FROM "NO PLACE" TO HOME THE QUEST FOR A WESTERN HOME IN BREWSTER HIGLEY'S "HOME ON THE RANGE"

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In the spring of 1934, New York attorney Samuel Moanfeldt set out on a trip that would take him through most of the states west of the Mississippi in search of the origins of the popular American folk song "Home on the Range." The reason for his trip was a $500,000 lawsuit filed by William and Mary Goodwin of Tempe, Arizona, who claimed that they had written the song—which was then the most popular tune on the American airwaves—and were owed royalties in arrears for its broadcast on public radio.

Moanfeldt's investigation ended in Smith County, Kansas, where he found proof that the song had originated in the form of a poem written in 1872 by a pioneer doctor named Brewster Higley. The case was closed, but Moanfeldt's report of his investigation revealed much about the song's controversial history. For this, we are indebted to the Goodwins, without whose false claims of authorship this story might have been lost. However, the Goodwins were not unique in claiming that they were the authors of one of America's favorite songs, a song that by the middle of the twentieth century was, as author Carl Biemiller comments, "as well known as daybreak." By the time the Goodwins filed their suit, Kansas, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado had all claimed "Home on the Range" as their own, and it had even been made official in the Congressional Record that the song had originated in Colorado. As word spread about the song's contested origins, the claims of authorship multiplied. In 1946, when American author Homer Croy went looking for more information on the song and its author, he discovered that despite the fact that Moanfeldt had authenticated the song's authorship to the satisfaction of both the courts and the authorities...
on American folk music, many Americans still claimed that they or someone they knew had written it. Croy published a letter in the paper asking for information, and he was amazed by the response: “Many of the authors said their father had written the famous song, for he had sung it to them when they were children and had told them he had written it; and in this way they were sincere and earnest; many sent ancient clippings and copies of diaries.”

The sense of ownership that so many Americans have felt for this song is a testament to its ability to express an ideal that has had a deep and enduring grip on the American imagination—the garden of the West—that mythic space beyond the frontier where Frederick Jackson Turner claimed that the American character was forged. Henry Nash Smith argues that the character of America has been determined above all by the relationship between human beings and nature, or more specifically, by the relationship between “American man and the American West.” Because “Home on the Range” was originally a pastoral poem, its adaptation over time reflects profound changes in the American environment and dominant themes in the relationship of the American people to the natural world. Because it emerged from the pioneer agrarian society at the edge of the frontier and was written in the twilight of an era that continues to haunt the American imagination, the story of the song is also the story of changing ideological interactions with the idea of “the West” in American history.

In his essay “The Land Sings Its History,” Biemiller argues that folk music can tell us as much about American history as any textbook. “Home on the Range” is emblematic of this tradition. As is typical of folk music, it arose from obscure origins, was passed on orally, and has been revised and rearranged as it has moved through time and across the American landscape. As a result, the evolution of the song provides a record of the tension between the lived realities and most cherished dreams of Americans from the late nineteenth century until today. “The land has sung its history,” writes Biemiller, and in the case of “Home on the Range,” with its many incarnations and variations, the constantly returned-to refrain is that of a quest for home.

In this article, I examine the forces that contributed to the origin, transmission, and revision of “Home on the Range” as I explore how the text reflects shifts both in dominant ideological conceptions of nature and the material realities of a changing American landscape. By examining the idealization involved in its genesis and the implications of its various messages and emphases, I portray the story of “Home on the Range” as a historical record of the changing relationship between Americans and the American West from 1872, when the poem was written, until 1947, when it returned to its original home and became the official state song of Kansas. In the process, I illustrate how a song that perfectly captured the spirit of a particular time and place was able to transcend its origins to become an international anthem of the American West.

No Place

Brewster Higley VI was born on November 23, 1823, in Rutland, Ohio. His father died before he was born and his mother died when he was a child, after which he lived with his grandfather and then his sister. He studied medicine in Indiana, where between 1849 and 1864 he married three different women, all of whom died. Little is known of his early life, but testimonials of individuals connected to Higley, collected by historian Russell K. Hickman in 1949, paint a portrait of a lonely, troubled man who struggled with poverty and alcoholism. Margaret Carpenter, who knew Higley when she was a child in Indiana, remembered him as a local oddity whose family was “as poor as Job’s turkey.”

A Mrs. Smith, the niece of Higley’s third wife, Catherine Livingstone, had mixed impressions of Higley. “Dr. Higley was considered a very fine doctor and was a brilliant man,” she
remembered. Smith recalled Higley traveling on horseback to care for the families in the area and often accepting vegetables in lieu of payment. “But,” she continued, “he let liquor get the better of him.” Smith recalled being told by her father that her aunt—Higley’s wife Catherine, who is listed in his biographical sketch in The Higleys and Their Ancestry, as having died of “an injury”—might have survived if she had received adequate medical attention, a statement that reflects very badly on Higley, a physician. Smith also pointed out that when her aunt died, Higley did not pay for her funeral, leaving her family to cover the cost.

In 1866 Higley married Mercy Ann McPherson, a widow with a young son. This was by all accounts an unhappy marriage, and it is conspicuously absent from Higley’s biographical sketch, likely at the request of Higley himself. In 1871 Higley sent his two youngest children to Illinois and left Indiana, making sure to keep his destination a secret. Hickman speculates that Higley might have left for the West to escape the “poverty and misfortune” that he had suffered in Indiana. However, Higley took great pains to ensure that his whereabouts were unknown for years after he left Indiana, leading some to conclude that he left to escape his marriage and evade any financial obligations that he might have had to his wife. Margaret Carpenter remembered his departure:

He took a revolver from father, and said he was going to Rockford. . . . I can remember father saying that he did not know where Higley had gone after he left this vicinity. Although no one knew his whereabouts, Dr. Higley had often said he wanted to go to Kansas, then a new country, and grow up with it.

Thus, Higley joined the upsurge of westward emigration that followed the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862, which saw 718,930 homesteads established on 96,495,414 acres of land in just forty years. Thanks to the act, land was cheap, and there was a constant call for settlers to come and reap what seemed to be an endless supply of resources, to “fulfill the promise of America.” The January 7, 1876, issue of the Smith County Pioneer calls for “500,000 more men and women—strong-minded, big-hearted, enterprising, persevering and muscular people, afraid of nothing but wrong, to develop and build up all the interests and institutions of this growing State.” As was typical of emigration propaganda of the period, pioneers were enticed with reference to a bounty of natural resources to be exploited:

Millions of acres of rich farming land invite the farmer’s toil. The hill and bluff abound in rich building stone of the best kinds. Salt springs and marshes are wasting their riches for the want of more people and money. Beds of plaster of vast extent are ready to enrich the capitalist, farmer and mechanic. Stone-coal abounds in many places, and almost every week we hear of new veins
being discovered. The rapids in our river furnish many good sites for all manufacturing purposes. 23

But beyond responding to the lure of cheap land, it is likely that Higley, like so many Americans before and after him, saw the West as a regenerative landscape, a place to begin again. An alcoholic, already widowed three times at the age of forty-one, and by all accounts enduring poverty and the effects of an unhappy marriage, Higley had good reason to want a new start, and the western frontier, that vast space of cheap and sparsely populated land, offered the perfect opportunity. As Elliot West notes, before it was settled the West was viewed by Americans as a place without a history, a pristine land of unlimited promise, upon which they could project their own fantasies. “In short,” West writes, it was “No Place,” the literal definition of utopia. 24

But while Americans at the time were endlessly fascinated by heroic tales of derring-do in the Wild West beyond the frontier, it was to the agrarian West that Higley emigrated, along with thousands of others. These settlers made homes and began lives in a succession of new communities, planting crops and putting down roots. 25 “The image of this vast and constantly growing agricultural society in the interior of the continent became one of the dominant symbols of nineteenth-century American society,” writes Henry Nash Smith. “[A] collective representation, a poetic idea . . . that defined the promise of American life.”26 And because this “poetic idea” expressed the greatest aspirations of the young nation and offered a hero in the form of the pioneer farmer, it assumed the quality of myth—the myth of the garden—which had roots in Europe but took on new life and meaning on the North American continent. 27

THE SOLOMON VALE

Higley spent his first winter in Kansas living in a boardinghouse before taking up a claim on the banks of the Beaver River in Smith County, where he was to spend the next three years living in a one-room dugout and working as a saddlebag physician for the surrounding settlers. 28 No stranger to privation, he adapted quickly to the difficult life of the pioneers. 29 Everyone who knew him seems to have agreed that he was an excellent doctor whose skills were highly valued among the other settlers. “He truly was a prairie physician,” writes Croy; he attended nearly a hundred cases of typhoid in one year and often had to perform amputations with his handsaw and no anesthetic. 30 Higley's close friend W. H. Nelson wrote of the doctor, “[N]o night was too dark or trail too dim to deter him from answering a demand for service, and there are no doubt many yet living in Smith county who owe him a debt of never ending gratitude for his timely medical attention.”31

While living in Kansas, Higley often wrote down his thoughts and impressions in the form of poetry. It seems, however, that he had had a penchant for poetry and songwriting long before he moved west. Of his surviving writings, including a nine-page poem to “Dryden, Eng. Poet” and three songs, his favorite, according to his son, Brewster Higley VII, was “Army Blue,” which he claimed to have written while living in Union Mills, Indiana. 32

Higley never sought to make money from his writing but enjoyed it as a hobby and a therapeutic form of personal expression. 33 It was perhaps with this intention that he sat down in 1872 to write what has since become one of the most famous of all American folk songs, whose lyrics were first published a year later in Higley's local Kansas newspaper. The original poem, entitled “Oh, Give Me a Home Where the Buffalo Roam,” was as follows:

Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam Where the deer and the antelope play, Where never is heard a discouraging word And the sky is not clouded all day.

Oh, give me the gale of the Solomon vale, Where light streams with buoyancy flow, On the banks of the Beaver, where seldom if ever Any poisonous herbage doth grow.
Oh, give me the land where the bright diamond sand
Throw's light from the glittering stream,
Where glideth along the graceful white swan,
Like a maid in her heavenly dream.

I love these wild flowers in this bright land of ours;
I love, too, the curlew's wild scream.
The bluffs of white rocks and antelope flocks
That graze on our hillsides so green.

How often at night, when the heavens are bright,
By the light of the glittering stars,
Have I stood there amazed and asked as I gazed
If their beauty exceeds this of ours.

The air is so pure the breezes so light,
The zephyrs so balmy at night.
I would not exchange my home here to range
Forever in azure so bright. 34

There are varying accounts of the moment of the poem's conception, each with differing degrees of plausibility and each revealing a different aspect of what the poem has represented to people in different eras of American history. Margaret Nelson, whose 1947 biography of Higley seems to reflect her fantasies of pioneer life more than the actual events of his, offers a florid account of the song's conception. Providing each line with a corresponding environmental inspiration, Nelson tells her readers that Higley was "suddenly overcome with emotions" as he sat in the door of his log cabin watching "the immense expanse of azure blue sky" and thinking of the "charm of the bright days," "the air, like a gentle but mighty fan," "the happy, carefree settlers so buoyant and full of life," marveling at the plant life and abundance of wildlife roaming freely about him. "Were we overlooking a part of Heaven right on earth?" Nelson's Higley asks himself. 35

After perpetuating the image of the West as a mythic garden, Nelson continues her depiction of the scene that Higley describes in the poem by establishing what it isn't, distinguishing the ideal West from the "shallow" and "artificial" east in Higley's mind. 36 Writing from an era in which the robust Anglo-Saxon male in the austere western landscape had emerged as the symbol of the American ideal of democracy and self-reliance, Nelson introduces Higley as "a lone man, on his horse, traveling under the bright stars . . . the moonlight on the prairie bathing the world in luminous splendor. . . . 'Oh, God,' he said, 'there is comfort out here in the open, away from the shallow and the artificial things of life. This is all the stimulant a man needs.'" 37

In the same passage, Nelson even more explicitly promotes the notion that cities are the domain of selfishness, vice, and iniquity while rural landscapes attract and engender virtuous, honest, and hardworking people. "He had taken care of the ailing indigents in the crowded cities," Nelson says of Higley, and "they had aroused his sympathy, but never his deep respect and admiration as the pioneers on the frontier did." 38

The east/west dichotomy that Nelson creates reflects a commonly held attitude of the time. In a 1939 New York Times article entitled "A New Yorker Rediscovers the West," J. Donald Adams gives voice to this notion of the constitutional superiority of westerners. As he travels westward across the continent, Adams perceives a significant cultural shift, a "deep-seated difference in spirit, in the attitude toward daily living." 39 Like others before him, Adams attributes this change in spirit to both the promise and the harshness of the landscape and to the adventurous and enduring type of person whose presence accounts for the settling of this difficult region. "The West was born out of optimism," Adams writes. "And the strain has not become perceptibly diluted." 40

The image that Nelson presents of the West as a "heaven on earth," seen in contrast to the "crowded" and "artificial" cities, is a reflection of the cultural mores of the time in which she
was writing, a time in which the Western was well-established as a popular cultural form in both film and pulp fiction. Nelson’s depiction of Higley’s life in Kansas is an example of how myths are perpetuated and come to stand in for historical fact, coloring perceptions of events in history. “The western is the closest thing we have to a national myth,” writes Elliot West. And it is a myth that is so deeply embedded in the national consciousness that it no longer seems to matter if it has any connection to the realities of American history as it was actually lived. Furthermore, like most myths, the Western is far from a benign fairy tale. It is, rather, a manufactured and highly manipulated story that packs a potent emotional punch, which has been exploited by successive generations who “[use] it as a blank screen where they can project and pursue their fantasies,” thus obscuring historical realities.

Seen from another perspective, however, Nelson’s extravagant account may in fact have been in keeping with the spirit of the poem, as other reports of its writing suggest. A. E. Daniels, who was a child at the time the poem was written and a neighbor of Higley’s, claimed in a 1946 interview that the song was written while Higley sat on a log outside his dugout waiting to shoot a deer. When no deer came, Daniels said, Higley decided to write a poem instead, to get down the feelings and sensations that had come over him as he observed the beauty of the landscape.

More than one person who lived in Kansas at the time the poem was written has pointed out that much of the environment described in Higley’s poem could not have been present for Higley to see. The buffalo had ceased to roam in that area shortly before Higley arrived, and a number of critics have questioned whether it is plausible that there were deer, antelope, and especially wild swans “gliding along” in that area as late as 1872. “How that swan ever got into Beaver Creek I don’t know,” writes Croy. “The old doctor must have brought her from Indiana.” Another contemporary of Higley’s said, “I might add that at that time there was antelope [in Kansas] in plentiful numbers, also the curlew was there, but not nary a dang swan! Buffalo had been gone about three years.” The “pure” and “light” breezes Higley describes are also brought into question, since according to his historical sketch, Higley’s reason for eventually leaving Kansas was that the climate “[proved] too severe for his health.”

This is not to say that the landscape as Higley saw it that day was not beautiful, and there is no way to rule out the possibility of his having spotted a swan or buffalo during that period, but taken together, the scene that Higley has created is perfect to the point of extreme implausibility. The landscape that Higley has created in his poem is an ideal conglomeration of benevolent natural forces, a perfect and peaceful “garden of the West.”

The Soul’s Home

The reality of life for settlers in Kansas at that time was very different from the world described in Higley’s poem, and much writing from the time paints a radically different picture from Higley’s. In “The Little Old Sod Shanty on the Plain,” the singer admits that

I am looking rather seedy now while holding down my claim,
And my vittles are not always of the best;
And the mice play shyly ’round me as I nestle down to rest
In my little old sod shanty on the plain.

Life was hard, and the skies were very often cloudy. Nature was not always the beneficent mother nurturing her children in the garden. Droughts, sandstorms, and plagues of grasshoppers made pioneer life a constant struggle, far from the Eden that Higley has depicted. But Higley’s poem ignores these hard truths, recording only the best attributes of a landscape that was already disappearing as he wrote. He also displays no awareness of the irony of his position as he exalts the very natural resources that were the stakes in the battle for the West, of which he as a homesteader was part. Without even a hint of the ambivalence
Ho! For the New Kansas!

"The Best Thing in the West."

A Sketch of the "Garden of the West."
Presenting Facts Worth Knowing Concerning the Lands of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad Company

A Puzzle.

To those who are so unfortunate as to reside in other States, Kansas is an agricultural puzzle. It entered the Union in 1861, not only with the title of "bleeding," but also with that of "starving" Kansas; and on more than one occasion since, has it been blazoned over the continent as powdered by drouth, or eaten down to the very limestone by grasshoppers. Yet, before the nation had time to settle comfortably into the belief thus created, it has been rudely jostled by the same Kansas exultingly marching away with the first national prizes for the best display of fruit, won at Richmond, Philadelphia, Newark, New York, and the Centennial, against the competing States of the Union; or by the official award, so frequently made in governmental reports, "Kansas again leads in the average yield per acre;" or by the vast army of clear-headed immigrants annually settling in its broad valleys. Among the multitudes assembled at Philadelphia in 1876, there were thousands of sturdy men and great-souled women who, with minds still quickened by the agonizing recitals of self-constituted "agents" from the grasshoppered Kansas of 1874, were more than startled by the actual products of Kansas in 1875 and 1876.

FIG. 3. Excerpt from an 1877 circular encouraging immigration to Kansas. Courtesy of the Kansas State Historical Society.
and social critique that played out in the nineteenth-century pastoral literature of Irving, Cooper, and Simms, Higley’s is a sentimental and unsophisticated poem in the pastoral mode of the English poets that he admired. However, because the myth of the garden had undergone a significant change after it was imported to North America—a change that was reflected in a key distinction between European and American pastoral poetry—the depiction of nature in Higley’s poem differs in at least one significant aspect from depictions characteristic of the European pastoral. During the American Revolution, the basis of the myth was reworked, and what was in Europe a literary ideal or utopian dream became an insisted-upon reality in postrevolutionary American literature. Feminist literary critic Annette Kolodny argues that “the earliest explorers and settlers in the New World can be said to have carried with them a ‘yearning for paradise’” and that the ensuing 300 years of American writing have continued to assert the realization of this dream of paradise, or what Kolodny calls “the soul’s home.” In this early American literature, the country is portrayed as a maternal landscape, abundant and nurturing, and the return to nature offered reentry to this “soul’s home”—the womb of mother nature.

Kolodny goes on to argue that the human impulse to project feminine characteristics onto the landscape in the “land as woman” paradigm was “a reactivation of what we now recognize as universal mythic wishes” to return to the maternal embrace. However, the difference in this case was that in American literature, the wished-for paradise had become the assumed reality. The results of this reality, Kolodny writes, “touched every word written about the New World with the possibility that the ideally beautiful and bountiful terrain might be lifted forever out of the canon of pastoral convention and invested with the reality of daily experience.” Kolodny argues that it is only by understanding this distinction between the American and European pastoral impulse that we can make sense of the disparity between idealized literary depictions of life in America and the historical reality of the hardships that were endured during the period of settlement.

Higley’s poem fits perfectly into the American pastoral paradigm by conflating the real and the ideal into a portrait of a dream landscape that is presented not as a promised or even wished-for place but as an actual place that the author “would not exchange” for any other. This reading makes “Oh, give me” an ambiguous demand, as it can mean “Given a choice, I will always choose this place I do have” or “Oh, give me this place I do not have.” And, writes Kolodny, the willful imaginative creation of an idyllic landscape such as this only becomes more attractive in the face of evidence to the contrary, because retaining the commitment to the belief that the ideal environment was a plausible possibility helped settlers to overcome the hardships of their lives on the frontier. The poem, argues Hickman, can be seen as an “exaltation of spirit, an expression of hope for better days ahead,” and in this hope Higley was not alone—Croy maintains that “Home on the Range” “had the spirit of the early settlers better than any other song I had ever heard.”

**MY HOME IN THE WEST**

In 1873 Higley’s poem was published in the Smith County Pioneer. Once published, the poem became instantly popular with the newspaper’s readership for its celebration of the beauty of the land they loved and its optimism about the long-term prospects of a good life there. According to Margaret Nelson, many families pasted the clipping on the walls of their cabins and dugouts, where Higley’s words helped to “cheer the struggling homesteaders on their way, and [drive] away the gloom and the loneliness of the next few years.” The next time the poem appeared in print was 1874 in the Kirwin Chief in Phillips County, Kansas, alongside J. C. Greenleaf’s “On Receiving an Eagle’s Quill from Lake Superior,” under the slogan “Westward the March of Empire Takes Its Way.” In this version, the
poem had received a new name, “The Western Home,” apparently at Higley’s request.63 Two years later, in 1876, the poem was reprinted in the same publication.64 The Chief version is slightly different from the Pioneer version, with at least three changes worth noting here. First, the word “seldom” has been substituted for “never” in the third line of the first stanza, a change that did not appear the first time that the Chief printed the poem in 1874. This subtle alteration is a significant departure from the original, since it suggests a slight movement toward a more realistic depiction of life in the West, allowing that it is imperfect, and that occasionally discouraging words are heard there. Secondly, the Chief reprint included the refrain from the song version (which will be discussed in detail later), perhaps a nod to the popularity of this incarnation of the poem. Finally, the Chief retains the local references to Beaver Creek and the Solomon River but implants some mountains into the last line of the penultimate verse in the place of Higley’s “hillsides”—a much more likely sight in Kansas.65 This addition is a reflection of the distance the poem had already covered in the two years since its conception.

The occasion of the Kirwin Chief’s 1876 reprint was to contest yet another claim to authorship. “The Western Home” had been published earlier that year in the Stockton News under the title “My Home in the West,” citing Emma Race as the author.66 It was the first example of contested authorship leading to the preservation of the song’s history: this reprint is the earliest surviving version, Higley’s original having been burned in a wagon fire and the 1873 Pioneer version having mysteriously disappeared during the court case over the poem’s authorship in 1934.67 In rebuttal, the editor of the Kirwin Chief wrote a front-page editorial under the title “PLAGIARISM,” which included several scathing remarks and concluded with a reprinting of “The Western Home” under Higley’s name, asking readers to compare it with Race’s version, which he says is identical apart from two words. The editorial ended by asking the editor of the Stockton News to “look to his laurels, as he will find plenty of people who are willing to profit by the brain work of others.”68

At this point, it is worth exploring the possibility that Brewster Higley was not the original author of the poem. When folklorist John A. Lomax Sr. first read an account of the origins of “Home on the Range,” he responded with skepticism. Turning to his extensive records on American folk music, he found a letter from a Texan claiming to have sung the song as early as 1867, five years before Higley is believed to have written it.69 According to Higley’s son, Brewster Higley Jr., Higley was not especially proud of “Home on the Range,” and he was not concerned by other claims to its authorship.70 Apparently, of all the songs and poems Higley wrote, his favorite was “Army Blue,” a song that he claimed to have written at the close of the Civil War. However, Hickman discovered that the song was already a traditional standard at West Point Military Academy as early as 1865, leading him to question Higley’s claim to its authorship.71 Lomax’s evidence is unsubstantiated, and even if Higley did not write “Army Blue,” that fact alone would not be proof that he did not write “Home on the Range,” but it would call into question the legitimacy of his claims to authorship in general.

Another observation that brings Higley’s authorship into question is from the poem itself. In the Pioneer, the second line of the third stanza is “where light streams with buoyancy flow.” In the Chief, the line has been changed to “where life streams with buoyancy flow.” Composer Kirke Mechem argues that neither of these was the author’s intention, and therefore neither newspaper used the author’s copy as a source. In both cases the line is “a nonsense line, such as we find in many folk songs, the corruption resulting from learning the song by ear.”72 Mechem suggests that in the original line, which is “where live streams with buoyancy flow,” the word live refers to “living water,” a term commonly used by pioneers to describe running or spring-fed streams—something very important for people so dependent on agriculture.73
While Mechem makes a good case that this line as published does not reflect the author's intentions, he does not explore the possibility that his claim might imply Brewster Higley was not the poem's author. When the poem appeared in the Pioneer, Higley was the assistant editor of the paper, a fact that reduces the likelihood that the song as it appeared was not a reflection of his intentions. Further, because the title of the poem was changed for the Chief reprint on Higley's suggestion, we know that he had contact with the editor and could have requested a correction to the line if it had not been what he intended. While it is possible that he made this correction but was misunderstood (live could easily have been mistaken for life, and the Chief version does include other words not in Higley's original, as outlined earlier), this discrepancy also presents the possibility that Higley himself copied down the poem based on a mishearing of another, earlier version.

While the evidence for Higley's authorship remains strong (certainly no rival claims enjoy anything like the wealth of support that his does, as Moanfeldt's detailed report attests), it would not exclude the possibility that even if Higley were not the author, he believed himself to be. As the number of claims to its authorship indicate, the poem expressed the American cultural dream life so well and people identified with it to so much that they may have sincerely believed that they had written it themselves. "Where will the trail end?" Lomax writes. "My guess is that it goes far back beyond Kansas and Texas, as well, into the big songbag which the folk have held in common for centuries."

**HOME ON THE RANGE**

While the first phase of the poem's written transmission was carried out in small Kansas newspapers without much fanfare, another event set off radical changes that have shaped the story of the poem as we know it today. The dissemination of "Oh, Give Me a Home Where the Buffalo Roam" began when Higley's friend, Trube Reese, discovered the poem between the pages of a book in Higley's dugout. Reese persuaded Higley to have the poem put to music, leading Higley to give the poem to fiddler Dan Kelley, who composed a tune similar to the one that is widely known today. The most significant change brought upon the poem by its translation into music was the addition of a refrain, apparently at the suggestion of Judge Harlan, a partner in Kelley's Harlan Brothers Orchestra. The refrain went like this:

A home, a home where the deer and the antelope play,
Where never is heard a discouraging word
And the sky is not clouded all day.

While Nelson describes Kelley writing the music for the new song in the same kind of florid detail she used to describe Higley writing the words, Mechem argues that it is unlikely
that Kelley would have written down the music, and would have instead learned it by ear and played it often. In any case, there is no known record of the original sheet music.

The adaptation of Higley's poem into a folk song radically influenced the course of its history. Because folk music is generally learned by ear and passed orally from singer to singer, it is almost impossible for the original to remain unchanged, especially if it is not written down. Folk songs are constantly adapted by the places and preoccupations of the people who sing them as well as by simple mishearing or misinterpretation. Therefore, Higley and Kelley's making "Oh, Give Me a Home Where the Buffalo Roam" into a song opened up the poem to the endless possibilities of dissemination and revision in the folk tradition that has recorded every verse of American history in song.

Precolonial settlers imported many Anglo-Saxon ballads from Europe that have since been preserved and adapted into American folk songs. However, Biemiller argues that only the songs that were "made on the site," songs written in America, can really reflect the development of the nation. In the case of the western frontier, isolation, loneliness, and in many cases, illiteracy led to an outpouring of expression in the form of song. As John A. Lomax writes, "[T]he frontier has been beaten back to the accompaniment of singing," and the songs that this period produced are a testament to the conditions and aspirations of pioneer life.

"Oh, Give Me a Home Where the Buffalo Roam" expressed these aspects of the lives of settlers so adeptly that it quickly became a favorite after its first performance by Cal Harlan and the Harlan Brothers Orchestra in the town of Harlan, Kansas, in 1873. Suddenly the song began to be played at every gathering and celebration, and in no time it was known by almost everyone. As Margaret Nelson writes, the song "spread over the country almost by magic." Mechem notes that "nothing in the history of the song is so remarkable as the way it spread from one singer to another until it was known everywhere on the Western frontier." Mechem quotes one writer as saying, "With neither printed words nor music, far out on the unsheltered plain, 'Home on the Range' became a song hit 1,500 miles west of Broadway!" The seemingly instantaneous popularity of the song was owed to the immense amount of human movement that was characteristic of that place and time. While the railroads and pioneers pushed the frontier westward, ever-expanding numbers of cattle farming outfits swelled the cattle trails, and buffalo hunters drove south for the hunt. According to Mechem, Only the year before the song was written the Santa Fe reached Dodge City. Almost overnight the town became the largest cattle market in the world and the shipping center of the Southwest. The hunters who exterminated the buffalo here marketed several million dollars worth of hides and meat. Hundreds of wagon trains carried supplies to Western towns and army posts. By 1875, three years later, nearly all the cattle trails led to Dodge; in 1884 Texas drovers alone brought 106 herds numbering 300,000 head.

This last point turned out to be of greatest significance to the history of the song, which has become "the national anthem of the cowboy," despite the fact that in its original form it had nothing to do with this stock western figure. As Mechem writes, "[I]t is perhaps more than a coincidence that the life of Dodge City as a great cattle market, from the early 1870's to the middle 1880's, approximated that of the first life of 'Home on the Range.'" Where the trails converged and cowboys met, songs were shared at social gatherings and sung on the drive during the day and to dispel loneliness and soothe restless cattle at night. As these songs were passed along, they were changed by the cowboys according to the singer and the place. Verses were added and taken away, local references were dropped and new ones included.

Above all, "Home on the Range" owes its popularity to its adoption by American cowboys. However, it was not only the nomadic
lifestyle of these men that accounts for their contribution to the song's popularity. As with its other interpreters, the cowboys altered the song in ways that reveal yet another image of "The Western Home." Of these, the most significant and enduring is the change in the penultimate line of the poem that made "range" a prepositional phrase instead of an infinitive, replacing "I would not exchange my home here to range" with "I would not exchange my home on the range." Thus, rather than being committed to a specific home as a physical place "here" in Smith County, Kansas, the range itself has become the home. In contrast to the sedentary settlers staking claims, the rootless cowboys expanded the concept of home to include all of the range country across which they wandered. This slight alteration, along with the removal of local references, gave the song its present title and transformed it from a ballad about a specific locale to one that could apply to every westerner.

COLORADO HOME

The nineteenth-century gold rush to Colorado amplified both literal and imaginative interactions with the western frontier. Scores of settlers headed west in the hopes of striking it rich, and the nation's natural resources were transformed into material wealth. "In effect," writes Kolodny, "the new nation had entered its adolescence, leaving behind . . . the configuration of the Mother and making of the landscape, instead, a field for exercising sexual mastery and assertive independence." The hero of this version of the western myth was not the yeoman farmer tirelessly tilling and sowing the soil but the mining man who (in theory, at least) earned his fortune overnight, reaching his pan into a riverbed and coming up rich. He did not make his home in a sod house on the prairie but in a crowded cabin or dugout with other miners seeking their fortunes.

In the winter of 1885, while the song's popularity as a cowboy ballad was still in its infancy, four young prospectors in Leadville, Colorado, were snowed in one night in a cabin that they had nicknamed the Junk Lane Hotel. These men—Bob Swartz, Bill McCabe, Bingham Graves, and Jim Foutz—were musicians, and they often sang, played, and wrote music together to pass the time during the long winter months. "They make this their headquarters," Bob Swartz wrote of his companions in a letter home. "Most any night, 11, 12 or 1 o'clock you can look in at old Junk and hear the band going or singing with the banjo or a card game going on." On this particular winter evening, the men composed a song that they called "Colorado Home," which went on to become an instant favorite among their prospecting friends. In a letter to his parents dated February 15, 1885, Swartz recounted the events of that evening:

We have originated a new song, music and all, and it's creating quite a stir among the boys all around. I got up the tune and Bill most of the words, but we all had a hand in it as the cabin was full that night and everybody helped make it up. If it keeps on going it will become a popular western song.

Swartz included with the letter both the lyrics and music of the song, unknowingly producing the earliest known copy of the musical score to "Home on the Range." The lyrics, however, were dramatically different from Higley's poem:

Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam,
And the deer and the antelope play;
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word,
And the sky is not cloudy all day.

Oh, give me the hill and the ring of the drill,
In the rich silver ore in the ground;
And give me the gulch, where the miners can sluice,
And the bright yellow gold can be found.

Oh, give me the gleam of the swift mountain stream,
And the place where no hurricanes blow;
And give me the park with the prairie dog bark,
And the mountains all covered with snow.

Oh, give me the mines where the prospector finds
The gold in its own native land;
With the hot springs below, where the sick people go,
And camp on the banks of the Grand.

Oh, show me the camp where the prospectors tramp,
And business is always alive;
Where dance halls come first and fare banks burst,
And every saloon is a dive.

A home, a home, where the deer and the antelope play;
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word,
And the sky is not cloudy all day.

Shortly after they wrote the song, the Junk Lane musicians went their separate ways, scattering to various parts of the West and taking the song with them. "Colorado Home" went on to enjoy great popularity and even spawned its own imitation, "Oh, Give Me the Hills," which was recorded in 1903 near Idaho Springs, Colorado.

Although "Colorado Home" is clearly a variation on Higley's poem and the tune is almost identical to Kelley's original, it is unlikely that Swartz and his friends knowingly plagiarized the song. As late as 1930, when "Home on the Range" was already popular on the radio, Swartz reiterated his claim to authorship in a reply to a birthday card in which his sister had enclosed his original 1885 letter with the lyrics of the poem:

I showed the letter to about 20 on my shift at the Round House that was interested. ... [S]ome of them didn't believe me some time ago, when I told them that someone was singing a song I wrote 50 years ago over the radio. And when I let them read the old letter, they were surprised and convinced [sic]. It done me good to show it to them.

It is quite possible that he was sincere. Just as Higley and Kelley may have unconsciously drawn on outside influences, the Junk Lane musicians may have been wholly unaware of the extent to which they borrowed from an earlier version of a song that by that time had already entered into the American consciousness as the expression of a common and deeply felt sentiment. And rather than exonerate the Junk Lane composers on the grounds of unconscious plagiarism, it might be more appropriate to praise them for their contribution to the evolution of the song, which in the spirit of the folk tradition can be seen as a fluid process of which adaptation and revision are fundamental aspects.

THE ROAD TO RUIN

In 1909 John A. Lomax traveled to San Antonio, Texas, with his Edison dictating machine looking for locals who were known to have many folk songs committed to memory. He was directed to The Road to Ruin, a saloon where he found the African American proprietor Bill Jack McCurry. McCurry was a former cow camp cook and knew several cowboy songs by heart, which he
allowed Lomax to record on a wax cylinder. One of the songs that McCurry sang that day was “Home on the Range,” and the recording was used to create a score. The next year, the song appeared in Lomax’s Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads, and this is the version on which all modern versions are based. The song as sung by McCurry in 1909 can therefore be seen as a historical snapshot, a freeze frame of a fluid process reflecting some of the changes that had taken place in the thirty-seven years since it had first been composed. The lyrics of the McCurry/Lomax version are as follows:

Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam,
Where the deer and the antelope play,
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the skies are not cloudy all day.

Home, home on the range,
Where the deer and the antelope play;
Where seldom is heard a discouraging word
And the skies are not cloudy all day.

Where the air is so pure, the zephyrs so free,
The breezes so balmy and light,
That I would not exchange my home on the range
For all of the cities so bright.

The red man was pressed from this part of the West
He’s likely no more to return,
To the banks of Red River where seldom if ever
Their flickering camp-fires burn.

How often at night when the heavens are bright
With the light from the glittering stars
Have I stood here amazed and asked as I gazed
If their glory exceeds that of ours.

Oh, I love these wild flowers in this dear land of ours
The curlew I love to hear scream,
And I love the white rocks and the antelope flocks
That graze on the mountain-tops green.

Oh, give me a land where the bright diamond sand
Flows leisurely down the stream;
Where the graceful white swan goes gliding along
Like a maid in a heavenly dream.

In the years since the song had been written, the closing of the frontier transformed the way that America experienced and imagined the American environment. By 1890 Frederick Jackson Turner had declared that there was not enough unsettled western land left to constitute a frontier, and so the environment that had defined American history was gone. In his seminal essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” Turner argued that “the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explains American development.” Thus, Turner wrote, the closing of the frontier “[marked] the closing of a great historic movement.”

This hypothesis had serious implications for American society. If, as Turner argued, all the virtues and conditions—liberty, democracy, opportunity—that made America America were produced by the existence of free land, then presumably these were under threat now that the frontier was closed. Without the purifying effects of the frontier, Turner implied, America would become as congested and oppressive as Europe. The implications of Turner’s observations were evident in the amendments and additions to “Home on the Range” that had been made in the years between the poem’s conception in 1872 and its reification in print in 1910.

Apart from the previously explored shift of the word “range” from verb to noun in the third verse (which was the final verse in the original), another important change that happened during the years that the cowboys spent tinkering with the song was the modification of...
During the Progressive Era in America, popular films often portrayed the hardworking cowboy as the hero in contrast to the eastern “city slicker,” who represents “the corrupting influence of the city.” However, the cowboy had not always been treated so kindly. At the time when the poem became a song, cowboys were not the romantic heroes that they later became. In the 1870s, when the poem/song was written, “cowboy” was still predominantly used as a pejorative term that “usually called up the image of a semibarbarous laborer who lived a dull, monotonous life of hard fare and poor shelter.” However, after the gold rushes of the late nineteenth century, Americans turned to the cowboy as the last remaining symbol of a disappearing world. In 1885, the year that “Colorado Home” was written, there was already a sense among Americans that “the wild and wonderful western frontier was rapidly disappearing, and that the winning of the West must be lived vicariously through the heroes who tamed it.” Thus, the heroic mantle had passed from the farmer and miner to the much romanticized and mythologized American cowboy—and “Home on the Range” followed suit.

As every North American child who has played cowboys and Indians knows, the cowboy’s natural enemy is the Native North American, and the fourth verse of the McCurry/Lomax version of the song serves as a poignant reminder of who ultimately won this battle. By the time that the song was written, European Americans and Native Americans in the West had been engaged in full-scale conflict for a decade, and it is not characteristic of the cowboy as he is typically portrayed to care enough about the genocide of Native Americans to write the fact into one of his favorite songs. However, when speculating on the significance of this verse to the cowboys, it is also important to remember that the song as recorded by Lomax would have been only one of the versions circulating at the time, and no doubt there were numerous other verses that were left out by McCurry. Mechem notes that “it is likely that this [verse] was a stray or a maverick, favored by the Negro singer who had picked it up on the Chisholm Trail.”

the final line of this verse from “forever in azure so bright” to “for all of the cities so bright.” The song’s singer is now committed to the range as his home, and rather than being unwilling to exchange this home for the blue sky, the singer is now unwilling to exchange it for the bright lights of the city.

One of the principal aspects of the Turner hypothesis was the idea that the wilderness of the West had defined the American character, breeding the virtues of democracy, individualism, and egalitarianism and providing a purifying influence in contrast to the materialism and vice that characterized city life. The new wording in this stanza invests the “range” with a heavy symbolic value, distinguishing the rural from the urban and the east from the west while extolling the virtues of nature during a period of increasing growth of urban centers.
Regardless of its general acceptance at the
time, the very existence of the verse marks
an important moment in the history of a song
that had previously omitted any sense of the
price that was paid for the establishment of
these successive “Western Homes.” As histo­
rian David W. Noble writes, settlers like Higley
repressed the implications of their presence
for the Native Americans by casting Native
Americans as “underdeveloped, not fully
human, and incapable of living in freedom”—
they were seen as a “people without history.”
Thus, writes George Lipsitz, white settlers
could solve the dilemma of explaining why the
land that made them free did not do the same
for its original inhabitants.

The added verse about the “red men” in
the Lomax/McCurry version of “Home on the
Range” simply comments on this fact of
western settlement without passing judgment
on either side. Presumably written by a cowboy
sometime between 1873 and 1909, the verse’s
intended significance can only be speculated
on, but its inclusion offers the first evidence in
the song of an awareness of the price paid by
some so that others could enjoy their “Home
on the Range.”

OH, GIVE ME A HOME

After “Home on the Range” was published
in Lomax’s Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier
Ballads, the printed version went almost
unnoticed for fifteen years. Then, in 1925,
Carl Fischer produced the first sheet music,
which enjoyed minor success, and in 1930,
David Guion produced another arrangement,
which was followed by an increasing variety
of slight variations in the ensuing eight years
as the song’s popularity continued to grow.
The Fischer version was sung on the radio
and incorporated into the concert programs
of singers Lawrence Tibbett and John Charles
Thomas, further raising the song’s profile.

This transition from the oral to popular
print tradition marked another significant
turning point for “Home on the Range,” and
the growing demand for the sheet music had
its own implications for the song’s trajec­
tory. However, it wasn’t until 1933, when
President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt endorsed
it as his favorite song, that “Home on the
Range” became the most popular tune in
America. As Mechem writes, in the period
immediately following Roosevelt’s statement,
“such sudden and worldwide success was prob­
ably never equaled by another song.”

Hickman, however, attributes the success of
the song to much more than the president-elect’s
approval. The year that marks the beginning of
the song’s astronomical rise in popularity was
also the year the Great Depression had reached
its lowest depths in America. As Hickman
argues, “[T]he refrain that helped to dispel the
gloom of the ‘Grasshopper Days’ in Kansas,
and had brought renewed hope to the hard
pressed pioneer throughout the West, was a
most appropriate song for the Great Depression
and the era of the New Deal.”
The optimism
that had so appealed to pioneers in hard times
resonated with Americans in the grips of the
worldwide economic crisis. And beyond merely
creating a desire for cheerful songs in general,
the Great Depression provided fertile ground
for the success of this particular song because
it was the favorite fare of a figure who became
immensely popular during that period: the
singing cowboy.

Peter Stanfield, author of Horse Opera: The
Strange History of the 1930s Singing Cowboy,
claims great cultural significance for this char­
acter, who he calls “one of the most important
cultural figures to emerge from the tumultuous
years of the Great Depression.” This was a
character, writes Stanfield, who “represented
the fantasies, desires, and ambitions of those
who felt keenly the economic hardship and the
threat (and fact) of dispossession and disloca­
tion.” As Gene Autry wrote in his preface
to the ballad book He Was Singin’ This Song,
“The romanticized life of the cowboy—his
valor and fortitude in the face of every kind of
hardship—was admired by Americans whose
own courage was being tested by the depres­
sion.” And this fascination was not unique
to the cowboy’s home range. “A lot of folks
had the idea my records were only popular in the Midwest,” writes Autry, “but I actually sold more recordings in eastern states and New England.”

As a result of the singing cowboy’s appeal, cowboy and western songs enjoyed unprecedented popularity in the early 1930s, and “Home on the Range” was the most popular among them.

The downside to all of this uplift was that the emergence of the singing cowboy coincided with the demise of genuine cowboy culture and caused the cowboy’s complex history to be obscured through commercial exploitation of his image. The economic crisis had shattered the myth of the garden, thereby marking what Henry Nash Smith calls the “real end of the frontier period.”

In an attempt to hold on to this dream, Americans latched on to the last denizen of this disappearing world. As a result, the fictional cowboy outlived the real cowboy, and it was through this fabricated figure that Americans continued to imagine the West well into the 20th century.

Western-themed Broadway musicals portrayed camp renditions of the cowboy lifestyle, and Western movies enthralled urban audiences with their unrealistic depictions of life on the frontier. “The East has met the West in cowboy song literature,” wrote John Lomax in 1938, “and has sucked up its treasures.”

But this fabrication had a price. As Stanfield argues, “[T]he view of the singing cowboy as little more than a Saturday matinee distraction for kids, a nostalgic figure for more innocent times, or, more recently, a prime example of American camp has effaced his real history.”

The same can be said of “Home on the Range” itself: The commercial appropriation of the song, which exploited its wealth of accumulated cultural currency, diluted its original power as much as it broadened the range of its popularity.

Meanwhile, the natural landscape that Higley lauded in his poem was vanishing. The curlew and swan had long since disappeared from Smith County. The buffalo was virtually extinct. And the “glittering stream” had dried up, clogged with silt as a result of erosion caused by the depletion of prairie grasses by wagon wheels and overgrazing cattle and other domestic animals. These developments were not new—emigrants had been burning, felling, digging, and hunting their way through the country’s natural resources for generations—but by the 1930s, the effects of this overuse were undeniable. In 1938 John Lomax wrote,

Gone are the buffalo, the Indian warwhoop, the free grass of the open plain—even the stinging lizard, the tarantula, the horned frog, the centipede, the prairie dog, the rattlesnake, the Gila monster, the vinegaroon, are fast disappearing. Save in some of the secluded valleys of southern New Mexico, the old-time round-up is no more; the trails to Kansas and to Montana have become grass-grown or lost in fields of waving grain.

By the 1930s the Turner hypothesis provided the dominant view of American history. And while other approaches to the American past did exist, and dissenting voices called for a move toward agrarian simplicity and away from materialism and industrialization, the majority of Americans at the time still viewed the land as something to be conquered and exploited as the American people pursued their manifest destiny. As journalist Adams wrote of his impressions during his 1939 drive west across the United States, “[T]he pioneer tradition and the will to conquer and subdue the land, no matter what difficulties it presents, are not yet dead in this country.”

And, Adams continues, the evidence of this is the “thousands upon thousands of well-kept homes” that he passes as he drives across the country: “homes of the great mass of self-respecting, hard-working American citizens. There is nothing like it on a similar scale anywhere else in the world.” Thus, in Adams’s view at least, rather than the beauty of nature, it is the home itself, the actual physical brick and mortar house, that has become the symbol of the promise of America and proof of the realization of the American dream.
In 1947 “Home on the Range” became the official state song of Kansas. However, the official version, while keeping the title given by the cowboys, reverted in most other aspects to the original poem that appeared in the *Smith County Pioneer* in 1873. Of course, by that time there were no buffalo roaming in the area, but one member of the legislature joked that “knocking out buffalo and putting in Jersey milk cow would naturally hob with the meter of the thing.”\(^{156}\) The irony of such a statement might have been lost in a period when Kansan legislators sought to encourage the expansion of agricultural productivity, which had reached unprecedented levels during the Second World War.\(^{157}\)

Some Kansans were not pleased with the choice of “Home on the Range” as their state song. “Some say it is too mournful,” writes Mechem, “and others complain that it fails to ‘sell’ the state and its products.”\(^{158}\) During this period of postwar economic prosperity and the growth of big business,\(^{159}\) “Home on the Range” again became a vehicle for the preoccupations of the time. On June 18, 1948, the Kansas Industrial Development Commission announced in *The Western Star* a $100 contest to “find a parody to the official state song”: “The new stanzas should paint a word picture of Kansas—its bountiful agriculture, diversified industry, vast and varied natural resources, scenic beauty, the fine people of our state and various sections of the state such as the rich Flint Hills area.”\(^{160}\)

These new verses were intended for use in singing commercials, to advertise the state’s agriculture and industry. They were also used for political purposes, and were first introduced at the inauguration celebration for Gov. Frank Carlson in January 1949.\(^{161}\) On this occasion, writes Mechem, “the music was jazzed to such a pitch that if the tune had been so played when first written all the deer and antelope would have been scared out of the country.”\(^{162}\)

There was some backlash against this use of the song for commercial purposes, and many wrote to legislators and published letters in the newspaper protesting this appropriation of their state song. “Although this protest may have been only a natural reaction against singing commercials,” writes Mechem, “it is more likely that the song expresses emotions that go deeper than a desire for bigger business.”\(^{163}\) However, despite these dissenting voices, the Kansan authorities continued their attempts to shine up the image of the famous song to maximize its utility as a draw to the state.

In 1946 Homer Croy visited the site of Higley’s claim in Smith County, Kansas. The dugout in which Higley had been living when he wrote “Home on the Range” was long gone, and in its place was the log cabin, built in 1875, in which Higley lived with his fifth wife, Sarah E. Clemans.\(^{164}\) Although it did not exist when the poem was written, this log cabin is often still incorrectly referred to as the place where “Home on the Range” was written.\(^{165}\) At the time of Croy’s visit in 1946, the cabin and surrounding property were owned by a man named Pete Rust, who was accustomed to receiving visitors to the site. But as Croy approached what was to him a place of pilgrimage, he was shocked by what he saw:

By now we arrived at the cabin. I nearly fell over. It is now a henhouse! It’s filled with white hens with red combs, and smells to the top of the trees. . . . I hadn’t yet got over my shock. “Couldnt’ you clean out the old cabin and keep it for sentimental reasons?” Pete Rust shook his head. “We’re short of hen space.” “Dont’ you ever pause and look at it and think what a historical event took place here?” “Yes, I do sometimes,” said Pete reflectively. “On the other hand, I’ve got used to the idea. An’ there’s always the hen-space problem. I have to think of that.”\(^{166}\)

As Croy discovered, what he believed to be the home of “Home on the Range” was now a henhouse. In Croy’s view, it was just another example of the indignities that the song increasingly had to endure in a rapidly changing world.
Croy also notes that the Smith Center Chamber of Commerce had purchased land to create a park in the town of Smith Center and planned to relocate Higley’s cabin there. The move, the authorities reasoned, would make the cabin more easily accessible to tourists, since the original location was too far from the highway for many visitors to travel. “I would rather think of it being on the banks of the Beaver,” writes Croy, “even if the cabin is filled with chickens—than I would in a tourist-catching park.” But Croy had missed the point almost as much as the Smith Center authorities. If the goal was to preserve the place where the famous song originated, then it did not matter in the least where the cabin was, because it was not the “home on the range.” The real home in need of preservation was the open space, clean air, fresh water, and abundant wildlife that had been in decline because of human activities since before Higley had even written the poem.

This story exemplifies the pastoral paradox: human beings seeking communion with nature set out into the wilderness, but their very presence erodes the wilderness that they sought. What Howard Mumford Jones calls “the emotional appeal of the uncharted forest, the unfenced range, the trackless mountains and the open sky”—the very world that Higley described—was the very attraction that led to the destruction of that world. As Annette Kolodny writes, “[T]he success of settlement depended on the ability to master the land, transforming the virgin territories into something else—a farm, a village, a road, a canal, a railway, a mine, a factory, a city, and finally, an urban nation.” But like most dreams, the dream of the “garden of the West” outlived the hope of its realization, and so a growing sense
of nostalgia for a simpler time led to displaced significance being attributed to Higley's cabin, which was itself almost displaced from the landscape that was its reason for being.

However, by making Higley's cabin the shrine to "Home on the Range," the Kansas authorities provided a fitting conclusion to that chapter of the song's story. From the beginning, "Home on the Range" was a story about an imagined place that became a blank canvas onto which the pastoral longings of successive generations could be projected. From the garden of the West to the riches of the mine to a nostalgic rendering of a lost idyll, the song has always represented an impulse that has shaped and motivated the American cultural dream life since the docking of the Mayflower: the quest for a home.

**AFTERWORD**

Today the chorus of "Home on the Range" is still well known, but the song's sentimentality often lends itself less to nostalgia than to parody—for example, the YouTube renditions "Homie on the Range" and "Home on the Range (Bush Version)," in which an animated George Bush sings "where the beer and the cantaloupe stay." The song's omission of the hard facts of western settlement has also inspired critical renditions, such as Tori Amos's "Home on the Range: Cherokee Edition," in which she asks "America, who discovered your ass?" as she sings in a minor key verses such as:

Well, Jackson made deals, a thief down to his heels,
Hello long trail of tears
The Smokies could hide a Cherokee bride,
Her brave was shot yesterday.

However, as current ecological and economic crises deepen, so too might the appeal of the song. Just as Americans in the 1930s sought solace in its bright optimism, modern-day Americans may also be more susceptible to the invocation of a mythic past through cultural artifacts that carry heavy historical resonance, such as "Home on the Range." In times of fear and uncertainty, it is comforting to look to the past, which from the distance of decades is imagined as a simpler time. That this fond looking-back is not based on reality (as Elliot West says, the early settlers "could have told today's computer programmers, homemakers, and CEOs a thing or too about stress"171) is still irrelevant. One only needs to look to the 2008 presidential campaign to see how the myth of America's pioneer past is used as an extremely potent emotional shorthand to which the general American public appears to respond readily.

In May 2008 a Unitarian Universalist choir in Bethesda, Maryland, performed "Home on the Range" as part of a program called "A Celebration of American Music." To introduce the performance, ministerial intern Megan Foley offered the following words:

We are surely living in precarious times, when there is so much to criticize and worry about the way our country is functioning at home and abroad. Let us come together this morning for a brief respite from that worry and take some time to consider some of the best offerings of our American history and culture—some of what we Americans have brought to the world over the course of time. We're talking about the music itself, of course, but it's more than the music—the music helps us to remember those American time periods and ideas that make up our understanding of ourselves, and those great ideas and values that we've spread around the world.173

The West represents what has been an enduring dream for Americans, and there is no reason to believe that this dream has worn out its usefulness. The fact that so much of American history is abhorrent to the dominant twenty-first-century American sensibility does not strip the country's past of its deep fascination and emotional force. With the current social, political, environmental, and economic issues facing the nation and the world, the
American public may once again come to crave the sort of nostalgic comfort that "Home on the Range" might be in a unique position to provide.

NOTES

6. Ibid., 166.
9. Ibid., 79.
13. Ibid., 11.
14. Ibid., 11.
17. Ibid., 14.
18. Ibid., 10–12.
19. Ibid., 14.
20. Ibid., 11.
23. Ibid.
25. Smith, Virgin Land, 123.
26. Ibid., 123.
27. Ibid., 124.
29. Croy, Corn Country, 175.
30. Ibid., 175.
31. Hickman, "Historical Background," 16.
33. Hickman, "Historical Background," 18.
34. Mechem, Story of Home on the Range, 17.
36. Ibid., 154–55.
37. Ibid., 154–55.
38. Ibid., 155.
40. Ibid., 21.
41. West, Way to the West, 164.
42. Ibid.
43. Croy, Corn Country, 169.
44. Ibid., 168.
45. Mechem, Story of Home on the Range, 18.
47. Lomax, Adventures, 63.
50. Dary, True Tales of Old-Time Kansas, 71.
52. Smith, Virgin Land, 127.
54. Ibid., 5–6.
55. Ibid., 6.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., 154.
58. Hickman, "Historical Background," 22.
60. Nelson, Home on the Range, 188.
61. Ibid.
63. Hickman, "Historical Background," 19.
64. Mechem, Story of Home on the Range, 7.
65. Ibid., 23.
66. Ibid., 7.
70. Croy, Corn Country, 175.
71. Hickman, "Historical Background," 18.
73. Ibid.
75. Lomax and Lomax, Folk Song: U.S.A., 198.
76. Mechem, Story of Home on the Range, 6.
78. Mechem, Story of Home on the Range, 16.
79. Many early listeners noted that the tune sounded remarkably similar to a traditional church song, "Home of the Soul" (Wayne Gard, The Chisholm Trail [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954], 249; Lomax, Adventures, 64), yet
another example of possible (and perhaps unintentional) plagiarism.
80. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
83. Lomax, Cowboy Songs, xxv.
89. Ibid.
90. Ibid.
91. Ibid.
94. Hickman, "Historical Background," 1.
95. Tinsley, He Was Singin' This Song, xiii.
96. Hickman, "Historical Background," 1.
98. Ibid.
100. Kolodny, Lay of the Land, 133.
101. Ibid.
107. Although the Goodwins have thus far only been proven to have plagiarized Higley's poem, which they copyrighted in 1905 under the title "Arizona Home," they also claimed ownership of Swartz's version. In 1915 the Goodwins published the exact verses as they appear here through Balmer and Weber Music House Company in St. Louis, also with the title "Arizona Home."
109. Ibid.
110. Tinsley, He Was Singin' This Song, 215.
113. Tinsley, He Was Singin' This Song, 214.
115. Some changes also reflect the personal preferences of John Lomax, who admits to "rephrasing some unmetrical lines" (Lomax, Adventures, 62).
118. Ibid., 186.
119. Ibid.
120. Smith, Virgin Land, 206.
121. Ibid.
123. Green, Singing in the Saddle, 31.
126. Green, Singing in the Saddle, 6.
127. West, Way to the West, 48.
129. David W. Noble, Death of a Nation: American Culture and the End of Exceptionalism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xiii.
130. George Lipsitz, foreword to Noble, Death of a Nation, xiii.
131. Lomax, Adventures, xii.
133. Lomax, Adventures, 61–64.
135. Ibid.
136. Hickman, "Historical Background," 23.
138. Ibid.
139. Autry, He Was Singin' This Song, ix.
140. Ibid.
141. Tinsley, He Was Singin' This Song, 215.
142. Stanfield, Horse Opera, 1.
143. Smith, Virgin Land, 188.
144. Lomax, Cowboy Songs, xxvii.
145. Ibid., xx.
146. Ibid.
147. Stanfield, Horse Opera, 1.
149. Ibid., 18.
151. Lomax, Cowboy Songs, xxvii.
152. Klein, Frontiers of Historical Imagination, 8.
153. Klein, Frontiers of Historical Imagination, 8; Kolodny, Lay of the Land, 139.
155. Ibid., 10.
157. Richmond, A Nation Moving West, 282.
159. Noble, *Death of a Nation*, 349.
162. Ibid.
163. Ibid., 26.
164. Hickman, "Historical Background," 17.
167. Ibid., 179.
168. Ibid.

170. Ibid., 7.