Heath Anthology of American Literature Vol. 2* Ed. Paul Lauter (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Co., 1990), pp. 714-21. Another famous literary portrait of a gentle tamer is contained in the descriptions of Molly Wood in Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (New York: Macmillan, 1902).

⁴⁷ Lomax, *Cowboy . . .*, p.375; unless otherwise notated, any citation from this source is a song lyric.

cowboy song advises those thinking about becoming cowboys to “stay at home” if they didn’t want to share his pining.⁴⁸ The cowboy also sings about the sweetheart he left back East. He longs for her as much as he does for the women in his family. In many lyrics, his “pillow is haunted by the girl [he] left behind.”⁴⁹ His verses reveal what specific qualities he misses in this civilized girl. For example, in “A Cowboy’s Worrying Love,” he praises “the winningest sort o’ blue” and “soul inspirin’ eyes,” a “smile that seems a sunburst from the skies,” and a “figger plump as a prairie dog’s that’s feeding on new spring grass.”⁵⁰ At the same time, he acknowledges that these women must remain in his dreams because cowboy machismo encouraged the belief that women would not survive in the territories west of the Mississippi.

In the 1850s and 60s, the heyday of pioneering, eastern papers advised that westering was a male enterprise; it was “palpable homicide” to attempt to send women to the West.⁵¹ And, in fact, many of the women depicted in the cowboy’s songs are dead. The deceased gentle tamers join the ranks of famous dead women such as Clementine in nineteenth-century popular songs.⁵² Dead women help to preserve the sacred male space of the western wilderness. Cowboy’s musical eulogies to their wives who have passed away

⁴⁸ Lomax, *Cowboy* . . . , p. 44.

⁴⁹ Lomax, *Cowboy* . . . , p. 86.

⁵⁰ Lomax, *Songs* . . . , pp. 59, 77.

⁵¹ Sandra L. Myres, “Women in the West,” *Historians and the American West*. Ed. Michael P. Malone (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), p. 372.

⁵² The memorialization of beautiful dead women was a prevalent theme in nineteenth-century American popular songs. Examples include H.S. Thompson’s 1863 “Oh, My Darling Clementine” and Stephen Foster’s 1860 “Cora Dean.” See “Protocols of Dying” in Jon W. Finson’s *The Voices That Are Gone: Themes in 19th-Century American Popular Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

on the frontier promote the idea that the “feminine” was what kept the cowboy tied down. When released from the constraining and “un-wildernessing” implications of marriage by the death of a loved one, the tamed man was free once again to “hit the trail” and resume his cowboy status.⁵³ In Lomax’s collection, other women die in defense of the mythical image of the independent and macho western frontier man. There are fantastic songs of female sacrifice for the cowboy. In one, an uncharacteristically active woman throws herself down over her lover in a fatal embrace to save him from a stampede. Another woman loses her life in order to stand by her man in the ballad “Marta of Milrone.” Marta is shot down at the altar on her wedding day when she ignores the objections of a jealous ex-suitor. These sacrifices emphasize the expendable status of women in the cowboy songs and demonstrate that gentle tamers were valued only for the ways in which they supported the men in their lives. Furthermore, these songs show that dead gentle tamers were safe women in regards to sentiment and sex. No harm could come of a cowboy’s musical longings and fantasies concerning deceased females.

The sunbonneted helpmate was perhaps the most widely recognized stereotype of a woman in the West because her image was promoted by a variety of sources as the fate of those gentle tamers roughened by surviving the dangers of the frontier. The mythical figure of the pioneer woman was the virtuous and strong woman with whom the cowboy could settle down. She was the resolute and hard-working mate who could help the cowboy become a homesteader. “With a sunbonnet, sturdy long-sleeved dress falling full to the

⁵³ Lomax, *Songs . . .*, p. 90.

ankles, booted, holding one child by the hand and another on her arm," she represented necessity, commitment, responsibility, and restricted freedom.⁵⁴ In the cowboy's songs, she is the woman who has "no trimming, no lace, no nonsense about; a long bonnet tied under her chin;"⁵⁵ the "one who will wash and patch his britches, and feed the setting hen."⁵⁶ In addition, her image recorded what men viewed as the unattractive physical effects of pioneering on females. Theodore Roosevelt wrote in *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* that "toil and hardship of a life passed on the wilderness, or on its outskirts, drive the beauty and bloom from a woman's face long before her youth has left her. By the time she is a mother she is sinewy and angular, with thin, compressed lips and furrowed, sallow brow."⁵⁷ However, the pioneer woman was celebrated by western men for her successful fulfillment of domestic roles in an uncooperative environment. She was praised for being "a good mother and a hard-working housewife, always putting things to right, washing and cooking for her stalwart spouse and offspring . . . [while remaining] resolute, silent, uncomplaining."⁵⁸ The sunbonneted helpmate was honored solely for her supporting role.

Though not as frequently mentioned in music, the third stereotypical woman in cowboy songs was the hell-raiser. This character was all that the gentle tamer and sunbonneted helpmate were not. The hell-raiser was the super cowgirl who defied prescribed gender roles and, sometimes, the laws of

⁵⁴ Weston, p. 175.

⁵⁵ Lomax, *Cowboy . . .*, p. 212.

⁵⁶ Lomax, *Cowboy . . .*, p. 51.

⁵⁷ Theodore Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Hunting-Trail* (New York: The Century Co., 1888), p. 98.

⁵⁸ Roosevelt, *Ranch Life . . .*, p. 98.

the land. In general, she was depicted as a masculine, but “good-looking and well-educated [woman] who could outride, outshoot, and outcuss the best cowboys in the West.”⁵⁹ She was “the female bandit, the Calamity Jane who drank, smoked, cursed and was handy with a poker deck, a six-gun, and a horse.”⁶⁰ It is interesting to note that the cowgirl had to *out*-perform men in work and play *and* be smart and attractive, qualities not associated with the average cowboy, to garner attention. The hell-raiser character could also be the successful female rancher who loved the same wild “buckaroo” things as the cowboy.⁶¹ Labeled one of the “queens of all the range,” the female rancher was respected for her cowboying skills. For example, in one song, “Patty Morehead, the Pecos River Queen” was celebrated as “an A-1 top cow hand” because she could shoot and rope and ride and brand as well as any man.⁶² Two other legendary female ranchers included Anne Bassett who was known as “Queen Anne” for her bronco busting skills and Sally Skull who was recognized as “the most fearless woman ever known.”⁶³

The stereotype of the western woman as the “bad” woman appears in songs about women associated with sex. “Bad” women include prostitutes and ethnic female characters. Their images support the machismo, virility, and physical appeal of the cowboy. They celebrate the myth of the cowboy as the attractive self-reliant man who is simultaneously idealized as an innocent individual and a man of great sexual prowess. Prostitutes are depicted as

⁵⁹ Jensen and Miller, p. 181.

⁶⁰ Myres, p. 173.

⁶¹ Lomax, *Songs . . .*, p. 82.

⁶² Lomax, *Cowboy . . .*, p. 369.

⁶³ Weston, pp. 176, 177.

“Delilahs” and “harlots” who are able to entice the cowboy as Eve had beguiled Adam.⁶⁴ They are differentiated from the songs’ good girls because they occupy institutions where “up above the women laugh; down below is gin.”⁶⁵ In song lyrics, the prostitutes “trim up their dresses and curl their hair . . . [and] giggle and laugh . . . [but] couldn’t get married to save their two eyes” because they are spoiled merchandise.⁶⁶ The presence of these temptress characters hints at the cowboy’s sexual conquests.

The other “bad” woman characters, the ethnic figures, cannot marry the cowboy either but for reasons of respectability linked to race. They are able to promote the manliness of the mythical Anglo-Saxon cowboy without threatening his mythic independence. The song “The Chase” presents an Indian woman who is the victim of a white cowboy’s male dominance. The lyrics convey a tone of conquest and an insinuation of rape. The cowboy protagonist trails and captures a squaw to force her “to pay [him] a kiss to be free.”⁶⁷ In Lomax’s collection, there is another song that mentions a “China girl called Wi” in relation to “good times in Salt Lake.”⁶⁸ Another set of songs develops the portraits of Mexican women who continue to reinforce the cowboy’s success in casual relationships. There is “Pepita, so young and fresh,” “Lolita, Senorita,” and “Lasca.”⁶⁹ None of these “deviant” women characters interferes with the cowboy’s lone status since she does not demand any commitment. She and

⁶⁴ Lomax, *Cowboy* . . . , p. 126.

⁶⁵ Lomax, *Songs* . . . , p. 5.


⁶⁶ Lomax, *Cowboy* . . . , p. 212.

⁶⁷ Lomax, *Songs* . . . , p. 80.

⁶⁸ Lomax, *Cowboy* . . . , p.70.

⁶⁹ Lomax, *Songs* . . . , pp. 74, 89, 23.

her cowboy lover know that for any enduring love he “couldn’t cross the line . . . [because] she was Mex and [he] was white.”⁷⁰ The cowboy can visit her and leave whenever he chooses. In some instances, she is even allowed to accompany him back to the trail as a sexual companion. She is permitted to live in his “masculine” realm because she is less civilized than her respectable eastern or urban counterpart.

The sexist roots of all four categories of stereotypes are reinforced by the language used in reference to the women in songs. Just as American popular thought associated women with livestock in the saying “Texas is a good place for men and dogs, but its hell on women and oxen,” the cowboys associated their representations of women with animals. Almost without exception, the sweethearts in cowboy songs are described in the coarse terms of the range. For the cowhand, women were part of the “feminine beauty herd.”⁷¹ Through square dance calls like those found in “The Cowboys’ Christmas Ball,” the cowboy encouraged his peers to “pen the fillies” and “bunch [the] heifers.” He represented women as “squirrels” and “gentle pussies” who could literally be roped into relationships.⁷² According to his musical metaphors, they were stock that needed to be staked and marked. The cowboy sang that he yearned to claim a woman with “ M-I-N-E, . . . the brandin’ iron o’ love.”⁷³ Although an integral part of his occupational language, these images were also sexist. In contrast to the women, the men in “The Cowboys’ Christmas Ball” are referred

⁷⁰ Lomax, *Songs . . .*, p. 67.

⁷¹ Lomax, *Songs . . .*, p. 59.

⁷² Lomax, *Songs . . .*, p. 114.

⁷³ Lomax, *Songs . . .*, p. 76.

to as “fellers,” “boys,” and “men.” They are granted selfhood and autonomy by being called by name, “Doc Hollis,” “Van Andrews,” “Hec McCann,” “John Milsap.”⁷⁴ The association of the women with animals rather than with their dance partners demonstrates once again the cowboys’ attempt to establish mythic male dominance. The cowboys’ terminology objectified and degraded women.

Derogatory descriptions of women are found in cowboy songs, in part, because cowboys were not usually able to get married. If cowboys married, they had to give up their chosen profession because there were no supply or housing arrangements made for their wives. Cowboys needed to obtain land to settle down with a woman. Wooing a respectable woman necessitated the adoption of economic ambitions by the cowboy. To be seen as a worthy suitor, he had to be able to provide a woman with a home. He had to adopt “Homestead plans.” He would need “50 head of cattle and a daisy claim.”⁷⁵ A reluctance to give up cowboying and the scarcity of women in some sections of the West produced what Historian Jack Weston has labeled “a sour-grape response.”⁷⁶ Cowboys pretended not to want marriage and denigrated the women they could not have. Ballads like “I’ve Got No Use for the Women” portray females as treacherous, “selfish and grasping.” The cowboy proclaims that “a true one may seldom be found.”⁷⁷ The sweet little girl, the true little girl” whom he left behind often proves unfaithful.⁷⁸ The cowboy laments his fate at

⁷⁴ Lomax, *Songs . . .*, p.114.

⁷⁵ Lomax, *Songs . . .*, pp. 65, 76, 62.

⁷⁶ Weston, p. 19.

⁷⁷ Tinsley, p. 184.

⁷⁸ Tinsley, p. 200.

the hands of a woman who “married a richer life”⁷⁹ in his absence. Regardless of economic situations, this jilted cowboy musically advises his peers that “when you court a pretty girl, marry her while you can. For if you go across the plains, she’ll marry another man.”⁸⁰ The cowboy’s construction of the unfaithful woman was a source of solace in a western territory where songs proclaimed “the girls are few and the boys are true.”⁸¹ Degrading female images also reflect the overall gendered nature of the cowboy song repertoire. As a part of the American ballad tradition, cowboy songs are associated with a male-dominated form of discourse. The songs are narrated from a male point of view and convey a masculine tone because they were created in a sexually segregated community.⁸²

In accordance with the genre’s misogynist spirit, the cowboy made the attraction to women appear abnormal in his songs. If a woman made a cowhand feel “like an orphan calf” and like he was “ridin’ through a range o’ dreams,” he declared he must be out of his mind.⁸³ Cowboy songs explained love in terms of insanity. All reason left the courting western man whose story was told in song. He was “crazy as a loon” and went about with a “locoed look” in his eyes.⁸⁴ For him, the admitted desire for a woman was expressed as a “violent attack.” He was the victim of the “loco weed o’ love” and as a result his

⁷⁹ Tinsley, p. 36.

⁸⁰ Lomax, *Cowboy . . .*, p. 245.

⁸¹ Lomax, *Cowboy . . .*, p. 134.

⁸² Susan C. Cook, “‘Cursed Was She’: Gender and Power in American Balladry,” *Cecilia Reclaimed: Feminist Perspectives on Gender and Music*, Eds. Susan C. Cook and Judy S. Tsou (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 205.

⁸³ Lomax, *Songs . . .*, pp. 59, 71.

⁸⁴ Lomax, *Songs . . .*, pp. 77, 59.

heart was knocked “plumb out o’ gear.”⁸⁵ This was the only way that the cowboy could explain the confusing emotions that he experienced but that contradicted his proclaimed hatred of women. Insanity pardoned his conflicting desires to remain a cowboy and to settle down with a woman. Lunacy made a man unaccountable for the occupational switch from cowhand to homesteader that marriage necessitated. Madness explained a lovestruck cowboy’s willingness to abandon the male bonding of the camp and trail for the company of women and townfolk.

According to historians of women, the four stereotypes of women found in cowboy songs did not accurately reflect women’s roles in the West. Cowboy songs were unrealistic because they were created by men and influenced by cultural assumptions about appropriate gender roles. They reflected a conception of frontier life as a struggle against the environment in which only men played an active role. This vision of the pioneer experience excluded women from playing an important part in life west of the Mississippi. Any women on the frontier were believed to be restricted to marital, maternal, and household chores in the domestic realm. However, women’s activities were not confined to the home. This belief obscured the presence of all kinds of working women in the West. In reality, women were successful in traditional female occupations such as teacher, artist, laundress, dressmaker, and midwife. Others were just as successful in traditional male occupations such as physician, journalist, professor, and lawyer. In the cattle industry alone, women played a variety of important roles.

⁸⁵ Lomax, *Songs . . .*, p. 77.

The roles that women played in the cattle industry reveal a female affinity for frontier life not reflected in the lyrics of Lomax's cowboy songs. Women's voluntary participation in the agricultural economy of the West demonstrates an enthusiasm for the territory women were typically described as hating. In particular, historians have identified six positive relations women held to the profession of cowboying. There were unmarried women and widows who owned ranches. There were also wives and daughters of owners who were involved in the day-to-day management of large ranches. These women manned the chuck wagons and worked the herds to escape the domestic realm. Other women helped to tend the cattle on their small, family owned ranches. Some women ran "road ranch-saloon-whorehouses" where cattle and horses were sometimes collected in lieu of cash payment from customers.⁸⁶ A few single women hired out for wages to work as cowpunchers. In fact, one "cowgirl" (a word which was current as early as 1895) entered a rodeo bronco riding contest in 1901.⁸⁷ Finally, the last type of woman working cattle was the mounted female outlaw who rustled cattle and horses. This woman often dressed like men and ran with the likes of Butch Cassidy and Sundance. Newspapers provided accounts of the most notorious female outlaws. In 1889, Ella Watson was lynched for cattle rustling and Flora Quick was shot for stealing horses in Colorado in 1878.⁸⁸

These ranch-related occupations were performed by women despite the

⁸⁶ Weston, p. 177.

⁸⁷ Weston, p. 174.

⁸⁸ Weston, pp. 177, 179.

existence of customs designed to keep them in subordinate positions. These gender conventions included such traditions as the middle and upper class insistence on the sidesaddle and female riding costume. Designed to keep a woman's legs together and ankles covered, the awkward gear made it difficult for a woman to enjoy an active role in ranch life. She could not ride astride a horse without causing a scandal. Many women expressed frustration with their lack of freedom and lamented the restrictions that something as seemingly simple as a saddle placed on their lives. One young woman in New Mexico wrote, "True to aristocratic rearing, I had to lead a lady-like life and should not resemble that of our uncouth neighbors whose women were able to do men's work. I always envied any woman who could ride a bronco, but in my society it was not done."⁸⁹ Yet, many of the women limited by patriarchal conventions managed to love the wilderness as much as did men. Their involvement on the frontier challenges the perception of the West as a male domain. Recent historical research has revealed that contrary to the stereotypes, women survived and flourished in the West. The discovery of new primary sources and the re-examination of others has uncovered the reality of the female pioneer experience. In contrast to the mythical images contained in Lomax's collection, women played leading roles and were active participants in the western experience.

If the female stereotypes contained in the original cowboy songs suggest that Lomax failed in his stated purpose to document the "true" West, they also suggest that Lomax's volumes were valued for that very failure. *Cowboy*

⁸⁹ Weston, p.168.

Songs and Other Frontier Ballads and *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp* were popular because they preserved elements of a fantastic territory celebrated in American mythology. The volumes and the four categories of women they reinforced served a particular social function at the time of their publication. They were successful because Lomax's act of transcribing traditional cultural assumptions into a permanent printed form sustained a belief in the mythical West at the very moment of the region's perceived passing. Even after the Census Bureau declared in 1890 that the American frontier was gone, Lomax's collection allowed Americans to cling to old beliefs. The lyrics in Lomax's collection particularly were appealing because they reinforced a useful interpretation of the frontier in American society. They supported the concept of the West as something that gave the United States its unique identity. As vessels of reassuringly familiar images, the cowboy songs helped to appease cultural anxieties in an era of momentous change and transition. The cowboy songs represented a backward glance at the historical turning point from which American society apprehensively looked to the future and wondered collectively what would replace the West as the determining factor of American progress.

More succinctly than any other individual, the historian Frederick J. Turner articulated the fears of an American society in transition. In his paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Turner conveyed the atmosphere of nostalgia for the West in which Lomax's volumes of cowboy songs were received. Historian Gerald Nash asserts that Turner functioned "[l]ike a barometer, he reflected the passing of the old order and bemoaned the

advent of the new.”⁹⁰ In “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Turner expressed a pessimistic view of a future without a frontier because he firmly believed that westward expansion was responsible for making America what it was. He stated that the “existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.”⁹¹ Without an unsettled area left to conquer, Turner was anxious about the nation’s future. As Historian Frank Popper writes, Turner “was concerned about what might replace [the frontier] to shape the character of the American people. He worried about the ways in which Americans might respond to the loss of their accustomed frontier, about how a frontierless America might deteriorate.”⁹² Specifically, Turner worried that the United States might deteriorate as a result of the three forces of industrialization, urbanization, and immigration.

The mythical West glorified by Turner and “documented” by Lomax was perceived as an escape from modernity by early twentieth-century society because it represented preindustrial America. Confronted by impersonal technological innovations in the workplace, East Coast and urban communities psychologically longed for the time when labor was performed manually in the out-of-doors. Americans celebrated the West as a region where the dexterous physical skills of farming and ranching had been artfully performed. Society

⁹⁰ Gerald D. Nash, *Creating the West: Historical Interpretations 1890-1990* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1991), p. 7.

⁹¹ Frederick J. Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (Readex Microprint, 1966), p. 199.

⁹² Frank J. Popper, “The Strange Case of the Contemporary American Frontier,” *Yale Review* 76 (Autumn 1986), p. 103.

praised the humanity of the western economic system over that found in factories where man was reduced to a mere cog. Citizens praised the perceived independence of wage earners in the West in comparison to the subordination of workers to bosses in city shops. Theodore Roosevelt articulated this laudatory view of western labor in his autobiography. Reminiscing about the days he spent as a ranch-hand, Roosevelt wrote:

It was still the Wild West in those days, the Far West . . . the West of the Indian and the buffalo-hunter, the soldier and the cowpuncher. That land of the West has gone now, "gone, gone with lost Atlantis," gone to the isle of ghosts and of strange dead memories. It was a land of vast silent spaces, of lonely rivers . . . In that land we led a free and hardy life, with horse and with rifle. We worked under the scorching midsummer sun, when the wide plains shimmered and wavered in the heat; and we knew the freezing misery of riding night guard round the cattle in the late fall round-up. In the soft springtime the stars were glorious in our eyes each night before we fell asleep; and in the winter we rode through blinding blizzards, when the driven snow-dust burnt our faces. There were monotonous days, as we guided the trail cattle or the beef herds, hour after hour, at the slowest of walks; and minutes or hours teeming with excitement as we stopped stampedes or swam the herds across rivers treacherous with quicksands or brimmed with running ice. We knew toil and hardship . . . but we felt the beat of hardy life in our veins, and ours was the glory of work and the joy of living.⁹³

This memory acknowledges the hardships of labor on the fringe of civilization, but glorifies the freedom and diversity of its tasks. It is an excellent example of American anti-industrial nostalgia for "honest" work, free from the dehumanizing influences of mechanization. This nostalgia was a common theme in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century American imagination.

⁹³ Theodore Roosevelt, *An Autobiography* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913), pp. 103-04.

Individuals often yearned for the old world and longed for things that used to be. Aside from cowboy songs, popular music such as James Bland's 1875 "Carry Me Back to Old Virginny" frequently extolled the past in reaction to social change.

Accompanying Roosevelt's depiction of physical labor on the frontier is a powerful emphasis on the vast nature of the environment in the American West. It was common during this period for individuals to idealize the wilderness of the frontier because open space was a desirable alternative to the cramped space of growing urban centers. Citizens clung to an image of the West as an escape from the urbanization caused by industrialization. The growth of American industry had accounted for a significant rise in urban concentrations. In 1890, one in three Americans lived in a city, by 1910 nearly one in two.⁹⁴ In a traditional city / country dualism, American culture glorified the West's mythical landscape in reaction to the effects of urban growth; overcrowding, pollution, crime, and poverty. As Gerald D. Nash explains, turn-of-the-century historians and architects of popular culture "lost themselves in nostalgia as they invented a lost golden age, an earlier period in Western history This West of their imaginations was an uncomplicated, sparsely populated area characterized by a majestic, uncluttered landscape rather than a crowded [and problematic] urban environment."⁹⁵ As a result, the West was constructed in the national consciousness as "a transplanted Eden, overflowing with the bounties of nature" rather than the bounties of industrialization that

⁹⁴ John A. Garraty and Robert A. McCaughey, eds., *The American Nation: A History of the United States, Sixth Edition* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1987, p.550.

⁹⁵ Nash, p. 208.

created social discontent in American cities.⁹⁶ The image of the West as Eden grew out of the nineteenth-century Romantic tendency to sentimentalize nature as a beneficent garden imbued with regenerative powers.

In the nineteenth century, the frontier had also been promoted as a land of natural bounty in an attempt to lure immigrants westward. Authors of travel guides, agents for railroads, and promoters of land and immigration companies depicted the frontier as a new Canaan. The West was constructed in the national consciousness as a land of opportunity and abundance. In the early twentieth century, some portions of the American population wanted to cling to this idea of the West because it provided an image of a safety valve with which to control the growing immigrant population in the United States. In this manner, the West was celebrated as a solution to the perceived problem of the twenty-five million foreigners from eastern and southern Europe who poured into American urban centers between the years 1866 and 1915.⁹⁷ White Protestants liked to imagine that the West was still a place where the nation could unburden itself of dispossessed masses by promising immigrants land on the frontier. The cultural hegemony lamented the perceived disappearance of the frontier as a social crisis because it meant that foreigners would remain in "Anglo-Saxon territory" in the East.

The mythical West contained in original cowboy songs represented a utopian ideal in the popular mind of early twentieth-century America. The

⁹⁶ Ray A. Billington, *America's Frontier Culture* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1977), p. 77.

⁹⁷ Garraty and McCaughey, p. 546.

fantastic realm “served as a soothing contrast to the harsh realities of the contemporary world.”⁹⁸ Its reassuring images were associated with an escape from the machine age. Like other popular representations of the West, Lomax’s collection was successful because it told urban, eastern, literary consumers what they wanted to hear. Lomax’s collection is a valuable mirror of the national consciousness at a particular historical moment of social and economic change. *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* and *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp* reflect cultural anxieties over the perceived disappearance of the frontier. However, the collection’s influence moves beyond preserving the sentiments of a specific generation. Lomax’s work became an integral part of American popular culture. Dog-eared copies of his volumes served as source books for singing cowboys on the radio and in the movies. To this day, school children in every region of the country are taught “Git Along Little Dogies” and “Home on the Range” in music classes. For this reason, it is especially important to recognize that the songs in Lomax’s collection do not contain realistic descriptions of conditions in the West but record what the West meant to American society in 1910 and 1919. Ultimately, John A. Lomax’s cowboy songs document, not the American West, but its myth.

⁹⁸ Nash, p. 198.

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VITA

Katherine Hinchliffe Gschwend

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March 1, 1972. Graduated from the Lancaster Country Day School in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, May 1990; B.A., Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut, 1994. M.A. candidate, the College of William and Mary in Virginia, 1994-95, in the Program of American Studies. The courses required for this degree have been completed, but not the thesis: John A. Lomax: Documenting the American West.