Verse 1.
Not a thing on the river McCluskey did fear,
As he swung his gord stick o’er the big spotted steers,
They were round, plump, and handsome, girdin’ eight foot ‘n’ three,
Said McCluskey, the Scotchman, “They’re the laddies for me.”

Verse 2.
Then along came Bull Gordon, whose skidding was full,
As he hollered, “Whoa hush,” to his little brown bulls.
Short legged and shaggy, girdin’ six foot ‘n’ nine,
“Too light,” said McCluskey, “to handle our pine.”

Verse 3.
“For it’s three to the thousand our contract of call,
Our skidding is good and our timber is tall.
McCluskey, he swore that he’d make the day full,
And he’d skid three to one of the little brown bulls.

Verse 4
“Oh no,” said Bull Gordon, “that you cannot do,
Although your big steers are the pets of the crew.
I tell you, McCluskey, you will have your hands full
When you skid one more log than my little brown bulls.”

Verse 5.
So the day was appointed, and soon did draw nigh,
For twenty-five dollars their fortunes to try,
All eager and anxious next morning was found,
The judge and the scaler appeared on the ground.
Verse 6.
With a whoop and a yell came McCluskey in view,
As with his big spotted steers, the pets of the crew.
He says, “Chew your cud, boys, and keep your mouth full,
For we easily can beat them, the little brown bulls.”

Verse 7.
Then along came Bull Gordon, with his pipe in his jaw,
To his little brown bulls he hollers, “Whoa haw.”
He says, “Chew your cud, boys, you need never fear,
For we will not be beat by the big spotted steers.”

Verse 8.
Says McCluskey to Sandy, “We’ll take off their skins.
We’ll dig him a hole and we’ll tumble him in.
We’ll make up a dish and we’ll feed it to them hot.
We will learn them damn Yankees to face the bold Scot.”

Verse 9.
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 10.
When up stepped the scaler, saying, “Hold ye awhile,
Your big spotted team is behind just one mile,
You’ve skidded one hundred and ten and no more,
Whilst Gordon has beat you by ten and a score.”

Verse 11.
How the boys then all laughed, and McCluskey did swear,
And he tore out by handfuls his long yellow hair.
He says to Bull Gordon, “My dollars I’ll pull;
And you take the belt for your little brown bulls.”

Verse 12.
Oh, it’s here’s to Bull Gordon and Sanberry John,
For the biggest day’s work on the river is done.
It's fill up your glasses, boys, and 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.*
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:

K.G.