

COWBOY POETRY: HISTORY, ORIGINS, INFLUENCES, FORMS

In 1985, on a cold winter weekend, the first National Cowboy Poetry Gathering—a cooperative event created by public-sector folklorists from around the West—debuted in the little cattle town of Elko, Nevada. It marked the beginning of a true renaissance of a folk art that existed for more than a hundred years, a genre that had escaped public notice in the overwhelming glare of publicity and attention given to other media representations of the cowboy: Hollywood films, popular fiction and history, and cowboy music.

Cowboy poetry owes its origins to the cattle drives of the second half of the nineteenth century. Beginning 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 Alberta. Such drives lasted as much as six months and, in their spare time, the cowboys—a diverse bunch that included vaqueros from Mexico and south Texas, 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—played and sang the music of their cultures, told stories, and composed songs and poems. Many of the cowboys were not literate and the ability to recite lengthy verse from memory was highly prized. The popular practice of dramatic recitation—in schoolhouses, parlors, and picnics—contributed to the spread of cowboy poetry as well.

Many of the earliest poems and songs were undoubtedly in Spanish. Perhaps the earliest extant poem is “El Corrido de Kansas,” a narrative of the adventures of a group of vaqueros who drove a herd of steers northward. Individual volumes of poetry about cowboy life were published in the 1870s, 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. Lomax followed with a collection of cowboy poetry, *Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp*, in 1919. During and after this period, the greatest cowboy poets—S. Omar Barker, Charles Badger Clark, Curley Fletcher, Henry Herbert Knibbs, Gail I. Gardner, Sharlot Hall, Bruce Kiskaddon, and Rhoda Sivell—were writing and publishing their work, as were artists more famous in other areas such as the poets Vachel Lindsay and Eugene Field and the painters Charles M. Russell and Maynard Dixon.

Cowboy poetry owes many of its rhymes, rhythms, and forms to the British ballad so popular in broadsides and in the recitations and songs of sailors, soldiers, herders, and rural folk. In later years, cowboy poets were influenced by the popular poets of the day: Longfellow, Whittier, Kipling, and the poet of the Yukon, Robert W. Service. Today, many cowboy poets read widely, from Walt Whitman, Edwin Arlington Robinson and Stephen Vincent Benét to e. e. cummings and the poets of the Beat Generation.

Some poets, particularly during the heyday of the Hollywood “oater,” reflect the influence of cinema in poems about range wars, stagecoach holdups, outlaws, Indian raids, and shootouts. Poems have also been set to music and recorded by Hollywood actors, bluegrass and country musicians, classical composers, and community choirs. 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 music, film and television, and written fiction and history. It has been influenced by academic poetry, country and western music, the great epics of Greece, the plays of Shakespeare, and the Bible. In recent years, it has mirrored other cultural changes throughout the country as poets turn increasingly to free verse and open forms, take on new topics from environmentalism to politics, and increasingly adapt the personal lyric to express the complexity of their lives. More and more women are writing poetry, reciting it, and performing it, for as one woman poet said, “Cowboy isn’t a noun, it’s a verb, and a woman can cowboy just as good as any man.”

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