

# Little Brown Bulls

As sung by  
Arthur Moseley  
09-05 1940 Black River Falls, WI

The Little Brown Bulls .....Arthur "Happy" Moseley

Oh, there's no-thing on the ri-ver Mc-Clus-key did fear, As he swung the gord stick o'er the  
big spot - ted steers. Long leg - ged and shag - gy, girt - in' eight foot in three, "You  
bet," says the Scotch - man, "they're the lad - dies for me." And a hi-der - ry, ho-der - ry  
hi - der - ry down, And a hi - der - ry, ho - der - ry, hi - der - ry down. Oh, it's

## Verse 1.

Oh, there's nothing on the river McCluskey did fear,  
While he swung the gord stick o'er the big spotted steers,  
Long leg-ged and shaggy, girtin' eight foot in three,  
"You bet," says the Scotchman, "they're the laddies for me."

## Chorus

And a hi-derry ho-derry-hi-derry down,  
And a hi-derry ho-derry hi-derry down.

## Verse 2.

Oh, it's long came Bull Gordon, his skids being full,  
And he holler'd "Whoa hush" to his little brown bulls,  
Short leg-ged and stocky, girtin' six foot in nine,  
"Too small," says the Scotchman, "to handle large pine."

## Verse 3.

"For three to the thousand our contract does call,  
Where the skidding is good and the timber is tall.  
I have twenty-five dollars to make the day full,  
That I'll skid two to one on your little brown bulls."

## Verse 4

Oh, it's "No," says Bull Gordon, "that you never can do,  
Though your big spotted steers are the pet of the crew,  
You bet your bold ladies will have their hands full  
Than to skid one more log than the little brown bulls."

Verse 5.

So the day was appointed, and soon it came 'round,  
With judges and scalers, they 'peared on the ground,  
With a whoop and a yell as they swung into view  
O, the big spotted steers, the pet of the crew.

Verse 6.

Says he, "My bold ladies, just keep your jaws full  
For you'll easy defeat them, the little brown bulls."

Verse 7.

Oh, it's long came Bull Gordon, with his pipe in his jaw,  
And the little brown bulls with their cud in their maw,  
Oh, little we thought when we saw them come down  
That a hundred and forty they could jerk around.

Verse 8.

Said McCluskey to Sandy, "Now strip to the skin.  
We will dig them a grave and we'll tumble them in.  
We'll learn the damn Yankee to face us brave Scot;  
And we'll fix them a dose, and we'll feed it red-hot!"

Verse 9.

Up spoke Bull Gordon, with blood in his eye,  
"We will conquer McCluskey or today we will die."  
"Oh no," says bold Kennebec, "that never you fear;  
We will never be beat by the big spotted steers."

Verse 10.

When the sun had gone down the foreman did say,  
"Turn out, boys, turn out, it's enough for to-day.  
We've counted and scaled each man to his team,  
And it's very well known which one kicks the beam."

Verse 11.

When supper was over, McCluskey appeared  
With his belt ready made for the big spotted steers.  
To construct it he tore up his best mackinaw;  
And he's bound to conduct it according to law.

Verse 12.

Up spoke the scaler, "Just hold ye awhile,  
For your big spotted steers are behind just a mile,  
You've skidded one hundred and ten and no more,  
And Gordon has beat you by ten and a score."

Verse 13.

How the camp it did ring, and McCluskey did swear,  
And he tore out in handfuls his long yellow hair.  
Says he to Bull Gordon, "Down the colors I'll pull,  
So it's here, take the belt for your little brown bulls."

Verse 14.

So it's here's to Bull Gordon and his Kennebec John,  
For the biggest day's work on the river they've done.  
So fill up your glasses, boys, fill them up full,  
And we'll drink to the health of the little brown bulls.

*Transcriptions and lyrics from the Helene Stratman-Thomas Collection.*

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## 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.