

Little Brown Bulls

As sung by
Robert Walker
08-14-1941 Crandon, WI

THE LITTLE BROWN BULLS

.....R.W. Crandon

Not a thing in the woods had Mc - Clus - key to fear, As he swung the gord stick o'er the

big spot - ted steers. Short leg - ged and shag - gy, girt - ing eight foot and three. Said Mc -

Clus - key to Scot, "They're the lad - dies for me." Oh, next came Bull Gor - don; the

.....R.W. Crandon

Verse 1.

Not a thing in the woods had McCluskey to fear,
As he swung the gord stick o'er his big spotted steers,
Short legged and shaggy, girt eight foot and three,
Said McCluskey to Scot, "They're the laddies for me."

Verse 2.

Oh, next came Bull Gordon, the skidding was full
As he hollered "Whoa hush" to his little brown bulls,
They were young, sound, and quick, girt six foot and nine,
"Too light," said McCluskey, "to handle our pine."

Verse 3.

"For it's three to the thousand, our contract did call;
Our skidding 'tis good and our timber, 'tis tall.
Said McCluskey to Gordon, "To make the day full
I will skid ten to one of your little brown bulls."

Verse 4

"Oh no," said Bull Gordon, "that you never can do,
Though your big spotted steers are the pets of the crew,
But mind you, my laddie, you'll have your hands full
When you skid one more log than my little brown bulls."

Verse 5.

Oh, the day was appointed, and soon it drew nigh,
For twenty-five dollars their fortunes to try.
Both eager and anxious, the morning was found;
The scalers and judges appeared on the ground.

Verse 6.

That morning said Gordon, with blood in his eye,
"Today I will conquer McCluskey or die."
Said Sandy to Gordon, "We'll take off their skins;
We'll dig them a grave, we will tumble them in.

Verse 7.

With a whoop and a yell came McCluskey in view,
With the big spotted steers, the pets of the crew,
Sayin', "Chew your cuds slowly, boys, keep your mouths full,
For you eas'ly can conquer those little brown bulls."

Verse 8.

Oh, next came Bull Gordon, with the little brown bulls,
With a pipe in his mouth and a cud in his jaw,
But little did they think when they saw them come down
That a hundred and forty they could eas'ly yank 'round.

Verse 9.

Oh, the sun had gone down and the foreman did say,
"Turn in boys, turn in, you've done enough for today,
For well we have called each man for his team;
Very well do we know which team holds the beam."

Verse 10.

After supper was over, McCluskey appeared,
With a belt ready made for his big spotted steers.
To make it he tore up his best mackinaw;
He was bound to conduct it according to law.

Verse 11.

Oh, the scaler speaks up; said he, "Hold on you a-while,
Your big spotted steers are behind just a mile.
You've skidded one hundred and ten and no more,
While Gordon has beat you by ten and a score."

Verse 12.

The boys, they all holler'd; McCluskey did swear,
As he tore out in handfuls his long yellow hair.
Said McCluskey to Gordon, "My dollars you'll pull,
And the belt you shall have for your little brown bulls."

Verse 13.

So here's to Bull Gordon and Big Sandy John,
For the biggest day's work on the Wolf River ever was done.
So fill up your glasses, boys, fill them plumb full,
And we'll drink to the health of those little brown bulls.

Critical Commentary

HST notes:

In the Professional Papers series:

The ballad, The Little Brown Bulls, is undoubtedly of Wisconsin origin. Lumberjacks agree that the log skidding contest described in the ballad actually occurred, but they do not agree as to the location of the contest.

Barry regards the ballad as western, but believes that the owner of the winning team, "Bull (Bold)" Gordon and his swamper, "Kennebec" John Stebbin, were Maine men. Rickaby reports the history of the song as he obtained it in 1923 from Fred Bainter, Ladysmith, Wis., "According to Mr. Fred Bainter, , the ballad was composed in Mart Douglas's camp in northwestern Wisconsin in 1872 or 1873. It was in this camp and at this date, he said, that the contest between the big spotted steers and the little brown bulls was waged."

[editor's note: Stratman-Thomas cites Rickaby, p. 206 for this quotation]

The lumberjacks whom we met on our recording trips voiced varied opinions. Dan Grant of Bryant said that McCluskey and "Bold" Gordon were local characters. Mr. Grant's father had worked with McCluskey.

Charlie Bowlen, Black River Falls, was very positive that the song originated in a logging camp on the Chippewa, about seventy years ago. He learned the song from an uncle, who always declared that he was in the camp the winter the song was first sung.

He knows the version differs a little and thinks his words are as near the way the song was originally sung as possible to get them. He learned it when he was a very small boy (before he went to the woods), so the song must be at least 65 years old.

Arthur Moseley, Black River Falls, placed the contest somewhere on the Black or Chippewa Rivers.

Emery De Noyer, Rhinelander, also was of the opinion that the contest took place on the Chippewa. He thought the man who wrote it was Pat Murphy from Chippewa Falls. Mr. De Noyer said that he once met McCluskey and sang the ballad for him.

Henry Hunter, Galesville, quoted the opening lines, "Not a thing on Black River McCluskey did fear."

A version furnished by Earl S. Holman of Antigo begins, "Not a thing on Grand River McCluskey did fear."

Robert Walker of Crandon sang, "For the biggest day's work on Wolf River ever was done."

Adolph Williams, Hayward, said, "Ed Collett of Hayward knows just where this song was made up – out on Highway 77 on the Torch River." first white boy born in Hayward. Real name is Johnson – so many Johnsons he went by the name of Williams.

Harry Dyer, Madison placed the contest on Black River.

Editor's notes:

Harry Peters mentions the lumberjacks who sang this song for Helene Stratman-Thomas, and includes an unattributed transcription of a version that is slightly different from those in her collection (Peters 248).

Sources:

Fowke, Edith. *Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods*. Transcriptions by Norman Cazden. Published for the American Folklore Society. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970.

Lomax, John A., and Alan Lomax, collectors and compilers. *Our Singing Country; A Second Volume of American Ballads and Folk Songs*. Ruth Crawford Seeger, music editor. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1941.

Peters, Harry B., ed. *Folk Songs out of Wisconsin: An Illustrated Compendium of Words and Music*. Madison, WI: The State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1977.

Rickaby, Franz, collector and editor. *Ballads and Songs of the Shanty-boy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926. Slightly similar

K.G.