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Article Title: Folklore As a Supplement to Western History

Full Citation: Levette J Davidson, "Folklore As a Supplement to Western History," *Nebraska History* 29 (1948): 3-15

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1948Folklore.pdf>

Date: 3/06/2017

Article Summary: State historical societies should include among their formal records and studies a collection of popular lore found in old newspapers and volumes recounting personal experiences. Collecting current material should be encouraged since many varieties of folklore are a significant part of life today.

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Cataloging Information:

Names: William F Cody, Nathan Meeker, Grandma Pfeiffer

Keywords: trappers, beaver, Indians, rendezvous, bullwhacker, Union Pacific Railroad, Central Pacific Railroad, Meeker Massacre, International Camp, tall tales



Left—Jim Bridger, a mountain man and teller of tall tales. (See *Folklore as a Supplement to Western History.*)



Above—John C. Fremont, center of controversy. (See *Fremont in California: Hero or Mountebank?*)

Folklore As A Supplement To Western History

By Levette J. Davidson

Today many important contributions to knowledge are resulting from the tendency of scholars from different fields of study to join forces in a cooperative attack upon common problems. Astrophysics, biochemistry, and educational psychology have demonstrated the effectiveness of such a procedure. Since historians and folklorists have the desire to record man's adventure through the years and in different places and since both attempt to understand and to explain human experience, they might profitably associate with each other at frequent intervals. Such association might counteract the tendency of history to become an archive of dead facts, a museum of stuffed shirts, or an instrument of political propaganda, and the tendency of folklore to become a quest for examples of fantastic superstitions, trivial local mores, or quaint antiques.

The history of a given locality, such as Nebraska, is incomplete if it preserves the accounts of great public events, the biographies of celebrated leaders, and the statistics of material development alone, while neglecting the customs and beliefs, the songs and the stories, the popular sayings, and the arts and crafts of the common people. Perhaps more of the actual life and spirit of a community is to be found in its folklore than in its political, economic, and military history. But folklore becomes valuable for careful study only when collected by those who follow the methods of dependable historians: searching out the best sources, dating and locating the various occurrences of significant materials, and drawing conclusions only when warranted by an adequate number of authentic examples. A good social history requires the combined efforts of local historians and of local folklorists.

The line between folklore and history is in fact, hard to draw. Incidents and personalities in history become, with the passage of time, surrounded by legend; as they are preserved in the oral traditions, at least, they take on additions and are changed more or less to suit the fancy of the narrator or his audience. It is difficult at this late date, for example, to unwrap from the historic William F. Cody all of the qualities of heroic legend and popular glorifications in which his figure has been embalmed. But Buffalo Bill is definitely a part both of Western history and American folklore. To illustrate how folklore studies may contribute to social history one need only cite the entertaining article on "Old Nebraska Folk Customs," by Louise Pound, published in *Nebraska History*¹ and *The American Play-Party Songs*, by B. A. Botkin.²

Too often, factual history is assumed to contain all of the worthwhile truth about the past; folktales and local anecdotes are regarded merely as entertaining fiction. Perhaps a less naive and a more fruitful attitude is suggested by the following dialogue printed on the title page of Ben C. Clough's collection of tall tales and folk tales, *The American Imagination at Work*³. Police Court Judge to voluble drunk: "Is this true?" Drunk: "Well, judge, it's kinda true." So with much folklore: it is truth communicated with artistic and imaginative embellishments. In addition to entertainment and human interest, however, the careful listener or reader may glean information and understanding from the traditional tales, legends, and the other folk materials which have come down to us from the various periods of the frontier history of Western America.

Trapper Lore

The first movement of white men into the Trans-Missouri West was motivated in part by curiosity about the un-

¹Louise Pound, "Old Nebraska Folk Customs," *Nebraska History*, XXVIII (January-March, 1947), 3-31.

²B. A. Botkin, "The American Play-Party Songs," *University of Nebraska Studies*, XXVII, 1937.

³Ben C. Clough, *The American Imagination at Work* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947).

explored, in part by the love of adventure, but chiefly by the desire to exploit the natural wealth of wild animal furs abounding in the Rocky Mountains. For centuries various Indian tribes had lived off the country by eating the buffalo, the antelope, the deer, and the other animals native to the region, and by using their hides for clothing, shelter, and the additional necessities and luxuries of a savage way of life. But the Indians took only what they needed for themselves; they had no commercial outlet until the white man came, seeking especially the beaver pelts, for which there was a ready market back East. The French and the British from the northeast and the Spanish from the southwest and from such Mississippi settlements as St. Louis had pushed far into this territory even before the entrance of trappers and traders from the United States. But the great era of the fur trade began with Astor's challenge to the dominance of the Hudson's Bay Company in the far Northwest and with the sending out of the Ashley and Henry expeditions of American trappers to the Rockies in 1822 and the years following.

These trappers and traders of the Far West developed a way of life during the first half of the nineteenth century that reflected their return to the primitive struggle of man against nature. Besides the practical knowledge required for survival and material success, these pathmakers and forerunners of American settlement acquired and then passed on to others a body of oral tradition. This included an informal history of the fur trade and numerous biographical sketches of the great moments in the lives of its outstanding personalities. In addition there were countless tales, often highly imaginative, that were used to while away the idle hours in winter quarters, at frontier forts, and before the campfires where two or more trappers cooked their meat and swapped yarns before curling up for the night's sleep.

As is true of most occupations a peculiar jargon grew up around the trapping of beaver. This first great addition from Western life to American speech has few survivals today; but representative examples of talk, found in con-

temporary records, contain words and phrases which suggest vividly the customs, attitudes, and important events which characterized the fur trade period.⁴ Among the terms dealing with trapping and trapper equipment were the following: *cache*, a word borrowed from the French, designating a hiding place for provisions and other effects; *plew* or *plus*, a prime beaver skin, which at one time was worth about six dollars and was the basis of exchange among mountain men and traders; *possibles*, the personal property of the trappers, such as ammunition and tobacco, clothing and cooking utensils; the phrase, *up to beaver*, used of a person who was wise enough to catch even the most cautious beaver; *to trap the river clean*, meaning to take all the beaver; and *bull boats*, light and fragile skiffs, made of buffalo skins stretched over wood frames.

Among the many terms pertaining to wilderness life were: *appolas*, the sharpened sticks upon which meat was hung over the fire to cook; *to make meat*, to lay in a store of provisions by hunting buffalo, deer and other wild animals; *boudins*, a trapper delicacy made from buffalo intestine and containing the chyme; *grease hungry*, to crave meat; *aqua ardiente*, one of the many terms for distilled spirits, such as those made at San Fernandez de Taos—the drink itself oftentimes being called *Taos lightning*; *fufurrow*, or *fofarrow*, from the French for either bauble or tinsel, meaning anything fancy, such as the clothes seen at Santa Fe; *to raise hair*, a figurative expression for scalping; and *white Indian*, applied to any man who had adopted the savage's way of life, often as a squaw man, dwelling with his wife's relatives.

The rendezvous was an authentic folk institution—regional and vocational—designed to facilitate trade and to provide a social break in the lonely existence of the

⁴For a good description of trapper life, see H. M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*. (New York, 1902; revised edition, Press of the Pioneers, 1935). Several selections from the books of the trapper period are included in Levette J. Davidson and Prudence Bostwick, *Literature of the Rocky Mountain West*. (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1939).

trappers. Like the cowboy of a later period, trappers celebrated violently when the rare opportunity presented itself. They expressed their pent-up emotions and spent their accumulated wealth in a short spree, returning to the hunt with little to show as profit for the year's hard labor except a few supplies and their memories. Although the custom lasted for only a few years, it has its parallels even today in American folk ways: for example, "Market Week" in Denver and other wholesale centers. The rendezvous offered, of course, a good opportunity for the exchange not only of furs but also of hair-raising experiences, bits of dearly-won wisdom, entertaining legends, and other lore that embodied and expressed something of the fascination of wilderness life far beyond the limits of civilization.

Along the Overland Trails

Even before 1800, American pioneers were crossing the Mississippi. Beyond the great river they hoped to find still richer land uncrowded by neighbors. Although it had taken two centuries for European settlements to spread from the Atlantic to the Mississippi, the vanguard of the conquerors of the Far West pushed on to the Pacific within another fifty years. Carrying with them much of the civilization of the East, these frontiersmen adapted themselves to a strange environment and to new ways of winning a livelihood. Out of their experiences, there emerged a folklore of the trails and a gallery of Western character types which enrich the story of America's past.

With the introduction of wagons in place of pack animals, in 1824, there came upon the plains the far-famed bullwhacker. As a folk figure he became known for his strong language and his skill with the bull-whip. The following contemporary portrait includes some "whip-lore."

Beside the first yoke of oxen trudges the character of the plains—a bullwhacker. Usually he is a well-built man, bronzed by constant exposure to the weather; his hirsute and unclean appearance is an indication of his aversion to water. He is more profane than the mate of a Mississippi River packet, and we have his word for it, "kin drink more

whiskey." Accompanying this assertion were seven of the most astounding oaths that ever fell on an ear used to the strong language with which the army teamster encourages his mules. The bullwhacker's oaths and his whip are the largest known. The handle of the ordinary whip is not more than three feet in length; the lash, of braided rawhide, is seldom less than twenty feet long. From the staff the lash swells gradually for five or six feet, when it reaches a size of at least ten inches in circumference from this point ("belly" is the term used here) it tapers to within a foot of the end, which is formed of a ribbon-shaped thong. With this persuader the cattle travel eighteen to twenty miles a day. A lazy ox occasionally receives a reminder, in the shape of a whack in the flank, that causes him to double up as if seared with a red-hot iron. The blow is invariably accompanied by a volley of oaths that seems to startle the whole team into a more rapid pace.

The accuracy with which the bullwhacker throws his lash is astonishing. A favorite pastime among them is the cutting of a coin from the top of a stake thrust loosely into the earth. If the coin is knocked off the stake without disturbing the stake it is forfeit; if the stake is disturbed the thrower of the lash loses the value of the coin. A bullwhacker, noted for the accuracy with which he threw his lash, bet a comrade a pint of whiskey that he could cut the seat of his pantaloons without touching the skin beneath. The bet was accepted. The blow was delivered at the stooping form of the acceptor of the wager, who is said to have executed the tallest jump on record, at the sight of which the thrower of the lash remarked, "Thunder! I've lost the whiskey!" The other party was minus a piece of skin as well as a large fragment of breeches.⁵

The life of the bullwhacker was full of hard work; but he was proud of his responsibility and, when the occasion presented itself, able to compensate with a wild spree and the many boisterous entertainments of the towns at the ends of the long drives. Perhaps the best picture of caravan life ever given is the one by Josiah Gregg in his *Commerce of the Prairies*, based upon his own trading expeditions to Sante Fe.

Many were the tales of the trail told at night before the campfires of the bullwhackers. Some dealt with Indian

⁵Theodore R. Davis, "A Stage Ride to Colorado," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, XXXV (July, 1867), 137-139.

attacks upon the caravans. Those depredations became at times so disastrous that military escorts had to be furnished by the United States government. Especially feared were the Comanches. Upon the appearance over the horizon of a band of Indians, the wagons would be "formed," guns would be primed, and all would be ready to repulse the enemy. If the Indians were accompanied by their women and children, they were probably out on a buffalo hunt; they would then stop for a friendly visit, departing soon after having received the expected presents which the whites had handed over in the interests of peace. Other stories of the trail dealt with the careers of famous traders or the comedies and tragedies of everyday existence.

The various adventures of Lewis and Clark and of Fremont, as well as those of the other explorers of the Far West, were no doubt recalled before the campfires of emigrants on the Oregon Trail. Romantic stories of such red heroines as Sacajawea (Bird Woman) and Wik-munk (Holy Rainbow), who had made the overland trip with the pathfinders in earlier days might well have inspired the women of the migrating families with new courage and determination to bear up under their trials. Certainly there were many hardships and tragedies along the way, especially for the women and children. The stories of two of the greatest disasters of the Oregon and California trails—that of the Donner Party and that of the Mountain Meadows Massacre—are too well known to need recital here.⁶

Most gigantic of the construction jobs in the history of American railroads was the building of the first trans-continental line across the plains and the mountains west of the Missouri River. Following the Civil War, numerous surveys of possible routes, and the letting of generous land-grant contracts by the government, the Union Pacific built west from Omaha and the Central Pacific, east from San Francisco. Many songs, stories, and traditions resulted,

⁶Col. Henry Inman, *The Great Salt Lake Trail* (New York, 1898; Topeka, 1914), pp. 135-144; and W. J. Ghent, *The Road to Oregon* (New York, 1929 and 1934), pp. 89-91.

especially from the Irish Paddies "a-workin' on the railroad" for the Union Pacific. Chinese labor, predominant on the western section, of course added little to our folklore in English.

According to common report most railroad talk dealt with "whiskey, women, higher wages, and shorter hours." But story-telling was common, too. According to Cy Warman, who turned to writing about railroading after having worked as a D. and R. G. engineer in the Rocky Mountains, "There is an Irishman in eight out of ten stories you hear on the road." The two examples of Irish wit which he cites are, however, not very funny. Far better and seemingly authentic is the yarn about the blasting of a right of way through the Royal Gorge of the Arkansas River, picked up by Ernest Ingersoll, a journalist who toured Colorado by rail in 1884.⁷ Probably many such tales were repeated in construction camps, in railroad boarding houses, and wherever else railroad men gathered. Other stories that have survived concern the conflict between the Sante Fe and the D. and R. G. for the right of way through the Royal Gorge, the meeting of the engines at Promontory Point in 1869, phantom trains with madmen as engineers, runaway engines or cars, and the terrible storms encountered in the mountains.⁸

Frontier Settlements

The Westerner of today is more aware of the folklore that has come down to him from the first few decades of life on the frontier than of his heritage from the period of the fur trade or of the overland trails. This is partly due to the presence of story-telling old-timers who either saw the beginning of the now-prosperous settlements or who remember hearing their elders recount outstanding person-

⁷Ernest Ingersoll, *The Crest of the Continent* (Chicago: R. R. Donnelley and Sons, 1887). Reprinted by Levette J. Davidson and Prudence Bostwick, op. cit.

⁸Cf. "The Phantom Train of Marshall Pass." in Charles M. Skinner, *Myths and Legends of Our Own Land* (New York, 1896), pp. 192-195.

al experiences in town-building. Pioneer traditions are strong in many parts of the West, and revivals of old forms of entertainment and of old customs have become popular. Numerous songs and stories that grew up in the West have been collected more industriously in recent years and are now circulated more widely than ever, by means of radio and print. Then, too, current Western speech is colored by place names, proverbs, and other expressions that reflect the processes by which this savage territory was transformed into a civilized domain. The not too remote past of the Western frontier settlements is, therefore, a living tradition. It is cultivated more or less wisely by pioneer societies, chambers of commerce, schools, and folklore scholars.

Two Indian beliefs are interesting in this connection: that once the white man plows land it will soon become his possession and that bees are the advance party announcing the coming of the white man. The first belief may have led to the far-famed Meeker Massacre on the White River Ute reservation in 1879, for Nathan Meeker seemed to be determined to model the Indian community of which he was superintendent according to the agricultural pattern that had succeeded at Greeley, Colorado. The adoption by the Mormons of the beehive as a symbol of their industry in building Deseret might have reinforced the second superstition.

Many of the stories of early-day settlements deal with Indian troubles. One tombstone in a Denver cemetery, for example, bears the legend "Murdered By Indians." Every community seems to have had its Indian scare and to have listened to thrilling accounts by participants in such famous conflicts as the "Battle of Beecher Island," the "Sand Creek Massacre," and "Custer's Last Stand." One old-timer, however, had a unique experience, for according to an old newspaper clipping, "A true account of the man who was scalped and lived to tell the story has been filed with the Nebraska State Historical Society, and the indisputable proof is a wrinkled scalp in a hermetically

sealed glass case." In addition to Indian troubles most pioneer settlements experienced long-remembered fires and floods. When rebuilt these towns were usually better off than they had been before the disasters had tested their permanency. Such was true of Denver after the Cherry Creek flood of 1864.

Many are the sites in Colorado, California, Nevada, and other metal mining states of the West where gold or silver camps once flourished but where today little or nothing remains except a few dilapidated buildings with broken windows and sagging doors, untenanted except by ghosts of former days. Sometimes a rival town survived. Such was the case with International Camp and with Poverty Bar, Colorado. According to Charles H. Leckenby, editor of the *Steamboat Pilot*, J. V. Farwell of Chicago invested a great deal of money in constructing a twenty-seven mile ditch from Elk River over to the Hahns Peak gold region. His camp took the name of International Camp, from the mining company; but the miners called it *Bugtown* because all the "big bugs" lived there. Near-by was another camp, *Poverty Bar*, where the placer area was more extensive although not so rich. It has survived as the town of Hahns Peak, while International Camp was abandoned long ago and its buildings swept away by fire. The legends connected with other Western towns, whether "ghost" or "life", would fill many volumes; now they can be found in oral tradition or in collections made by local historians.⁹

Local Characters

Often the center of traditional stories about frontier days is the local "character." Upon him or her were hung many yarns of foolish or wild deeds even though committed by another or merely imagined. From such stories one can construct a vivid and fairly dependable picture of the

⁹Cf. "The Names of Colorado Towns," prepared by the Colorado Writers' Project and published in the *Colorado Magazine*, January, 1940, through May, 1943.

social life in Western communities in the days before rapid transportation and communication. Chief Colorow of the Utes, for example, typified for early settlers in Colorado the begging Indian.

Another famous character is the pioneer woman, who endured countless hardships in the frontier settlements. Too often only such exceptional figures as Calamity Jane and other "lady wildcats" have been remembered. But the West produced heroines as well as "hell-raisers" like "Madame Featherlegs" and "Slanting Annie." "Silverheels," the dance hall girl of Fairplay, Colorado, for example, won the gratitude of the whole community by nursing sick miners through a small-pox epidemic; her disappearance before they could publicly thank her, changed her into a legend, with her name given to a neighboring mountain.

A few years ago I interviewed Grandma Pfeiffer of Monte Vista, Colorado, and heard the stories that she often told to school children and others. They included a description of how she once swam the flooded Rio Grande by holding on to her pony's saddle, for she was urgently needed to nurse a sick woman when the doctor could not go. She had always been able to rise to the demand made upon her, for "the Lord helped." As a young woman she had married the son of the Indian fighter, Colonel Pfeiffer, who told her of a human hair rope that the Indians had made, all of black except for white knots at intervals, with a tassel of red, presumably from the scalps of white women. But Grandma Pfeiffer was undaunted, probably because she knew the Colonel's reputation for tall tales.

On the border line between criminal and hero was the Western gambler and bunco artist, such as "Soapy" Smith, about whom some facts and much fiction has been circulated. Well-known in Denver and the boom town of Creede, Colorado, "Soapy" later went to the Klondike and was killed there.

Western Vocabularies

Another approach to Western lore is through vocabu-

lary¹⁰. Not only the peculiar physical features of mountains, plains, and deserts, but also the vocations characteristic of the region supply words and phrases which are unconsciously learned by natives but which often puzzle newcomers. Terms used in irrigation, in the sugar-beet industry, in gold and silver mining, in ranch life and cattle raising are rarely "learned"; they are absorbed by town and country dweller in the West by the mere processes of living, as is all "lore".

The following once-popular expressions, still to be heard occasionally in the Rocky Mountain region, also embody much of folk attitudes and back-grounds:

It takes a mine to run a mine.

A brand on a steer is like a lock on a door.

There is no Sunday west of Newton (Kansas) and no God west of Pueblo (Colorado).

He's got the world by the tail with a down-hill pull.

Maybe you'll catch me in a jack-pot some day when I'll need help.

The old bull was so tough a fork would scarcely stick in the gravy.

He jumped like a burned steer.

He keeps a high fence (is "offish" with neighbors).

If you want to get anywhere, you'd better start two days before you're ready (in the mountains).

Western cottonwoods used to bear fruit with boots on.

Tall Tales

Almost universal is the love for humorous anecdotes and tall tales. In all periods of Western history they have tended toward the gigantic, perhaps to rival the tall mountains and far-stretching plains. Today the trapper tales of a Jim Bridger are replaced by the yarns about Nature's wonders, told to or by vacationists. Although such stories are numberless, time will permit only one, the following.¹¹

¹⁰Cf. Levette J. Davidson, "Vocabulary of a Westerner," *Southwest Review*, XXIV (October, 1938), 62-74.

¹¹Prize-winning story, sent in by Mrs. Alma K. Reck, in the "Tall Tales" contest conducted by the *Rocky Mountain News*, Denver, in connection with the Fifth Annual Western Folklore Conference at the University of Denver, July, 1945.

An angler hooked a perch one morning while fishing in the Platte. He played the fish all day, but was unable to land it. He moored it to the bank with his line and went home to rest. After a good night's sleep he returned to his task, but still was unable to land the monster.

Days went by in this routine, and finally he hauled it ashore. He dragged it home, but its weight was so great he sank to his knees on the pavement at every step as he tugged at his prize.

The fish was so large he was unable to kill it. He kept it alive in a huge tank he had constructed and removed fillets from its flanks as needed for the table. Eventually, he moved back East and, on leaving, gave the fish to a widow. She wrote him from time to time in ensuing years, saying she had gradually sliced in to where "the fillets are getting right good." She told the angler the perch often asked about him.

Perhaps the above discussion will suggest some of the Western folklore areas worth cultivating for the light they may shed on the history of life in the regions west of the Missouri River. Every state historical society should supplement its more formal records and studies by a collection of popular lore still to be found in oral tradition and in old newspapers and volumes recounting personal experiences. Since many varieties of folklore are a significant part of the life of today, collecting current material should be encouraged. It is easier to secure examples of local legends, regional songs, tall tales, stories of queer characters, superstitions, proverbs, folk remedies, children's games, vocational lore, etc., as they appear than it is to collect them after they have died out.

Noteworthy progress has been made in recent times in folklore collecting and study both abroad and in various localities in the United States. The work of the Irish Folklore Commission, the National Folk Festival Association, the American Folklore Society, and similar organizations should be an example and an inspiration to all those who wish to preserve and to enjoy manifestations of the folk spirit and of the everyday democratic way of life in Western America.