

The Fiddle Footed Cowboy

1 He leaned up on the gar den gate His foot was on the rail He
 twirled spur rowell with his thumb And said "I'll hit the trail. They're fight ing
 20 'cross the pond got chore to do. But when
 27 get the mess cleaned up Will you be wait - ing, Sue?"

melody by George W. Lyon©

He leaned upon the garden gate
 His foot was on the rail
 He twirled a spur rowell with his thumb
 And said "I'll hit the trail."

"They're fighting over 'cross the pond
 I got a chore to do.
 But when we get this mess cleaned up
 Will you be waiting, Sue?"

"Boy, your twines sure tangled
 I've heard that line before
 Just a fiddle-footed cowboy
 That's why you're off to war."

"The first good-looking gal you spy
 When you get across the sea
 You'll start your rope a-spinning
 And you'll never think of me."

He kicked his spur against the gate
 And slowly shook his head
 "Don't reckon I would fancy
 No China doll," he said.

A rowell fell from out the spur
 He placed it in her hand
 "I'll leave you this one souvenir
 Whilst I'm in a foreign land."

"Without the rowell the spur's no good,
 Or the rowell without the spur."
 He seemd about to mount his horse
 And never looked at her.

We wouldn't put the hobbles on
 And as he turned his head
 "You fiddle-footed cowboy
 I'll be waiting," she said.

—Ray Bagley©

Ray Bagley was born in Iowa in 1880; his family moved to Alberta in 1892. He lived an adventurous working and personal life in the southwestern Canadian prairies, being involved in a number of farming and ranching ventures, as well as an early participant in the Chuckwagon Race at the Calgary Stampede. Bagley raised and trained the first thoroughbred Chuckwagon horses. He lived into his nineties. THOSE OTHER DAYS: THE POEMS OF RAY BAGLEY were collected and published in hardcover by Bagley and his companion, Paula Rice, during the 1960s. It's now a collector's volume. Many of the poems show the influence of the early tourist trade in the Rocky Mountains; Bagley was a valued member of the Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies for his ability to recite poetry and yarn.

The Day Leonard Taught Me To Chew Snuff

I come from the hard grass country, where folks don't go a bunch,
Where the ground is as dry as pavement, and gophers pack a lunch.
And in that hard grass country, for a boy to be a man
He must one day take a dip from a Copenhagen can.

Well Leonard was a friend of mine, though fifty years my senior.
He was tough as boiled owl shit, and didn't smell no cleaner.
We were talkin' of shootin' coyotes at Leonard's camp one day,
But when you're only ten years old, you don't have much to say.

When he reached down into his shirt and pulled out his can of snuff.
He tapped on the lid and took a chew, said "Do you think you're man enough?"
"You bet your life I'm man enough. I'll show you how it's done!"
So I jammed three fingers way down deep and took a good-sized one.

He told me how to hold it between my gum and lip,
Then he looked at me and said, "Only sissies spit."

My mouth began to fill up, as the saliva began to run,
Then I began to wonder what I had gone and done.
So I summoned up my courage, said "Let's go to town."
But as my courage was coming up, it met that snuff juice goin' down.

Well, it suddenly got warmer, and my neck began to sweat,
And I got a sinkin' feeling that my snuff ain't settled yet.
I don't know how it happened but the room began to spin,
And I suddenly came to realize the world of hurt I'm in.

Then I began to retchin', just like a sickly pup.
I barfed out bile and breakfast, and then my boots came up.
I thought I'd met my Maker, my insides must be drained,
But I didn't get off that easy — I upchucked once again.

Now that was twenty years ago that I took my first dip.
And to this day I've got a pinch between my gum and lip.
I don't know why I do it; you'd think I'd had enough.
And, like you, I often wonder why I chew this rotten stuff.

—Denis Nagel©

As he prepared to recite "The Day Leonard Taught Me To Chew Snuff" at the Calgary Stampede last summer, Nagel looked into the audience in the Agricultural Pavilion where readings took place and spotted a fresh-faced youngster in a large black cowboy hat. "What's your name?" He asked the startled boy. "Billy?" came the shy response. "Ever try to chew Copenhagen?" The boy grinned and nodded sheepishly. After he'd finished the poem, Nagel claimed that, to please his wife, he'd quit chewing snuff four months earlier.

Ranch Hand

Another school year was finished
One more grade, he had passed
He was heading for the foothills
Two months, would go real fast.

He had dreamed about roping
Every critter on the place
Loping green colts for miles
Getting his new horse to face

The arena would be built
In a week, maybe two
He'd practice for hours
Head, then heel, a few

Somehow his plans changed
This ranch didn't compare at all
To his long awaited dreams
And he cleaned another stall

The cattle weren't moved often
He'd only roped a few
The arena wasn't finished
Sored his horse and lost a shoe

Cleaning chicken coops and fencing
Baling hay and welding gates
Watching his horse stand there sleeping
And not going out on dates

He grew up a lot that summer
Matured more than he ever knew
Realized dreams don't always happen
And that "Cowboys" work hard too

—Arlene Boisjoli©

The fresh perspective on Western culture and the ranch life brought by female cowboy poets need not be confined to the discussion of women's activities. The gentle irony available from this point of view not only softens the machismo often found in cowboy poetry, it allows the poets to offer a more complete portrait of the Western experience. Boisjoli is Secretary/Treasurer of the Alberta Cowboy Poetry Association.

Coffee Row

They gather each morning
at the back of the old store
where a window
outlines grass-fringed slopes
and patchwork strips.

Joe Blostenik has never missed
Tuesday's cattle auctions or a rodeo
since he stepped out of his stirrups
eight years ago.

And Hank whose asthma
drove him early
to his house in town
wheezes each slow step
to the end of the street.

They listen to the tap
of old Bill's cane
the tap as repetitious
as his tales of the thirties
that ride cigarette smoke
across the room.

These men who meet
stir past dreams inside their cups
and are never more than a window
or one last story
away from the land.

—Doris Bircham©

Doris Bircham is a nurse and ranch wife. This poem has appeared in **Western Producer** supplement, **Western People**, & in **Prairie Dreams**, a collection of photographs by Courtney Milne (Saskatoon: Western Producer, 1989). Not all Cowboy Poets accept free verse yet; sometimes the controversy is severe. But it has been a century since the form was first introduced into Western European and North American culture, and by now enough people have encountered it in school that it doesn't shock as it used to. Rural poetry submissions to **Western People** are often in free verse.

Dingo Dog

"I guess I would have to give credit to a fellow by the name of Gene Jordan. He's one of those guys that can play anything, any kind of instrument, or bones or spoons or whatever.... I don't know where he is now. He was in Utah when I was mixin' around with him.... I know that he does a variation of this.... I ran in a fellow, actually at the Stampede last year, that was from North Dakota, and he had seen Gene somewhere, and he said, "You know, there's a fellow down there that does a poem very much like that. The tune is different" — because I sing it a cappella — "but," he said, "the ideas are the same, but the words are a little bit different." So, I guess, between Gene and me, it got created, and there were other people that — because we were sittin' around, talkin' about it, and the different experiences that can happen on a really bad day. So that's where 'Dingo Dog' came from."

In a rain-soaked sad-dle on a rain-soaked horse on a rain-soaked trail one day, Tore
hole in my slick-er and I dropped one glove. it dis-ap-peared as Old Bay shoved it down in the mud with
one hind foot. And when I got down off of Old Bay I put one boot in a pud-dle and my
16 Ding-o Dog give a yip at a squir-rel in a hole in a log at the side of the trail. I turned a-round my
21 boot came off and I fell down. Reached for my boot and I kicked my knee on a rock as Old Bay
28 stepped on me. lost my hat and it went in to the creek as I grabbed for that I poked one cheek on a
31 limb at the end of that same log. Bay turned a-round and he kicked my dog and he bit 'im and Old Bay kicked
38 him a-gain. Sit-tin' in the mud I nursed a sore shin. Now there ain't no mor-al to this stor-y 'bout rock-y trails and bogs,
45 rain-soaked sad-dles and lov-in' them danged ol' nags and danged ol' Ding-o Dogs. I wad-ed in to fish 'im out as I
52 nicked 'im un- a big long trout came out of my boot and back in- to the stream He's the bright-est rain-bow
51 ev-er seen got my boot and washed it off then shook the cow-boy hat I'd doffed.

56 thanked the gig-gling Lord a-bove and got back in the trail to get my glove. When Ding-o is

61 mul-tip-ly-'in, put-tin' down three, he's a-try-in', carr yin' one, to head Old Bay on a rain-soaked trail on

66 rain-soaked day. Fin' lly I got one foot in the stir-rup, moved a lit-tle clos-er, the boss yelled, "Hur-ry," broke a

71 thumb nail off on the sad-dle horn and cursed the day the bay was born I gave a push with my foot and a

76 pull to swing up in the sad-dle and I kicked my Ding-o Dog in the chin and I think that he

81 thought I did it on pur-pose and he growled at me. And Bay give a snort and she spooked and shied 'cause I'm

86 half-way on and I hooked her hide in the flank with the spur on my right foot. She whined and snort-ed and

91 bucked and put my hat back down in the riv-er bed, as the boss rode up and said, "Hand, I don't think

96 you're cut out to be a buck-a-roo as I crawled out of the mud-dy wat-er all drip-pin' wet 'cause my

101 hat still had my head in it. Now there ain't no mor-al to this stor-y 'bout rock-y trails and

106 bogs, rain-soaked sad-dles and lov-in' them danged ol' nags and danged ol' ding-o dogs.

—Don Wudel©

"I got hired to do a banquet for the Golden Something-Or-Other Horse Show in town. They had a banquet, and they weren't really there to be listening to poetry anyway, and I thought, well, I'll do 'Dingo Dog' 'cause that generally brings the house down. And I did it, and there was, out of the three hundred people that were there, or two hundred people, whatever it was, there was just three or four people that were sort of chuckling. And it just bombed. And when I got done, at a table that was right in front of this little stage area, not more than twelve feet away from me, there were two guys sitting at the table, they both had perfectly creased hats on, and grey Wranglers, both had spurs on, which kind of amazed me that their pants were so clean, but they had spurs on, anyway. One guy turned to the other guy and said, 'Now, why in the hell would anyone ride in the rain?' I heard that, and I thought, 'Oh, boy, am I in the wrong place!'"

Wendicundo's Vision

On a warm and sunny afternoon
of a pleasant day in early fall,
The old man Wendicundo sat propped up
against a weathered plaster wall.

He patted the ground beside him,
inviting me to hunker down;
Then inquired about my grandfather,
"Is my old friend living good in town.

"Old cowboy and old Indian
close in friendship as men should be
He is much like us you know,
don't want everything we see.

Take only what you need boy,
leave the rest for seed.
White man discovers many things,
I think he invented greed.

Old Indians see things,
that is why we know a lot.
Long time ago this gift
keeps us from getting shot.

My long gone old wife talks to me,
comes on a moonbeam late at night
Sometimes she stands beside me
even as the sun is bright.

She comes young and fat
her hair all shining black.
Makes me feel strong again,
glad to have her back.

Believe this old man's talk,
I only speak what's true.
I feel the power of your eyes,
maybe you see things too.

Listen while I speak to you
of experience that I had;
Of a thing that cannot happen
when peoples' hearts are bad.

A great eagle comes at morning light,
he snatches me from my bed.
I was plenty scared then,
thinking about being dead.

After flying for a long time
he drops me on a cloud,
Then perched beside me preening
like a great chief very proud.

I hear people singing,
it comes from the ground.
There below me is this strange place
my friend the eagle found.

Seems to be a new land,
grasses lush and green;
Plenty water everywhere,
all of it is clean.

Horses running in the hills,
also buffalo in large herds.
Tall forests standing here and there,
filled with animals and birds.

I see the happy people,
their skin is just one hue.
Even more than that,
they speak just one language too.

In the valleys are snow white lodges
from hill to shining hill.
All these many people,
yet they do not fight or kill.

There are no poor and starving.
All persons work and share.
Everyone lives in harmony,
without fear or care.

I began to wonder,
what place is this I found?
Am I taking my first look
at the happy hunting ground?"

Then the eagle spoke,
"Old man I want this understood
There before you is the world
When people become good."

—Harvey Mawson©

When Mawson introduced this poem at the 1991 Gathering at Pincher Creek, Alberta, he recounted Wendicundo's vignette history of the West: "Cowboys? Well, we were sort of cowboys, chasing the buffalo. Then some crazy guys came along, chased 'em all into a hole in the ground. Then some other crazy guys came along in big hats, chasing some other scrawny, spotted cows. They were OK, kind of stringy eating. But we were starving, didn't have any. Then we got some, we were cowboys again."

Don't Rub It In

It was back in the days when Hayshaker
left his bull calves whole until fall
And then expected Ma and the girls
to help him a changin' them all.

Ma, she got things kinda ready
made sure she had every thing there
The knife, disinfectant and oyster pail
and band aids for first-aid care.

The daughters had gotten quite handy
at helping, they each had their place
And all day they tried their darndest
to keep a smile on Old Hayshaker's face.

The eldest and strongest was tail jackin'
and she'd better not let that tail droop
The second was kept busy and bruised
a runnin' them straight up the chute

The youngest and ever the smallest
ran errands and picked up the slack
Helping fill pens and a screamin'
to keep 'em from turning back.

One especially hot, trying, change day
The longest in anyone's life
The runt of the group kept slippin' on back
but at last, it was his turn at the knife

Things up front were gettin' quite sloppy
and God had turned up the heat
Hayshaker still squattin' down in there
The slush now coverin' his feet.

Then the last little runt hit the headgate
by now he was loose as a goose
And as Hayshaker grabbed onto the oysters
that little sucker let loose.

Ma cautioned the girls against laughter
As she had trouble suppressing a grin
But finally the general hee hawing
prompted this loud response from him.

As he shook the green liquid off a his hat
and swiped it from nose, mouth, and chin
He says "Look you guys — you know the saying —
You can crap on me — just don't rub it in!"

— Rose Bibby©

Male calves are neutered so that they will be easier and less dangerous to work. This is usually done during Spring roundup, when a herd is gathered, counted, branded, and often dehorned as well as neutered. This is a major part of the job of raising cattle and understandably gives rise to themes popular in cowboy poetry. The "oysters" collected from castration are a seasonal delicacy to many (though not all!) Westerners, and are the subject of many humorous poems. "Hayshaker" is Bibby's poetic name for her husband Garth; her book is credited to "The Hayshaker's Wife."

*In the chute:
Jordie Thomson, Wendy Dudley, Bryn Thiessen, and
Don Wudel waiting their turns to read. Pincher Creek,
June 1991.*



"I bought these boots when I was about sixteen, and used them until I was twenty-one. There were small stampedes throughout the Peace River with a fairly large one at Taylor Flats on the Peace river put on for about three years by Tommy Wilde (who ran survey crews for the Alaska Highway) and Jack Lawless. They had crowds of 5 to 6,000. In '49 I gave up on horses and my folks sold them when they sold the farm. So the boots were stored away. After spraining an ankle off a four or five year old steer, then getting kicked in the back off a bare-back horse. I decided I maybe wasn't very smart." Nowadays, Joe Adams, born and raised in the Peace River country to a pioneering family in the region, lives in Calgary, accompanies himself on the dobro and writes fine songs. The Rio Grande mentioned is not the Texas river, but a township near Grande Prairie.



*Joe Adams in the Peace River Country
ca. 1943-44.
Photo courtesy Joe Adams*



*Joe Adams,
Calgary, 1992.*

Last Game Of The Season

It was near the end of the hockey season
And calving had just begun
And we had one more game to win
And we'd have that championship won

Well I rode out to check the Bovines
And make sure everything would be alright
And sort of ease my conscience
about taking off to play that night

There was a few old cows that looked real close
but I knew that they'd be fine
The weather was good and them old girls
had calved on their own time after time

Well I drove to the rink and I played that game
and without bragging I played mighty well
Hell I bet if ole Cliff Fletcher was watching
I'd damn sure be in the N.H.L.

Well after the game we savoured the win with a few beers
I'd turned back 41 shots
And I guess I deserved all those cheers

But I knew I had to get back to the ranch
Cause that's where my responsibilities lay
But the beer tasted so good and the compliments I got
and by god I wanted to stay

A few of the other cowboys I played with
knew the words that would change my mind
Kirk said "Your cow will be alright,
the weather's good and by the way did I mention I'm buyin'"

Well I figured two more wouldn't kill me
So off to the bar we went
And I don't know what time I left, but I was awful drunk
Cause all of my money was spent

Well half way home the panic set in
thinking about livestock that I lost
So I punched down that pedal, hell bent for leather
And Jesus I was gone like a shot

Well I got to the ranch in record time
And drove to the barn to saddle my horse
Well there I was the last of the ever ready cowboys
drunk with my flash light tryin to navigate a course

Well I rode past 3 fresh calves
that were up and going strong
And 2 more had just started and their calves were
coming right and I knew that they wouldn't be long

Well everything else seemed real quiet
and I got thinking, boy I wished I stayed at the bar
but like every time before, that I ever got cocky
and that's where my trouble starts pards

I had one place left to check
down a coulee, so I shines my light down there
and the answer I got back was 2 green glows
And I got that sickening feeling, the one that makes the gut fluids flow

Well I rode down that coulee
And her calf was easily found
so I rode around that back-end
And there she had everything on the ground

A full uterus prolapse, all ripped up
and one hell of a mess
I knew if I didn't do something real quick
this ole bossy was gonna be dead

So I cut a string off my saddle
and tied that tourniquet up good and snug
and rode to the barn for a hot iron
and some of them good old drugs

I was going to heat up that iron, get it good and red hot
And I was going to burn off that prolapse
and the heat was going to make it clot

So I started cutting and that cow she bellared
outa cowy scold
and half way through that uterus
that goddamn iron went cold

She died I guess that's all that needs to be said
but I'm reminded of the situation
every time that calf bellars and wants
to be fed

Well I sit back over coffee now
And I analyze the situation with a scoff
and I decided that next year
I'll play for a shittier team, one that won't make the play offs.

Gord Colliar©
June 2, 1991

Word From The Range

1 Twen - ty - four and wrang - ling for a dude string on the Old - man; the pop - lar hills and

short grass flats sang a song to my young soul. Deep in love with a cow - boy's life and

11 blonde haired ran - cher's daugh - ter. She took my hand and smiled at me as I tied up my bed

18 roll 'n' she said. "Send me word from the range you ride on. Let me

22 know the way the days go by and the things that bring you pride. Tell me all the land marks and the

29 of all the hor - ses. Send me word from the range where you ride."

I was just eighteen and out the door, bound out for the Rockies.
 Gonna learn to throw a diamond hitch, gonna learn to pack & guide.
 Mama standing at the stove, baking chocolate cookies,
 Head bowed down and turned around to hide the tears she cried.
spoken 'n' Mama said: CHORUS
 Send me word from the range you ride on;
 Let me know the way the days go by and the things that bring you pride.
 Tell me all the landmarks and the names of all the horses,
 Send me word from the range where you ride.

Twenty-four and wrangling for a dude string on the Oldman;
 The poplar hills and shortgrass flats sang a song to my young soul.
 Deep in love with a cowboy's life and a blonde haired rancher's daughter.
 She took my hand and smiled at me as I tied up my bedroll.
 'n' she said: *CHORUS*

Thirty-five and double-hitched, working on a feedlot,
 A woman and a family, ridin' pens the whole day long,
 Weight gain up and sickness down, seldom ride above a trot,
 Settled in and settled down 'til the whole damn thing goes wrong.
 'n' I told her: *CHORUS*

I was forty miles from anywhere when Dad rode his last circle.
 I got home a day too late, and the family took it hard.
 I walked out the front door, slammed the rusty screen behind me,
 and I stood staring at the sky in Mama's bare front yard,
 'n' I said:

Send me word from the new range you ride on;
 Let me know the way the days go by and the things that bring you pride.
 Tell me all the landmarks and the names of all the horses,
 Send me word from the new range where you ride,
 Send me word from the new range where you ride.

—Tim Williams©

*This song, which was first featured in the Lunchbox Theatre production, **Bunkhouse**, has become popular among cowboy poets and singers. Williams' songs were virtually the only Canadian cowboy verse in the play. Riding pens in a feedlot, the narrator's third verse occupation, is managing cattle in the small corrals where they are fattened up for slaughter, usually in or near an urban center; it is not high status employment among cowboys.*



*Cast of the premiere production of the **Bunkhouse**, September 1989: top Doug McKeag, l-r: Stephen Sparks, Jordie Thomson, Jim Leyden, Tim Williams. Williams, the author of "Word From The Range," and all but one of the other songs used in the play, has an varied background in ranching and farming and is popular musician in western Canada. He currently performs in the acoustic blues trio, Triple Threat. Photo courtesy Lunchbox Theatre, Calgary.*



*George W. Lyon is currently a PhD candidate in the English Department, University of Calgary; his dissertation is tentatively entitled **Cowboys, Farmers, and Indians: Dialectics in Alberta Vernacular Verse**. With Sid Holt, he co-edited **A Toast To Baldy Red: Back Porch Ballads and Parlour Poems**, published in 1991 by NeWest Press. His extensive publications include journalism in Calgary and articles on folk music topics in Canada and the United States, as well as scholarly articles on Allen Ginsberg, Pauline Johnson, and Patrick White. He has been researching community culture in Alberta since the mid-80s.*

A younger, confident GWL: "...seen better days, I'm just putting up with these."