

Little Brown Bulls

(The Helene Stratman-Thomas Collection does not include a transcription of Harry Dyer's version of this song.)

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.