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Here, Kansans Know All The Words To “Home On The Range”

Tom Averill

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UNTITLED (TOILE)
Yoonmi Nam

HERE, KANSANS KNOW ALL THE WORDS TO “HOME ON THE RANGE”

You’re a true Here, Kansan in direct proportion to your recollection of the verses of “Home on the Range.” And before you read one more word, you should go off by yourself and write down as much of that song as you can remember.

Now, I’ll bet the same thing happened to you that happens in Here, Kansas, where we citizens gather together every 4th of July. We don’t call it an Old Settler’s Reunion, because everyone in Here is already old, and we live here year round. In fact, it’s a reunion of the young and restless: for all our kids and grandkids gone off into the world to find something better than Here, Kansas.

But the 4th is mighty fine. Every resident and visitor joins the Here parade. We have to tie up our dogs along Kansas Street as an audience to parade for. We march in a circle at the end of the street, so the front of the parade can see the back of it. Then we gather for a picnic in the shade of the grain elevator, and wait for nature’s sparklers, lightning bugs.

Every year, as evening settles and the air cools to the low nineties, one of the young and restless strums a guitar and announces, “I’ll play one we all know.” Then we hear, “Oh, give me a home...” and a strong first verse: the home and the buffalo, the deer and the antelope, no discouraging words, and unclouded skies. And then the chorus. And then nothing.

“Short song,” says one of the old folks, and begins another verse. The other old-timers join in. We sing about the bright diamond sand, the glittering streams, and the white swan like a maid in a heavenly dream.

Then the chorus, then the gale of the Solomon vale where life streams with buoyancy flow and the banks of the Beaver where no poisonous herbage doth grow.

Most everyone drops out, but Elmer Peterson and Claude Anderson and Mabel Beemer and I sing about the bright heavens, the twinkling stars, how their glory does not exceed that of ours.

Then the verse about the wild flowers, the curlew's scream, the antelope flocks on the hillsides so green.

For the final verse it'll just be Mabel Beemer, in a high, wavering voice, singing of pure air, fine breezes, about how she would not exchange her home here, to range forever in azure so bright.

Her voice falls away, and around us fireflies wink, and above us the sky is shot through with stars. For a moment everything is fine.

"I didn't know there was so many verses," says one of the young folks. "How can you remember them all?"

"Because we're true-blue Kansans," I

want to say, but I let his question die.

But there's another reason we remember all of them: For us, they were true. We Kansas old-timers have not exchanged our homes here to range into the bright land of American corporate opportunity. In our early days, deer and antelope played alongside our cattle. The curlews, and the killdeer in buffalo grass, screamed their joy, and meadowlarks whistled like farm kids doing chores. The air was pure, the creeks ran full — at least in the spring — and we didn't have half the noxious weeds farmers spray for these days. The beauty of the wildflowers could still knock your breath away.

Kansans forget the verses of "Home on the Range" because they can't imagine them to be true. But they were. "Home on the Range" was not just the state song, it was the state itself.

Imagine 1873. You are Dr. Brewster Higley. You've left LaPorte, Indiana, and your fifth wife (which might account for the seldomness of discouraging words).

You've settled on 160 acres near Smith



SAFETY
Katie Twiss

Center. You wander down to Beaver Creek, hoping to shoot one of the deer and antelope that graze the rich Solomon River Valley. You look around you and are overcome by Kansas, and so you write a poem, "Western Home." The *Smith County Pioneer* prints it, a local druggist sets it to music, and folks love it. They sing it everywhere, transforming the words to fit Arizona or wherever they road. President Franklin Roosevelt claims it as his favorite song, and by 1947 it is adopted by your state to represent

everyone's feelings about Kansas.

Then imagine a July night surrounded by lightning bugs. You're sitting beside the Here, Kansas, grain elevator, singing. You remember all the verses to "Home on the Range," and not just because it's the state song. You know them because they are the Kansas you believe in again.

Excerpt from *William Jennings Bryan
Oleander's Guide to Kansas* by Thomas
Fox Averill