I'm one of those dudes who made a tape of cowboy songs, though I haven't been on a horse in twenty years; on that occasion I disgraced myself and annoyed the horse. The music on the tape was, except for one song, as authentic, in an historical sense, as I could make it. Anyway, I'm the guy who put together this museum piece, hoping to prove, among other things, that museums can be fun, and handed a copy to Don Wudel, knowing bloody well how he feels about drugstore cowboys. I didn't hang around while he listened to it; I don't know how he feels about library-carrel cowboys.

On the other hand, I do know that some of my diction smacks of the West. I was raised in Texas and have lived in Alberta twenty years. Although I eschew the "Y'all come — Gee haw" vocabulary this topic generally inspires in journalists, much of the discourse of the West is inevitably my own. A few years back, I bought the first cowboy hat I've had in over a decade; I figure that, all the guff I've put up with in 46 years of living out here, I've earned the right to wear it. What is a cowboy?

What is authenticity, anyway? Having skirted the edges of academic folklore for a quarter of a century, and having listened to an awful lot of old time music played and sung by old timers from all over several continents, I imagine that I can usually judge authenticity of form and derivation and so on. But where do you place all those toothbrushed-faced old riders with Merle Haggard ditties coming out of their clearcut gums, including some Canadians who can sing you every verse of "Okie from Muskogee"? At some point, you have to say that a cowboy song or poem is any item a cowboy sings or recites. But, again, what's a cowboy?

Pincher Creek, Alberta, June 1991: In one of the world’s windiest regions, southern Alberta, it’s a windy week. Birds better know their algebra and trig, because they won’t get anywhere by trying to fly straight. Campers on pickup trucks rock like that cradle in the treetop, which in this rough land wouldn’t be very high. As I approach the Pincher Creek Community Hall, where the 4th Annual Pincher Creek Cowboy Poetry Gathering is getting under way, I see Don Wudel, looking glorious in a white hat with his braided chin strap hanging down the back of his neck, luxurious white scarf, tightly buttoned black vest, and knee high red/tan cowboy boots, as he comes out of the hall and faces a corner of the building by the door, fiddling with something in his mouth. Coming up behind him, I start to laugh.

"If you can light it in this breeze, you’re a real sailorman."

"Don’t need to light it," he chuckles as he turns, smiling, to reveal a brown lump behind his lower lip. Snoose. Copenhagen snuff. If you’re lucky enough to catch Wudel reciting, you’ll likely get the impression that he’s thinking hard or surpressing a laugh half the time, but the chances are it’s just the expression his face makes with the lump of tobacco in his jaw.

As Denis Nagel’s poem demonstrates, the chewing of Copenhagen snuff is a token of machismo out West. But, although most cowboys and cowboy poets prize at least some ability to show their manliness, it would be a mistake not to read the self-directed satire in Nagel’s poem, or to assume that cowboy poetry is simple minded or uniform in its esthetic qualities or social attitudes.

Cliquies, Trends, & Everyday Life

Although a few instances of long-distance mascara and threateningly-slung behinds suggest that some poets, musicians, or local rodeo hands attract their share of groupies, the Gathering is definitely a family show, and there are lots of old folks and kids in the audience. There are more cowboy hats down here than you’ll normally see on the street in Calgary, though an ugly little baseball cap would make more sense in this wind. You do see a few of those around, with semen producer or tractor dealer logos on them. You won’t see any pulled around backwards, though!

Hats are significant in this cultural context, as Sid Marty pointed out in his article on the 1989 Gathering. He particularly noted the high status of expensive Resistol straw sombreros, made from fibres treated to resist sweat and rain. Lots of folks would like to wear Resistols (this writer included), but there’s a clean cut group that will wear nothing else; they’re usually just old enough to be dignified, old enough to have no need to prove that they work with their hands, and perhaps sufficiently well off that they may dress up to their taste. Men like Harvey Mawson of Dundurn, Saskatchewan. Of course, there are some old timers who are beyond worrying about such things; some of them wear beautiful old, well broken in felt Stetsons, but just as many...
have cheap straw hats from Taiwan.

You can tell the rodeo cowboys by their buckles, by their clean cowboy snapshirts, and by their tight jeans. The buckles, usually large and ornate, are common prizes for various rodeo events. Those who make it to middle age will probably fall into the Resistol or the Taiwan camps. Then there's Wudel and his friends, who appear to have stepped out of tintype images from the Old West or, the next best thing, out of a Jay Dusard photograph of contemporary cowboys. Cowboy poets are found in all of these and other western cliques.

The number of cliques and trends within the field is but one indication of how widespread the cowboy poetry phenomenon is. In a recent issue of Rope Burns, a tabloid paper from Oklahoma aimed at working cowboys, not less than forty-two gatherings were advertised, some unconfirmed at press time, in thirteen states. Events in Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia were also noted. A few poets have gained widescale repute. Baxter Black has been on national television in the U.S., and his performance style shows a show business consciousness; a trained veterinarian like Denis Nagel, Black now makes his living as a poet, having a syndicated column and crossing the West (both sides of the border) as an after dinner speaker. But most of the events neither feature stars nor are designed to create stars. This is a truly indigenous phenomenon.

Not to say that it didn't receive a certain kickstart. Folklorist Hal Cannon, himself a member of several fine old timey string bands which include Western and cowboy folk songs in their repertoires, founded the first Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, in 1985. This event, which has had hands laid upon it by both academic dignitaries and country music stars, has been as much a catalyst as a seed. The poetry was being written, and often shared in private recitation, long before the Gatherings gave it a higher profile. The success of Cannon's festival offered a larger context for what many were already doing and perhaps provided a certain amount of approval in a world in which poetry is both scorned as effete and felt to be beyond the capacities of the average person. The proliferation of gatherings after the Elko example represents a portion of the public taking control of their own culture.

This control doesn't come easily. At the Pincher Creek Gathering last summer, Harvey Mawson, who has published two books of poetry and one volume of rodeo stories, who was a featured reader at Elko in 1988, and who has been at all four Pincher Creek events, made a quietly impassioned comment on those who have called Western art "craft" and cowboy poetry "folklore." Even in showing interest to this cultural activity, the outside world seems determined to marginalize something that is important to many people. Mawson rightfully takes great pride in the resurgence of cowboy poetry and his role in it.

Most cowboy poems deal with the specifics of everyday life for most of the people who attend these readings, buy these books, and write the poems. These specifics may be exaggerated or ironized, or they may be reported relatively naturalistically, but the point is that these westerners' own lives are celebrated, certainly in the poems that are most warmly received at the gatherings.

The audiences make their preferences known at these events, which follow the custom of music concerts, where applause is rendered after each item, rather than that of the literary soirée, at which the audience sits politely until a poet has finished and then offers a usually restrained applause.

I suspect that Lloyd Dolen of Cochrane, Alberta, is not the first cowboy poet to have a member of his audience require a particular poem from him. His daughter works at a Self Help office in Calgary, where she met one day an elderly Native in distress. After dealing with the man, she went to her father and demanded that he write up this man's story. "I've met a man with a lot of poetry in him," she said to Dolen. She rejected two of her father's efforts, saying each time, "That's not what he said," until on the third trial, she was satisfied. "That's what he said!" Dolen recites the poem at gatherings, often proudly introducing it with that anecdote.

Two Modes of Cow

Cowboy Poetry Review,
Singers From The Earliest Days

That the cowboys were singers from the earliest days is a truism. John A. Lomax collected songs and poems from participants of the great trail rides of the 1880s. Perhaps in those days people generally sang more in their private lives than they do now. Recitations were certainly more common, and there was a fund of popular poetry, including that of Bret Harte, Robert Service, and Marjorie Pickthall, which wasn’t matched in mass sales until Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Rod McKuen appeared on bookshelves in the Sixties. Ferlinghetti and the other beat poets were known for their public readings, often to jazz accompaniment, and McKuen received considerable attention both for reading and for singing, but the tradition of poetry recitals was even stronger in the Nineteenth Century. Harte, Service, and Pickthall either performed their works or wrote expecting that they would be recited, in schools and churches, as well as upon the commercial stage. Pauline Johnson, the Mohawk poet, was a major draw on the concert trail from one end of Canada to the other; her readings were especially well received in western Canada, where she was seen to be part of the cultural avant-garde, and was welcomed as such by all levels of society.

Rural people, cowboys in particular, maintained a taste for poetry longer than did the general public. After the glory days of the open range ended, when the anonymous ballads such as "Utah Carroll" and "Bury Me Not On The Lone Prairie" had first been sung, poets like Gail I. Gardner (author of "The Sierry Petes," otherwise known as "Tyin’ A Knot In The Devil’s Tail") and Curley Fletcher ("The Strawberry Roan") continued to write, recite, and sometimes publish.

Some of these cowboy poets were often singers (music is featured at all cowboy poetry events), and the influence of the Hollywood cowboy and the dude ranch is often felt in the work of poets and singers. Noted Alberta singer Wilf Carter got his professional start singing for Canadian Pacific tourists; at least one hard working packer complained that Carter was paid good wages merely to sit on the corral fence and sing. One suspects that the tourist trade was, if not responsible for the creation of the early poetry, at least a significant support for the poets who produced chapbooks of their poems.

A genuine thread of connection runs through all of this activity. Today’s cowboy poets often recite or sing the classics of the genre, snapping up reissues or even original copies (at rare book prices!) of some historical volumes. But the tradition is as much oral as literary. At Pincher Creek last summer, Eugene Cyr, an Alberta poet, was singing "The Sierry Petes," and got stumped at "They started out ..., " a red shirtd old timer in the audience hollered out to him, "Kentucky Bar!" Cyr was able, then, to finish a ballad he’d probably been singing longer than this writer has been alive. I doubt that either one of these men owns either the Lomax book or Cannon’s Cowboy Poetry: A Gathering.

Poets In A Large Field

Despite claims sometimes made for the uniqueness of cowboy poetry, it’s probably more useful to think of it as a part of a larger vernacular field. People write poetry. My knowledge is primarily of Alberta, but I suspect that the picture isn’t so different elsewhere. During the half decade I’ve been collecting folk and popular poetry from the province, I’ve found examples from quite a few occupations, many ethnic groups, most social situations, both genders, and all ages.

As an English teacher, I cannot fail to notice a certain irony here, since most people enter literature classes prepared to declare that they don’t like poetry. What they mean is that they’ve found that schoolroom literary exercises seem to leave them out: somebody may be having a good time here, but they’re not invited. And yet, virtually everyone enjoys popular music, and regardless of the cracks of some soreheads, you can hear the words (most of the time), and the words matter. In cowboy poetry, as in popular song, many people find their

Boy Habiliments

Calgary Stampede, 1990

Wudel’s splendid antiquarianism evokes a century of European habitation on the prairies. His performances feature classics of cowboy poetry as well as poems by himself and his contemporaries.
lives written without the insulting mediation of scholars and teachers.

Karen Clark, who’s preparing a bibliography of poetry in Alberta up to 1970, notes that it’s not uncommon for informal social evenings in the foothills west of Calgary to include poetry readings or recitations. Her bibliography, which is restricted to published poets, includes over a thousand individual poets.

Cowboys have always been among the poets of Alberta. Charlie Millar, a well known rider in the High River area south of Calgary before the turn of the century, was highly respected for his horsemanship, but also as a pianist, harmonica player, silversmith, and poet. Arthur Peake emigrated from England to the arid Red Deer Valley near Drumheller in 1883. He quickly fit into the ranching ethos, writing poems scornful of both homesteaders and radio cowboy singers, always signing himself "Loco," probably because he figured anyone would have to be crazy to try to make a living in that region. His poems have been available only to those lucky enough to own a copy of the rare local history, The Grass Roots of Dorothy, but a recent anthology of his work, Ballads of the Badlands, has remedied that.

I have not yet found any reference to the performance of poetry in the early days of the Calgary Stampede, but the Souvenir Programmes of the first two Stampedes in 1912 and 1919 offer generous samples of the genre, featuring the American poet Wallace D. Coburn, a friend of western painter Charlie Russell. There are a number of unattributed poems and songs, including well-known items such as "The Dying Cowboy" and "The Zebra Dun," as well as two items by Charles Badger Clark, and a poem by Mary Carolyn Davies, a Greenwich Village poet of the same school as Edna St. Vincent Millay!

After World War Two, Dick Cosgrave, like his son Bobby, a major threat in the Calgary Stampede’s roughest event, the chuckwagon races, wrote poems with his wife Olive; printed over cartoon illustrations by Stew Cameron, whose work defined the Stampede ethos for many people, these poems were the Cosgrave family’s annual Christmas cards.

Many other poets, like Ray Anderson of Clive, wrote verses which they passed around among friends, or perhaps gestetnered a stack of them and gave them as gifts. A few answered ads for vanity presses, though perhaps not so many as among city poets. With the Elko-sparked revival, many of these poets have been encouraged to attempt more elaborate offerings. In 1990, Anderson made a selection from a corner-stapled booklet he’d put together in the Seventies, added a few more, found a good print shop, and published Yarns of a Cowboy.

Music, Drama, & Humor

A common preconception about vernacular verse holds that the rhythm of these poems must be either clumsy or metronomic, but this isn’t often true. The regular meter is often counterpointed by changes in accent, register, and amplitude. Delivery is often parlando rubato, so the metric regularity is further disguised, though this is perhaps less true for the poets of an earlier generation (Lloyd Dolen is an excellent example), who emphasize the music of the poem as they read, particularly the underlying rhythm (what you learned to scan in school, with your little "s’s and ‘s”). Don Wudel is a master at stretching words, drawing out measures, for musical as often as dramatic effects. He leaves no doubt that he is attending closely to the sound of words; despite the stereotype of the drawling buckaroo in possession of fewer vowels than one finds in "proper English," Wudel attends to the sonic differences in, for instance, the rhyming words "one" and "begun." Bryn Thiessen has a lovely way of blending his introductory remarks into the poem, so that it’s already begun before you realize it, the music of the prose becoming introductory material to the music of the poem.

Many of the poets affect a sort of disregard for the (usually scan-able) line of their verses, creating a conversational tone or even a histrionic mode that in fact becomes a counter-rhythm. Gord Collier is particular at moments has reminded me of African-American toasters with his laidback rhythmic freedom. This connection may seem far-fetched, but I don’t think that the possibility of at least an attenuated continuum from African-American verse to that of working class-whites can be easily dismissed. Blacks and whites share a certain amount of poetic repertoire, including items like "Rangy Nell" and the various parodies of "Red Wing." They may also share performance stylistics as well. The differences between, say, black and hillbilly blues singers are more often discussed than the similarities, but these similarities do exist. Why couldn’t there be similarities in their recitation styles as well? There remain more questions than answers about this and many other aspects of folk and popular poetry.

It is also a mistake to assume that vernacular poets always rhyme. Free verse has been around for over a century now, and it cannot be restricted to elite poets, although there remains a certain amount of resistance to it, especially among a public who may have heard Robert Frost’s scornful "Free verse is like playing tennis with no net." Doris Bircham, of Piapot, Saskatchewan, introduces one of her free verse poems with a fine response to Frost: "You know, free verse really isn’t free — the rhymes and rhythms are just in other places."

By the same token, any evaluation of cowboy verse must consider the humor we’ve already noted. Poetic intensification may be achieved by many devices, and the humorous exaggeration which this poetry inherits from the frontier is becoming increasingly common in "art" verse. Of course, it has a history there, as well. Shakespeare (who was well acquainted with the vernacular culture of his day) knew that humor requires subtlety and attention to detail and may be as noble an effect as elegance or piety.
What Is A Cowboy?

As could be expected, the cowboy poetry revival has attracted imitators, and the question of authenticity does not get any easier. What counts as authentic? At least one actor, David Longworth from Vancouver, performed in the Cowboy Poetry Roundup and Trappings Show at the O’Keefe Ranch near Vernon, B.C., last May, and he, understandably, looked the part. No one claimed he was a cowboy, though he may well have ridden horses in his life. Was he more authentic reciting antique rangeland chants, which he learned from Folkways LPs, than when he offered his spoken versions of Billy Joe Shaver songs? In 1989, theatres in both Edmonton and Calgary mounted plays based upon the cowboy and his lore. Sid Marty has written of Don Wudel’s distaste for the Calgary production, Bunkhouse, an hour-long string of poems (virtually all from the U.S.) and songs, held together by a skimpy plot. But the man who put that play together has lived on ranches, and two of the actors in it have had extensive ranch and rodeo backgrounds.

The poets themselves speak and write a great deal about authenticity, but their concern should not be confused with a hidebound insistence upon exactness. The spirit of improvisation and fun is too strong in them, and as quick as they are to deflate themselves and each other, it’s difficult to claim that they take themselves too seriously. Just before he went back into the community hall that windy Friday at Pincher Creek, Wudel mused, "On the way down, I was trying to remember a Badger Clark poem, and I’m getting about three-quarters of it."

"Which three-quarters? ‘Cause you could leave out parts...." "Or improvise. Nobody’s gonna know. Just the aficionados."

A few minutes later, onstage, Bob Ross, from Montana, is preparing to read, but has a confession to make. "I can’t remember the title to one I want to do." Wudel is seated onstage behind him. "Make one up!" he shouts, causing general laughter.

Despite this irreverence, the validation of authenticity seems often to come from the past, which, being over, is complete and seemingly easy to comprehend. The past is a frequent theme not merely in poems which discuss the Old West, but in a recurring preoccupation with age and with things that are over and people that are dying. At the O’Keefe Ranch, Alan Wilson dedicated one of two poems he’s written honoring dead old timers to a couple of youngsters who had died the past weekend. He noted, "It’s not true that old cowboys never die."

At the same event, Glen Rafuse, a B.C. poet who writes under the nom de plume Starchild, read a poem that ended with the claim that he’d rather be in a buffalo robe than in a technologically heated room. Authenticity, the product of the past, counts for more than does comfort, the product of the present. That, at least, is the claim. Like many of the cowboy poets, Rafuse also has a poem in which he angrily responds to the animal rights movement and the tendency toward vegetarianism among many city dwellers. Introducing this poem, Rafuse claimed that such people are jaded, "bored with life." They have lost authenticity.

Controversy over authenticity occurs among the cowboy poets as well as between them and big city yuppies, especially between "working" cowboys (that is, they work on ranches) and rodeo cowboys (who are not always from ranching backgrounds and are sometimes regarded as professional athletes). Gord Colliar has a poem entitled "Buckle Bunnies," a common term for the groupies of the rodeo circuit. This poem recounts a trip to a Calgary bar, during which he was nearly picked up by a couple of bunnies, but rejected for his lack of a rodeo prize buckle. After he recites a catalog of the work he does, the poet, who has a university degree in biology, tells the women that if you want to know whether someone is a cowboy, measure his heart, not his buckle.

If occupation itself is our measurement, of course, the authentic cowboy will survive as long as his work remains to be done. Introducing another of his tributes to old time cowboys, Alan Wilson noted, "They’ve been talking about the vanishing cowboy for 150 years, but I ain’t noticed any appreciable difference in the number of cowboys around yet."
What Poetry’s Good For

It would be hard to argue that the cowboy is disappearing. But the cowboy’s world is changing, and that may disturb many of the cowboy poets. Nevertheless, sometimes the ease of the change is more impressive than the difficulties that arise from it. In what was originally a man’s world, the presence of women is unmistakable and, it appears to me, largely welcome. At the 1989 Pincher Creek Gathering, Sid Marty estimated that 6% of the readers were women; in 1990, it was more like 30%. Five members of the seven-member board of the Alberta Cowboy Poetry Association are women. It would not be realistic to suggest that there was a feminist presence in the Community Hall, but the rural public lives in the same world of satellite dishes and fibre optics as does the urban, and when Rose Bibbie read a poem about the many jobs a woman has to do around the ranch, her humor was much appreciated by the women in the audience. By the men as well, it should be added.

Many in this audience may not have much patience with the city dwellers who are recasting the language to eliminate gender bias in words like "chairman" and the inclusive pronoun "he," but they appreciated Coralee Adams’s gentle but perceptive probing of the language. Introducing a poem about chores, she noted that parents on farms and ranches always tell their children that chores are "good for" them. It then struck her that often this language has a distinctly patriarchal cast to it. "Chores will make a man out of you," she remembers hearing them say. "Well," she laughs, "I’m real happy to report it didn’t work!"

Susan Vogelaar teaches at Lethbridge Community College and raises exotic chickens. (What is a cowboy poet?) She read at Pincher Creek in 1990, and returning in 1991 she repeated, by request, an item about the hardships of the ranch wife, in which she warns that the sexy image of the cowboy is a trap for women. If the cowboy poets sometimes seem defensively macho, at least they deserve credit for accepting this sort of commentary.

The female has always been emblematic of culture on the frontier. And, to use postmodern jargon, Woman was always a Presence to cowboys, especially in her Absence. The most popular songs on the frontier always included "The Girl I Left Behind" and its relatives. After a brave declaration that he likes "the novelty" of his rough and tumble lifestyle, the protagonist of "The Little Old Sod Shanty," a song known across the prairies during the last century, admits that he wishes a "kind hearted girl" would appear to "relieve me of this mess that I am in."

Macho attitudes are found in cowboy poetry, sometimes in fairly unpleasant forms. Machismo tries to deny emotion, which it considers to be womanly. But even here, this sort of machismo contradicts itself, in the acknowledgment that the poet cares enough to write the poem. He may care enough to be shy about expressing himself. Don Wudel, whose verse is never objectionable, understands that there are "...thoughts we don’t let other people know we have too often. That’s what poetry’s good for — lettin’ people know what you’ve been thinking about."
Notes


2. Jay Dusard. The North American Cowboy: A Portrait. Prescott, Arizona: Consortium, 1983. Many of Dusard’s photos are available as cards; others are featured on the covers of LPs by Ian Tyson as well as the Great Western Orchestra. (Dusard also writes delightful liner notes.) Tyson and the various manifestations of the GWO have appeared at the Elko Gathering. Tyson is a particular favorite of Western music fans, who like to distinguish their favorite music from the Country music of Nashville and Bakersfield and other venues.

3. This is not to say that commercialism cannot be found among cowboy poets. Jordie Thomson told a Calgary Herald staff writer that "His hero ... is Baxter Black, king of the cowboy poets, and someday [Thomson] hopes to follow in his footsteps, earning $2,500 per performance plus expenses." Wendy Dudley, "A good woman, horse and dog": Cowboy-poet writes about the important things in life." Herald 30 July, 1990: 7D.

4. The academic presence at Elko is unmistakable, particularly in comparison to events such as the Gathering at Pincher Creek, Alberta, the oldest and largest in Canada. Although Pincher Creek was undoubtedly inspired by the Elko Gathering, it is a thoroughly vernacular production. The poster for the 1992 Elko Gathering, for example, features a lovely impressionist oil painting and a subtitle written in language one would not expect to encounter at Pincher Creek: "The 1992 and 1991 Cowboy Poetry Gatherings honor the skills and expressive culture of Hispanic ranching communities as an ongoing effort to enhance communication and understanding of pastoral people."

   Cowboy poetry remains marginal in the Canadian literary scene. The Alberta Cowboy Poetry Association received provincial funding for the 1991 Pincher Creek Gathering, but I was told by a member of the Alberta Culture staff that it was a "controversial" decision, given the shortage of funds for dispersal and the aversion in some circles to grant vernacular verse the status of literature.

5. Charles Badger Clark, American cowboy poet, is best remembered for "Spanish is the Loving Tongue," which is better known as a song than as a poem.

6. The "toasts" of African-American folklore are narrative poems, often quite lengthy, dealing with the feats of a variety of bawdy, sometimes obscene, heroes. Although they show formal and perhaps historical similarities to traditional balladry, and to popular narratives like "Hiawatha" and "Gunga Din," as well as to Tin Pan Alley, they are typically delivered with the rhythmic ease of jazz and blues. See Roger D. Abrahams, Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia. First Revised Edition. Chicago: Aldine, 1970, and Bruce Jackson, "Get Your Ass in the Water and Swim Like Me:" Narrative Poetry from Black Oral Tradition. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1974.

7. Bunkhouse was written and directed by Andy Maton, who also performed in the 1991 reprise. The Puff 'n' Blow Boys, written by Val Jenkins, was first performed at the Citadel Theatre in 1989. Like Bunkhouse (which is occasionally cited incorrectly as The Bunkhouse Boys) The Puff 'n' Blow Boys seems to have been revived in 1991; a tape of the play was broadcast on an Alberta CBC noon-hour radio program with an agricultural focus.