

Little Brown Bulls

As sung by
Charlie Bowlen
08-18-1941 Black River Falls, WI

The Little Brown Bulls
.....Charlie Bowlen

Not a thing on the ri - ver Mc - Clus - key did fear, As he swung his gord stick o'er his
big spot-ted steers. They were slick, smooth, and hand-some, gird-ing nine foot 'n' three, Says Mc-
Clus - key, the Scotch - man, "They're the led - dies for me."

Jensen B.

Verse 1.

Not a thing on the river McCluskey did fear,
While he swung his gord stick o'er his big spotted steers.
They were slick, smooth, and handsome, girding nine foot 'n' three,
Said McCluskey, the Scotchman, "They're the laddies for me."

Verse 2.

Next came Bull Gordon, whose skidding was full,
And he shouted, "Whoa hush," to his little brown bulls,
Short leg-ged but shaggy, girding seven foot nine,
"Too light," says McCluskey, "to handle our pine."

Verse 3.

"For it's three to the thousand the contract does call,
The skidding is good and our timber stands tall.
Says McCluskey to Gordon, "I'll make a day full,
'N' I'll skid two to one to your little brown bulls."

Verse 4

"Oh no," says Bull Gordon, "that you cannot do,
Though I well know your steers are the pets of the crew;
But I'll tell you, my laddie, you'll have your hands full
When you skid one more log than the little brown bulls."

Verse 5.

So a day was appointed, and soon it drew nigh,
For twenty-five dollars their fortunes to try,
'Twas early next morning as we came around,
The judges and scalers appeared on the ground.

Verse 6.

With a whoop and a yell came McCluskey in view,
With his big spotted steers, the pets of the crew,
Said he to his chainer, "We'll make this day full.
We'll skid two to one to those little brown bulls."

Verse 7.

Next came Bull Gordon, with his pipe in his jaw,
His little brown bulls, their cuds they did gnaw,
But little we thought, as we saw them come down
That a hundred and forty they could jerk around.

Verse 8.

Says McCluskey to Sandy, "Now strip to the skin.
We will dig them a grave and we'll tumble them in.
We'll mix 'em a dose and we'll feed it red-hot.
We'll learn a damn Yankee to face a bold Scot."

Verse 9.

Said Gordon to Johnny, with blood in his eye,
"Today we must conquer McCluskey or die."
Said Johnny to Gordon, "You need have no fear,
For you ne'er will be beat by those big spotted steers."

Verse 10.

The sun had gone down and the forman did say,
"Turn in boys, turn in, 'tis enough for today.
Each man has been counted 'n' scaled to his team,
And well do we know which one tips the beam."

Verse 11.

The supper being over, McCluskey appears,
With a belt ready made for his big spotted steers.
For to make it he tore up his best mackinaw;
But was forced to conduct it according to law.

Verse 12.

For up spoke the scaler, "Just hold you a-while.
Your big spotted steers are behind just a mile,
You've skidded a hundred 'n' ten and no more,
While Gordon has beat you by ten and a score."

Verse 13.

The boys all did should, while McCluskey did swear,
As he tore out great handfuls of long yellow hair.
Says he to Bull Gordon, "My colors I'll pull;
You can take the belt for your little brown bulls."

Verse 14.

So here's to Bull Gordon and Kennebec Jon,
For the biggest day's work on the river was done.
So it's fill up your glasses, 'n' fill them brim full,
And drink to the health of the little brown bulls

Transcriptions and lyrics from the Helene Stratman-Thomas Collection.

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.