



The Folk Songs of Great Plains Homesteading: Anthems, Laments, and Political Songs

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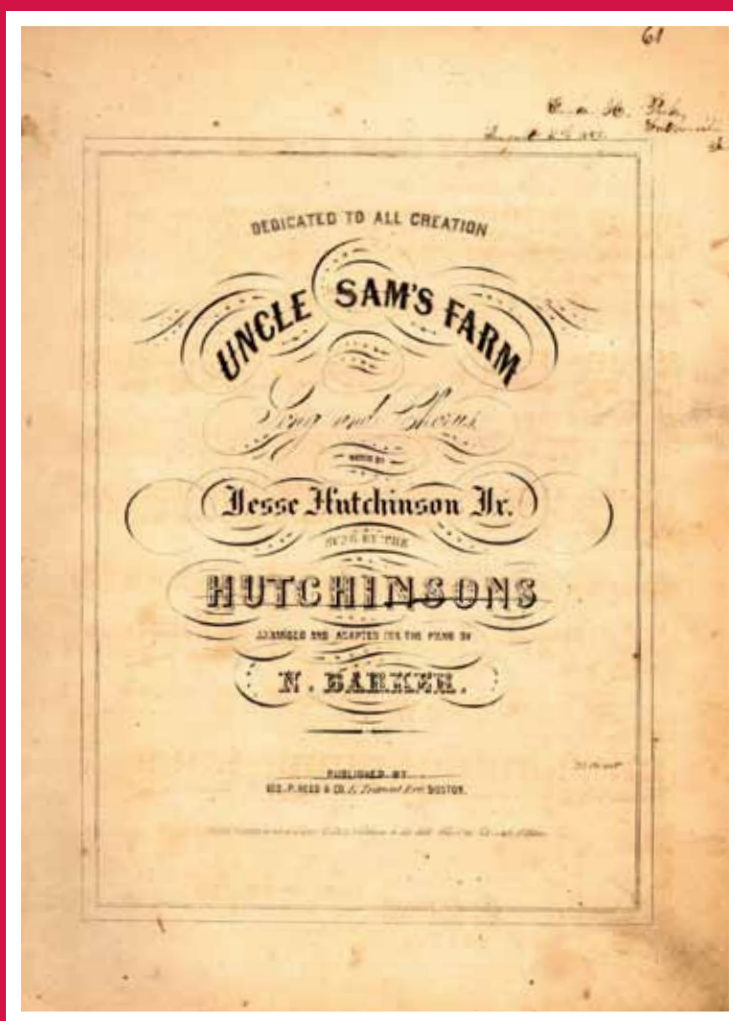
Songs Discussed: "Independent Man," "Song of the Kansas Emigrants," "The Kinkaider's Song," "My Western Home" (later "Home on the Range"), "Dakota Land," "The Lane County Bachelor," "The Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim," "Soddy Rally Song," "The Hayseed," "The Donkey's Song," "Dear Prairie Home," "But the Mortgage Worked the Hardest"

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THE FOLK SONGS OF GREAT PLAINS HOMESTEADING:

ANTHEMS, LAMENTS, AND POLITICAL SONGS



By DAN HOLTZ

“Of all the mighty nations in the East or in the West, o this glorious yankee nation is the greatest and best...”

“**U**ncle Sam is rich enough to give us all a farm.” So proclaimed a popular song from the early 1850s.¹ In that era, good old Uncle Sam undoubtedly had deep enough pockets, enough bread in the cupboard, or, overstated kidding aside, enough real property on the balance sheets to be a national sugar daddy. In fact, the record shows that roughly 270 million acres of the public domain (nearly 422,000 square miles, or about 10 percent of U.S. lands) were eventually given away because of the Homestead Act of 1862.² So the real issue for aspiring homesteaders was not so much whether they could get a farm; it was whether they had the gumption and the where-withal to keep it. Homesteading was an uncertain endeavor. Only about 40 percent of all homesteaders “proved up” on their claims and received a final patent from the federal government.³ Although the percentage was somewhat higher in Nebraska—a little more than 50 percent between 1863 and 1900—government records nevertheless reflect a cold, hard reality.⁴

Records of a different kind, folk songs, show other dimensions of that reality, namely the humanity of the situation. Not surprisingly, many homesteading songs tell of the hardships and deprivations of the homesteading experience. Just as tellingly, though, they illustrate the mindsets of homesteaders in other ways, as their focus and purpose shifted from mostly shared commiseration to determined public action by the latter decades of the 1800s. To put it another way, these songs were at first a salve, then a sword for these struggling but determined pioneers.

In Nebraska at least, the greatest flourish of songs responding to the human consequences of the Homestead Act occurred between August and November of 1890. These can be broadly classified as political songs (either campaign or protest or both), and typically dealt with persons and issues important to that year’s election. However, these are not the homesteading songs that were most



**Crowd near Custer
County land office, 1904.**
NSHS RG2134-1

often collected; the songs which have resonated most through the years are mostly those predating the volatile 1890s and which portray the universal human stories of the uncertainties of the homesteading experience. The ephemeral nature of the political songs illustrates, perhaps, the old maxim that propaganda does not endure as art, although I am not arguing that any homesteading song is fine art.

At this point I need to define the term “folk song,” and make clear that not all the songs discussed in this article are true folk songs. I also need to explain the criteria I used to put songs into the homesteading category. For a folk song definition, I used one formulated by noted Nebraska folklorist Louise Pound, who wrote in *Nebraska Folklore*:

My three tests of genuine folk songs . . . have always been: they are handed down in tradition orally or in print, their form not static but continually changing; they are anonymous, their authorship and origin lost to the singers; they have retained their vitality through a fair period of time.⁵

With this definition in mind, I began to look for songs which appear to have originated between 1854 and 1905—in other words, from the year the Kansas-Nebraska Act opened these territories to legal non-Indian settlement, to one year after the Kinkaid Act took effect. I chose the latter date to allow folk song composers ample time to respond to that land legislation. Guided by these parameters, I then looked for songs whose lyrics specifically mentioned the words such as “homestead,”

“homesteading,” “soddies,” or “sodbusters,” or songs that mentioned getting land as a “claim” (e.g., “The Little Old Sod Shanty on My Claim” or “Starving to Death on a Government Claim”) and, more generally, ones in which the speaker of the lyrics is primarily engaged in farming as an occupation, even if the song did not specify the land being acquired through the Homestead Act or some other piece of federal land legislation. I found a number of songs which met one or more of these criteria; for the purposes of this article I found that I could classify them into three categories: anthems, laments, and political songs.

Although none of the political songs composed during the three-month deluge in 1890 is a true folk song—because its authorship is usually known or, more importantly, its vitality is gone—all of these songs drifted into the folk tradition. They drifted this way because all borrowed their melodies from older, well-known songs, which made them recognizable and easy to sing and pass along. For example, Mrs. J. T. (Luna) Kellie’s “Independent Man” was sung to the tune of “The Girl I Left Behind Me,” a popular song during the Civil War.⁶ These campaign or protest songs were ephemeral; unlike the songs I refer to as “anthems” or “laments,” only a few of the protest songs are included in the standard-bearing folk song collections.⁷

Anthems

Homesteading songs which are anthems (that is, a song “of praise, devotion, or patriotism”) seem to be relatively few, though they include the two earliest-dated and the latest-dated songs discussed in this article.⁸ The earliest is the “Song of the Kansas Emigrants,” which can be dated to 1854. Its lyrics were written by John Greenleaf Whittier, the noted poet who was also a staunch abolitionist and corresponding editor for *The National Era*, the newspaper which serialized the initial publication of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in 1851-52. The song’s lyrics include these lines:

We cross the prairies as of old
Our fathers crossed the sea
To make the West as they the East
The homestead of the free.⁹

These lyrics reflect not only the desire of New England abolitionists to make Kansas Territory a free state under the Popular Sovereignty provision of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, but also the hunger for land that would heighten the inevitable conflicts between free- and slave-staters. Legend



has it that the members of the Second New England Emigrant Aid Company left Boston for Kansas Territory in 1854 singing this song, which is sung to the tune of “Auld Lang Syne.”¹⁰

The last-dated of the anthems, “The Kinkaiders’ Song,” originated sometime after the passage of the Kinkaid Act in April 1904. This legislation allowed homesteaders to claim 640, rather than 160, acres of land in 37 counties in northwestern and north central Nebraska. The song, throughout, includes resoundingly optimistic lyrics such as, “You ask what place I like the best / The sand hills, oh the old sand hills” and “The corn we raise is our delight / The melons, too, are out of sight,” as well as, “In all Nebraska’s wide domain / ’Tis the place we long to see again.”¹¹ However, this song’s sentiments belie the trying experiences of many Kinkaiders. Though no available figures indicate what percentage of Kinkaiders proved up on their homesteads, many found that even 640 acres in the Sandhills and drier high plains were not enough for successful farming.¹² Frederick Luebke, in *Nebraska: An Illustrated History*, writes that most Kinkaiders pulled out within a decade, defeated by an environment that was not conducive to their plans.¹³ Mari Sandoz, in *Old Jules*, suggests another dimension of these homesteaders’ plight: “The boom enthusiasm of the Kinkaiders was short. So many were middle-aged, some old, dying. Claims were deserted or the relinquishments sold for a couple of hundred dollars.”¹⁴ In other words, the enthusiasm of “The Kinkaiders’ . . .” lyrics is somewhat misleading.

One of the best-known anthems also gives a misleading impression, at least in its current form. Though known today as a cowboy song, “Home on the Range,” the official state song of Kansas, was originally written as a homesteading song. It began in 1872 as a poem, “My Western Home,” by Kansas homesteader Brewster Higley, who had filed a claim the previous year.¹⁵ Through the process of making folk music, in which the lyrics came to be sung not only by settlers but also by cowboys, Higley’s original chorus changed. His lines, “I would not exchange my home here to range / Forever in azures so bright,” became “Home, home on the range,” a phrase that doesn’t appear in Higley’s version.¹⁶ Instead, his lyrics offered tributes to the promises of the prairie, such as, “I love the wild flowers in this bright land of ours,” and “Where the life streams with buoyancy flow.”¹⁷

Laments

In contrast to the optimism of the anthems, the songs which seem to best capture the humanity



Moses P. Kinkaid,
congressman representing
Nebraska’s Sixth
Congressional District.
NSHS RG2411-2943b



**Southwest Custer
County, 1892.** NSHS
RG2608-1683 (detail)

of the homesteading experience are those I call laments. These songs bemoan the plight of the struggling sod-house settler, but almost always do so with a dose of tongue-in-cheek humor. They seldom have the bitterness or the anger of the political songs. Three of these—“Dakota Land,” “The Lane County Bachelor” (also known as “Starving to Death on a Government Claim”), and “The Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim”—appear in all the standard folk song collections on which this article draws. They express themes common to homesteading laments: the harshness and changeability of weather, the lack of basic necessities, and the short supply of marriageable women. “Dakota Land” (also known as “Kansas Land,” “Nebraska

Land,” and, even, “Sweet Saskatchewan”) begins with the lines:

We’ve reached the land of desert sweet,
Where nothing grows for man to eat;
The wind it blows with fiery heat
Across the plains so hard to beat.¹⁸

Describing “The Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim,” Nebraska folklorist Roger Welsch writes, “This song, better than any other, expresses the problems, good humor, loneliness, and faith of the sod-house settler.”¹⁹ The song describes the settler’s Spartan existence in lines such as, “My victuals are not always served the best,” and, “I little thought that I’d come down to burning twisted hay.”²⁰ It also notes the scarcity of women: “Still I wish that some kind-hearted girl would pity on me take / And relieve me of the mess that I am in.”²¹ This complaint is echoed in “The Lane County Bachelor”: “Frank Baker’s my name, and a bachelor I am; / I’m keeping old batch on an elegant plan.”²² Many passages in Mari Sandoz’s *Old Jules* reflect this scarcity, even well into the 1880s, when Jules Sandoz settled in the Nebraska Panhandle. Of the spring of 1885, for example, Sandoz wrote, “This year there were more women, not many, but more, and some of these single. Whatever their status in Indiana or Iowa or York state, . . . here they were all sought after as heiresses or, more to the point, good cooks.”²³

“The Little Old Sod Shanty” even inspired a parody, one of the few homesteading songs written in a female voice. Titled “Answer to the Little Old Sod

Shanty on the Claim,” this song recounts the waning ardor of a homesteader’s fiancée who is more vexed than empathetic with her beloved’s plight as he seeks his fortune on the plains: “No doubt some tawny Indian Miss would pity on him take, / and help extricate him from the fix he’s in.” The narrator makes up her mind: “I think I’ll wed the owner of the store front near the park, / And leave Sam in his shanty on the claim.”²⁴

Finally, one other song which has the self-deprecating humor of the laments, but which is really more of an anthem, is the “Soddy Rally Song,” sung to the tune of “The Yellow Rose of Texas.” Not found in the standard folk song collections, this song is notable for its inclusiveness as well as its humor. Its chorus includes the lines:

We are soddies from the prairies,
The mountains and the plains,
Where e’er the land was Uncle Sam’s
We planted there our claims.

One verse further emphasizes the kinship of the homesteaders with the lines:

We are Jayhawkers from Kansas,
We are gems from Idaho,
Cornhuskers from Nebraska State,
Show-Me’s from old Mo.

and continues listing homesteaders from states such as “Gophers from Minnesoty,” farther east.²⁵ Moreover, the song has a degree of self-deprecating, even indelicate, humor, which reflects the realities of the homesteading experience, but which is not found in any of the other songs. Its second verse proclaims:

We soddies well remember when
No fuel could be found.
Those cows they must have wondered
Why we followed them around!
No papers had we—such the odds
For these were luxuries.
We shelled the corn and saved the cobs,
No laughing if you please.²⁶

Political Songs

By 1890 the promises of the prairie were fading like faint wagon tracks in the Sandhills. Of the political songs, one of the most memorable is “The Hayseed,” sung to the tune of “Save a Poor Sinner Like Me.” It included lines such as, “I once was a tool of oppression, / And as green as a sucker could

Cora Housle, southeast of Merna, Nebraska, 1886.
NSHS RG2608-1775





be,” and, “And the ticket we vote next November / Will be made up of hayseeds like me.”²⁷ Like other campaign/protest songs, its lyrics were printed in the *Farmers’ Alliance*. Published weekly in Lincoln, the newspaper was “the official organ” of the Farmers’ Alliance movement, which was later absorbed by the Populist Party.²⁸ Arising because of both natural and man-made forces which farmers were facing, the movement dates to 1880 in Nebraska, with “more than two hundred local Alliances . . . chartered” in the state in 1886.²⁹

Although in 1889 Nebraska farmers produced their best yields in a decade, the surpluses resulted in plummeting crop prices. This was followed by drought, with the state receiving an average of 17.15 inches of rain in 1890, its lowest total since 1864.³⁰

Thus, in Nebraska during the contentious campaign of 1890, the pages of the *Farmers’ Alliance* proclaimed:

The most important political campaign ever made in Nebraska is about to open. On the one side will be arrayed the farmers and laborers of the state; on the other the corporations and their henchmen, and the newspapers which for years have prostituted their columns to the use of the corporations.³¹

The publications alluded to here included a “number of the State’s daily newspapers,” such as “the *Lincoln Journal*, the *Omaha Bee*, and the *World-Herald*,” which did not sympathize with the Farmers’ Alliance.³² In fact, the *Nebraska State Journal* had called Farmers’ Alliance leaders “horny handed sons of toil” and “venerable hay seeds,” thus inspiring “The Hayseed” song.³³

“The Hayseed’s” message, although adversarial, was directed at massed forces—“monopolies,” “railroads,” and “old party bosses”—that farmers

Cover of the Farmers’ Alliance songbook. After business matters were resolved, Alliance meetings could involve general discussions, speeches, music and literary performances.
NSHS 11055-584

saw arrayed against them. Other political songs were more pointed and personal. A good example is “The Donkey’s Song,” which appeared in the September 6, 1890, issue of the *Farmers’ Alliance*. Sung to the tune of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home,” it targets three men whom the Farmers’ Alliance saw as political and business adversaries: Church Howe, George W. Holdrege, and Thomas Benton. All were connected to the railroads or to other forces Alliance members regarded as oppressive. Howe, for example, was active in Nebraska Republican Party politics, serving four terms each in the Nebraska House of Representatives and Senate. For a number of years, he was also a vice-president of the Missouri Pacific Railroad Company.³⁴ Holdrege rose from railroad clerk to the position of “general manager of the Omaha office” of the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Company by 1882.³⁵ In “The Donkey’s Song,” Howe and Holdrege are named in the first three lines, which were spoken rather than sung:

As I close to the railroad camp passed the
other day,
I much delighted was to hear the long-eared
donkey’s bray,
It sure was Howe’s and Holdrege’s voice and
this they seemed to say.

Luna Kellie in 1892. She and her husband, J. T., were homesteaders in Adams and Kearney counties, and became involved with the Farmers’ Alliance movement. Luna wrote lyrics for several protest songs. NSHS RG3914-3



Then, the first line that is sung pulls the third villain, another railroad representative, into the story: “Oh, Thomas Benton is his name,” who “gave a mortgage on his soul.” The song’s refrain, “Yonc huh, yonc huh,” imitates a donkey’s bray.³⁶

These lyrics, like so many others that were printed in the *Farmers’ Alliance* in the campaign months of 1890, were written by Luna Kellie, a homesteader’s wife. It is one of the ironies of homesteading lyrics that while those that project a gender are almost exclusively male, the most prolific homesteading lyricist was in fact a woman. Kellie and her husband, J. T., settled in 1876 near Heartwell, Nebraska, a village between Hastings and Minden in the south central part of the state.³⁷ Lyrics to more than a dozen of Kellie’s songs appeared in the *Farmers’ Alliance* between August and November of 1890, and she was elected secretary of the State Farmers’ Alliance in 1894. She began as a reluctant activist who apparently got involved because of her husband’s encouragement. In her memoirs, Kellie wrote that she “had been taught that it was unwomanly to concern oneself with politics,” but she “saw where a decent mother might wish very much to vote on local affairs at least.” She also wrote that she had “had reservations about attending any meetings concerned with politics, since she had learned as a girl that drinking and rough language abounded on election days.”³⁸

Kellie wholeheartedly joined the fray by the summer of 1890. She wrote an opinion piece titled “To the Christian Women of Nebraska—Come up to the Help of the Lord Against the Mighty,” which appeared in the September 20, 1890, issue of the *Farmers’ Alliance*. “Do not be scared out with a cry of ‘women must not meddle in politics.’ This is not politics—it is religion,” Kellie wrote, going on to say that people must “make industrial and moral worth, not wealth, the true standard of individual and national greatness.”³⁹ Her contributions to the Farmers’ Alliance movement that summer also included two songs—“Dear Prairie Home” and “Vote for Me”—collected in *Songs of the American West*. The lyrics to that first composition reflect a theme common to her songs: the farmer being cheated by the money-men. The first verse says:

There’s a dear old homestead on Nebraska’s
fertile plain,
Where I toiled my manhood’s strength away;
All that labor now is lost to me, but it is
Shylock’s gain,
For that dear old home he claims today.⁴⁰



Even more bitter than “Dear Prairie Home” was “But the Mortgage Worked the Hardest.” Popular in Nebraska during the 1890s, the song gives an unrelenting account of how a homesteader’s constant labor and toil were outstripped by a ravenous mortgage which worked even harder. Some of the lines of the second stanza read:

Whatever we kept from it
Seemed almost as a theft.
It watched us every minute;
It ruled us right and left.

The last stanza concludes with an even darker image of the homesteader’s deceased wife:

If to trace the hidden arrow
Was within the doctor’s art,
They’d ha’ found a mortgage lying
On that woman’s broken heart.⁴¹

Like the experiences and the movement to which they gave voice, homesteading songs are diverse: sometimes rich in imagery, often painfully personal and honest, sometimes filled with pride and determination, sometimes brimming with bitterness and resentment, and more than a few times rife with lyrics which strain to wed with the song’s rhythm. Like Solomon Butcher’s photographs of the sod-house era, though, they let us peer into the lives of homesteaders in ways not found in claim documents and maps charting settlement patterns. And like Butcher’s photographs, in which homesteaders are pictured with their possessions outside their soddies, these songs reflect public, as well as private personae.⁴² They do not always let us peer inside. But they do give us worthwhile portraits of the economic, political, social, and personal lives of the homesteaders whose dreams of becoming free-holding landowners in the


Ed Barnes with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Peter M. Barnes, near Clear Creek, Custer County, 1887.
NSHS RG2608-1788 (detail)

James and Luna Kellie's
homestead, Kearney
County, 1890.
NSHS RG3914-2



plains states were complicated by a multitude of factors. Among other challenges they faced tough prairie sod which required a different kind of farming than soils farther east, natural disasters such as the grasshopper plagues of the 1870s, the seemingly endless dry years of the early 1890s, and often a pronounced lack of capital.⁴³ When these uncontrollable variables were coupled with manmade roadblocks such as high rates for freighting and farm loans, the voices in homesteading songs changed to reflect the homesteaders' metastasizing frustrations.

Thus, homesteading songs seemed to move through identifiable stages, although their chronological boundaries are not completely clear-cut.

Closely following important pieces of federal land legislation—The Kansas-Nebraska Act, The Homestead Act, and The Kincaid Act—were the anthems, which celebrated the homesteaders' perceived promises of free land-holding. The anthems were followed by the often dry-humored laments, which seemed to project the lone voice of one crying in the wilderness, a creative slight-of-hand because these songs would not have become vital and popular unless they expressed a rather universal misery. The final stage, near and during the early 1890s, produced the political songs, which expressed a growing resentment of felt injustice and, more often than not, campaigned on behalf of a political platform. 

NOTES

¹ "Uncle Sam's Farm," in *Songs of the Great American West*, ed. I. Silber (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967), 215-16.

² Todd Arrington, "Homesteading by the Numbers," <http://www.nps.gov/home/historyculture/bynumbers.html> (retrieved May 18, 2012).

³ Ibid.

⁴ James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska*, 3rd ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 160-61. Here Olson and Naugle write that "of 131,561 persons who filed original homestead entries on 18,393,541 acres . . . in Nebraska between 1863 and 1895, only 68,862 had received final patents by 1900." Thus, a little more than 52 percent had proved up.

⁵ Louise Pound, *Nebraska Folklore* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), 231.

⁶ "The Independent Man," *Farmers' Alliance*, September 27, 1890, 1:1.

⁷ These folk song collections are *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, collected by John Lomax; *Songs of the American West*, ed. R. Lingenfelter and R. Dwyer; *Songs of the Great American West*, ed. I. Silber; and *A Treasury of Nebraska Pioneer Folklore*, comp. Roger L. Welsch.

⁸ *Random House Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (2000), s.v. "anthem."

⁹ Cathy Barton, Dave Para, and Bob Dyer, "Song of the Kansas Emigrants" in *Johnny Whistletrigger: Civil War Songs from the Western Border* (Boonville, MO: Big Canoe Records, 1993).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "The Kinkaid's Song," in *A Treasury of Nebraska Pioneer Folklore*, comp. Roger L. Welsch (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 56.

¹² Olson, *History of Nebraska*, 198.

¹³ Frederick G. Luebke, *Nebraska: An Illustrated History* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 201.

¹⁴ Mari Sandoz, *Old Jules* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), 380.

¹⁵ "Home on the Range," in *Present at the Creation*, <http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/homeontherange/index.html> (retrieved Nov. 21, 2012).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ "Dakota Land," in *Songs of the Great American West*, 234.

¹⁹ Roger L. Welsch, *Sod Walls: The Story of The Nebraska Sod House* (Lincoln: J & L Lee Co., 1991), 166.

²⁰ "The Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim," in *Songs of the American West*, 464-65.

²¹ Ibid.

²² "The Lane County Bachelor," in *Songs of the American West*, 458.

²³ Sandoz, *Old Jules*, 60.

²⁴ "Answer to the Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim," in *Songs of the American West*, 466.

²⁵ "Soddy Rally Song," in Welsch, *Sod Walls*, 174-76.

²⁶ Ibid, 175.

²⁷ "The Hayseed," in *A Treasury of Nebraska Pioneer Folklore*, 67.

²⁸ "Nebraska Folklore Pamphlets Eighteen and Twenty," qtd. in *A Treasury of Nebraska Pioneer Folklore*, 57, 59.

²⁹ Olson, *History of Nebraska*, 212-22.

³⁰ Ibid., 224.

³¹ *Farmers' Alliance*, August 16, 1890, 2:1.

³² "Nebraska Folklore Pamphlet Twenty: More Farmers Alliance Songs of the 1890s," Federal Writers' Project, Nebraska, May 1939, 13.

³³ *Nebraska State Journal*, July 30, 1890, qtd. in Olson *History of Nebraska*, 227.

³⁴ "Church Howe, 1839-1915," Nebraska State Historical Society database. <http://nebraskahistory.org/lib-arch/research/manuscripts/family/howe.htm> (retrieved Nov. 6, 2012).

³⁵ "George Ward Holdrege, 1847-1926," Nebraska State Historical Society database. <http://nebraskahistory.org/lib-arch/research/manuscripts/family/george-holdrege.htm> (retrieved Nov. 6, 2012).

³⁶ Mrs. J. T. Kellie, "The Donkey's Song," in *A Treasury of Nebraska Pioneer Folklore*, 61-62.

³⁷ E. Jean Idea, *Dreamer's [sic] Betrayed: The Life of Luna E. Kellie: Pioneer Publisher - Politician* (AA Blueprint Company, Inc., 1993).

³⁸ Kellie, qtd. in *Dreamer's [sic] Betrayed*.

³⁹ Kellie, "To the Christian Women of Nebraska," *Farmers' Alliance*, Sept. 20, 1890, 3:3.

⁴⁰ "Dear Prairie Home," in *Songs of the American West*, ed. R. Lingenfelter and R. Dwyer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 478.

⁴¹ "But the Mortgage Worked the Hardest," qtd. in *A Treasury of Nebraska Pioneer Folklore*, 50-51.

⁴² John E. Carter, *Solomon D. Butcher Photographing the American Dream* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 11-12.

⁴³ Olson, *History of Nebraska*, 163.

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