

# CDSS Sings—The Cowboy

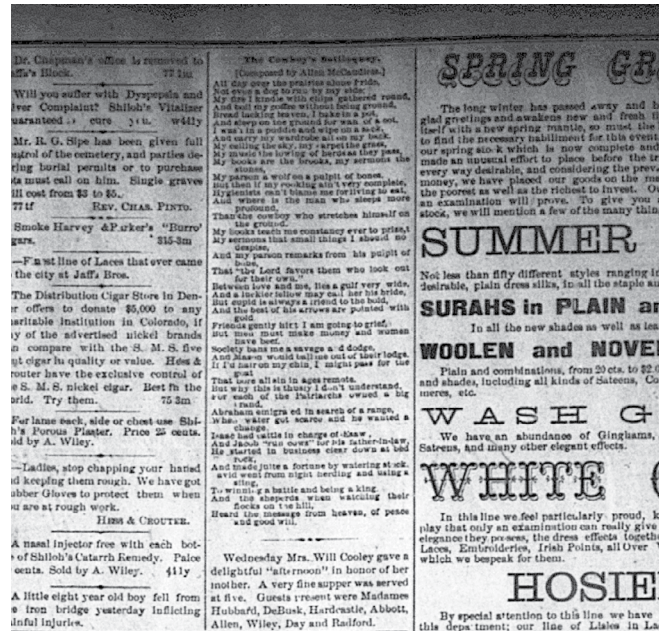
by Martha Burns

In the Trinidad, Colorado, *Daily Advertiser* for April 9, 1885, squeezed between several columns of commercial notices and bold display ads, was a poem of forty-two lines called “The Cowboy’s Soliloquy.” Its author was given as Allen McCandless, a name with no local significance. More than a century later, the folklorist David Stanley would trace McCandless to the Crooked L Ranch in the Texas Panhandle. A hired range hand venturing into verse.

McCandless’s poem, rich in imagery and erudite, was an elegant portrait of the cowboy. Drawing on both the Bible and Shakespeare, it told of a gentle soul who lived simply and close to nature. His calling was an ancient one, rooted in Old Testament times: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had all been cattlemen in their day. But scorned by society, the cowboy was also kin to the ill-fated scapegoat from Leviticus, an innocent cast into the desert to atone for the sins of the Israelites.

Like much old cowboy poetry, “The Cowboy’s Soliloquy” found its way naturally into song, and its verses were slowly reworked over time. John Lomax included a version with a simple score in *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, in 1910. The first recorded version came in 1927, from Carl Sprague, a Texas singer of cowboy songs. Sprague combined a different tune with the first six verses of Lomax’s text—all that would fit on a seventy-eight. But the borrowing went both ways. When Lomax revised his book in 1938, he added Sprague’s melody as an alternative one.

My favorite version comes from Glenn Ohrlin, and it’s featured here. It’s a bit shorter than McCandless’s poem or the version from Lomax. For me, it’s also the most focused and the most compelling. Glenn called it “The Cowboy,” and included it in *The Hell-Bound Train*, his superb book of cowboy songs, published in 1973. Glenn, who died in 2015, was a masterly singer whose extraordinary gift was understatement. His singing always put words and imagery in the foreground. He made two recordings of “The Cowboy,” each slightly different from the other. Follow the web extra link to hear one of these.



Now, about Shakespeare. Shakespeare’s works, performed and in print, were popular culture in the nineteenth century. McCandless’s “Soliloquy” probably pointed to a soliloquy by Duke Senior in *As You Like It*, from which the Texan borrowed two images for his poem. You’ll find these also in Glenn Ohrlin’s lyrics, transcribed on the next page. In the play, the unfortunate Duke has been forced from the Court and roams, an exile, in the Forest of Arden. But he is a noble spirit and finds contentment in his primitive surroundings.

And this our life exempt from public haunt  
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones and good in every thing.  
I would not change it.

So it was with “The Cowboy.”

Martha Burns is a singer of old-time and cowboy songs. Her 2014 album, *Old-Time Songs*, is available through [CDBaby.com](http://CDBaby.com) or from her website, [www.marthaburns.net](http://www.marthaburns.net).

**WEB EXTRA:** Listen to Glenn Ohrlin sing the song at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vv0bx6csjbc>

# The Cowboy

All day in the saddle on the prairie I ride, Not  
even a dog, boys, to trot by my side. My  
fire I must kindle from chips gathered round, And I  
boil my own coffee without being ground.

## LYRICS:

All day in the saddle on the prairie I ride,  
Not even a dog, boys, to trot by my side.  
My fire I must kindle from chips gathered round,  
And I boil my own coffee without being ground.

For want of a stove I cook bread in a pot.  
I sleep on the ground for the want of a cot.  
I wash in the creek and I dry on a sack  
And I carry my wardrobe all on my back.

And then if my cooking's not very complete,  
You can't blame me for wanting to eat.  
But show me the man who sleeps more profound  
Than the big puncher boy who's stretched out on the ground.

My books are the brooks and my sermons the stones.  
My parson's the wolf on his pulpit of bones.  
My roof is the sky, my floor is the grass.  
My music's the lowing of herds as they pass.

But society brands me so savage and dodge  
That the Masons would bar me out of their lodge.  
If I'd hair on my chin I might pass for the goat  
Who bore all the sins in the ages remote.

And why it is so I cannot understand,  
For each of the patriarchs owned a big brand.  
Abraham immigrated in search of a range.  
Because of a drought he was seeking a change.

Oh, Isaac run cattle in charge of Esau,  
And Jacob punched cows for his father-in-law.  
David went from night herding to using a sling,  
And winning the battle, became a great king.

My friends gently hint I am coming to grief,  
But men must make money and women have beef.  
And Cupid is always a friend to the bold,  
And all of his arrows are pointed with gold.

And my parson remarks from his pulpit of bone,  
That fortune favors those who look out for their own.