

Cowboy Songs and Ballads

The Basics

Time Required

3 class periods

Subject Areas

5th Grade ESOL

Development of the Industrial U.S., 1870-1900

Common Core Standards Addressed:

Writing Standards K-5

Author

Sonya Knee (2011)

The Lesson

Introduction

My 5th grade ESOL students study the westward expansion in the U.S. One of the groups that they learn about is the cowboys. These lessons will enrich their knowledge of this period by teaching them cowboy songs or ballads from that period and incorporating language arts activities which will strengthen their language skills. Each lesson will cover a different aspect of cowboy life and will provide students with insights into the daily activities and challenges of these men.

An excellent source for these cowboy songs is *He Was Singin' This Song: A Collection of Forty-eight Traditional Songs of the American Cowboy, with Words, Music, Pictures, and Stories* by Jim Bob Tinsley (2007 Centerstream Publishing LLC).

Learning Objectives

The student will compare and contrast "The Old Chisholm Trail" and "Whoopie Ti-Yi-Yo, Git Along Little Dogie," two cowboy songs about life on the trail and describe life on the trail. Through the study of "The Cowboy's Lament" and "Little Joe the Wrangler," students will explore the motivations of cowboys for heading West and the tragedies that often befell them. They will convey what they learn through discussion and written expression.

Students will compare and contrast "Yellow Rose of Texas," and "The Red River Valley," two love songs that cowboys sang and relate the latter to their own experiences with family members that live far away.

Preparation Instructions

Songs used in this lesson

"The Old Chisholm Trail"

“Whoopie Ti-Yi-Yo, Git Along Little Dogie”
“The Cowboy’s Lament”
“Little Joe the Wrangler”
“The Yellow Rose of Texas”
“The Red River Valley”

Lesson Activities

Lesson 1: Life on the trail

Introductory Narrative to Lesson: Cowboys on horseback herded cattle from Texas to railroads so they could be shipped to stockyards. These cattle drives were a major activity in the American west between 1866 to 1886. Cowboys made up songs on the long trail for many reasons such as to relieve the monotony, calm cattle, keep awake and socialize.

Objective: The student will compare and contrast “The Old Chisholm Trail” and “Whoopie Ti-Yi-Yo, Git Along Little Dogie,” two cowboy songs about life on the trail and describe life on the trail.

Standard: The student will demonstrate an understanding of the continued westward expansion of the United States.

Procedure:

Opening: Ask students if they have ever gone on a long trip (such as by car, train or bus). What did they do to pass the time? Who did they go with? Did they sing songs? Pair students and let them talk about what song they might choose to sing on a long trip and why.

Body: Tell students that the first song they will listen to is “The Old Chisholm Trail.” Show picture of the Old Chisholm Trail. Give background information about the song. Students will take turns reading the stanzas. Teacher will ask students if there are any words that they don’t understand, and she will explain them. Before listening to the song, teacher will tell students to make believe they are the cowboys and picture what was happening in the song. Then they should close their eyes and listen to the song. Then each student will tell about one event that happened in the song. Students will brainstorm what other stanzas they would add to the cowboys’ adventures. Next, tell students that they will listen to another song about life on the trail called “Whoopie Ti-Yi-Yo , Git Along Little Dogies.” Show them the map of the trail referred to in this song. Explain terms such as “doggies” and “Uncle Sam’s Injuns.” Then show pictures of the cowboys herding the cattle. Tell students to follow along with the words as they listen to the song. They should think about the following:

- Who is the cowboy talking to?
- Why is he singing this song?
- How might singing this song have helped the cowboy?
- Do you think it helped the doggies?

Closure: Class will brainstorm and create a Venn diagram which tells the similarities and differences in these two songs.

Lesson 2: Tragedy for Cowboys

Introductory Narrative to Lesson: Life in the West could be dangerous. Many cowboys died young. Here are two ways that cowboys met their end.

Objective: Through the study of “The Cowboy’s Lament” and “Little Joe the Wrangler,” students will explore the motivations of cowboys for heading West and the tragedies that often befell them. They will convey what they learn through discussion and written expression.

Procedures:

Opening: Show students pictures of Laredo in 1875 and 1880. In pairs, students will describe what they see. Then show class picture of dead cowboy. Ask students to observe details of the picture (bottle of liquor, cards and gun). In group discussion, students will state what they think happened. Tell class that this picture is a clue to what happened to the cowboy in “The Cowboy’s Lament.”

Body: Locate Laredo, Texas on a map. This is the scene of the first ballad, “The Cowboy’s Lament.” Students will take turns reading the stanzas, and teacher will explain key words (such as lament, Nation and Maker). Teacher will tell students to listen to the song and think about answers to the following questions:

- Who is singing the song?
- Who else is talking?
- How does the music make you feel?
- What is the setting?

Class will answer these questions and teacher will ask students why the dying cowboy wanted the men to “beat the drum slowly and play the fife lowly.” What does that remind them of? Then explain that this was referring to a military funeral. The song will be played again. This time, students will record the sequence of the story on the “story plot” graphic organizer. Students will then work in pairs and read their story plots. Class will repeat procedure with “Little Joe the Wrangler,” reading the stanzas and discussing key words. Then teacher will ask students to imagine that they were out West with Joe the Wrangler. They should listen to the song with their eyes closed and picture the events in the song. Students will describe what they saw and then each student will tell one detail about Joe the Wrangler’s life.

Closure: Class discussion: How were the cowboys alike? How were they different? What was the same and different about the music (such as instruments, rhythm).

Lesson 3: Love on the Range

Introductory Narrative to Lesson: It was lonesome on the prairie. Cowboys often sung about girlfriends they left behind. Sometimes they looked forward to seeing their sweethearts again.

Objective: Students will compare and contrast two love songs that cowboys sung and relate the latter to their own experiences with family members that live far away.

Procedures:

Opening: Show a picture of Mexican General Santa Anna. Tell students that the song *The Yellow Rose of Texas* was named after a light skinned African American, Emily Morgan, who this general liked. Because he spent time with her, he didn’t pay attention to the war with the Texans at San Jacinto, and the Mexicans lost the Battle of San Jacinto. As a result, Texas became independent from Mexico.

Body: Students will locate Texas and the Rio Grande on a map of the U.S. They will come to the map and locate places such as Mexico where they have relatives. While they are listening to the song, they should think about where the song would be sung and who would be listening to it. Where would they be? How does the music make them feel? What happens in the song? Class discussion

will follow. Tell students that the next song was originally sung by traders in Canada on an old trail that ran near the Red River, but sung in the West. Students will take turns reading the stanzas, and teacher will explain the difficult words. Students will close their eyes and listen to the song. Then they will discuss what they saw. Were they in the scene? If so, who were they? What happened at the end of the song?

Closure: Working in pairs, students will complete a song comparison graph.

Assessment

For Lesson 1

Each student will write a paragraph in their journal. He/she will write as if they were a cowboy on the trail. Student will include their activities on the trail and their feelings.

For Lesson 2

Students will pretend to be newspaper reporters. Using the information in the ballads, they write an obituary for one of the cowboys. They will tell about their life and how they died. Students will read their obituaries to their partners.

For Lesson 3

Students will think of a relative or friend who is far away. What would they want to tell that person? They should write a short letter to that person.

Extending the Lesson

As a culmination of the cowboy unit, students will tell which song they enjoyed the most and why. Class will sing these songs.

Resources

Lyrics

Note: All music and lyrics can be found in *He Was Singin' This Song* by Jim Bob Tinsley. All recordings are from the latter, except for "The Old Chisholm Trail" which can be found in Norman Luboff Choir- *Songs of the West* www.akh.se/luboff/cl657.htm

"The Old Chisholm Trail"

Song Background:

This song is named for the Chisholm Trail which ran from Texas to the Kansas Pacific Railroad. Cowboys in the late 19th century herded cattle along this route to sell them and ship them East. The trail had no precise origin; it consisted of cow paths which angled northward from central and southern Texas until they converged on a wagon road which had been blazed by Jesse Chisholm, a half-breed Cherokee trader.

"The Old Chisholm Trail" is an authentic cowboy ballad, produced by cowboys telling about their lives on the trail. It is undated and was originally circulated through oral tradition. It has many variations and a multitude of verses, because cowboys going up the trail added their own verses

about their experiences along the trail. It consists of a simple couplet structure and a nonsensical refrain. It was always written in the first person pronoun regardless of who wrote it or sang it.

Discussion Questions:

What is your favorite song to sing when you take a long trip? Why?

Why would cowboys make up a song like this?

When do you think they sang it?

What scene do you see when you close your eyes and listen to the song?

Comparison Song: "Whoopie Ti-Yi-Yo Git Along Little Dogies"

Lyrics:

Coma - tiyiyippy, yippy yea,yippy yea

Coma - ti yi yippy, yippy yea

Oh come along boys and listen to my tale
I'll tell you of my troubles on the old Chisholm trail

I woke one morning the old Chisholm trail
With my rope in my hand and a cow by the tail

I started up the trail October twenty-third
Started up the trail with the two U herd

I'm up in the morning before daylight
Before I sleep will moon shine bright

My feet in the stirrups my seat in the saddle
I hung in the rattle of the longhorn cattle

No chaps no slicker and it's pouring down rain
I swear I'll never see night herd again

We rounded 'em up and put 'em in the car
And that was the last of the old Two Bars

"Whoopie Ti-Yi-Yo, Git Along Little Dogies"

Song Background:

From 1866 to 1896, cowboys herded cattle from San Antonio, Texas to Montana and Wyoming along the Texas-Montana Trail. The cattle replaced the rapidly vanishing buffalo and were sold to the government to feed Native Americans on the reservations. Although this song was first published in 1910 by John Lomax, its origins predate this publication. The author first heard it sung by a gypsy at the Fort Worth stockyards. Two lines of the song "Ip-e-la-ago, go 'long little doggie, You'll make a beef-steer by-and -by." appeared in a classic cowboy book, *The Log of a Cowboy* by trail driver Andy Adams in 1903. It is the story of an 1882 herd trailed from the Rio Grande to the

Canadian line. Adams wrote that this song alerted the swing riders on the trail that the rear guard was pushing forward.

Discussion Questions:

1. How did singing this song help cowboys herd the cattle?
2. What details does the song give us about how cattle were herded on the Texas-Montana Trail?
3. What has changed for the Native Americans? What evidence do we find in this song?

Vocabulary: dogie, Uncle Sam's Injuns, sweet by-and -by

Comparison Song: "The Old Chisholm Trail"

Lyrics:

Whoopie ti yi yo git along little dogies, git along

As I was a-walking one morning for pleasure,
I spied a cow-puncher a- riding along;
His hat was throwed back and his spurs was a-jingling,
And as he approached he was a-singing' this song,

Whoopie ti yi yo, git along, little doggies,
It's your misfortune, and none of my own.
Whoopie ti yi yo, git along, little dogies,
For you know Wyoming will be your new home.

A whooping' and yelling' and driven' the doggies;
and wishing that they would keep moving along.
If you think that riding this range is a pleasure
Well that's where you got it most awfully wrong

When night comes on we hold them on the bed-ground
Than in the morning we're all on the go
We round up the herd and cut out the strays
And roll those doggies that roll on so slow

"The Cowboy's Lament"

Song Background:

In 1876, Francis Henry Maynard wrote this song while herding cattle along the Kansas-Indian Territory Line. He adapted it from a popular cowboy song called "The Dying Girls Lament" and changed the gender and setting. There are two popular versions. One takes place on the streets of Laredo, Texas, a southwestern border town founded in 1755. The other setting is a barroom in Dodge City, Kansas. In both versions, the dying cowboy request a military funeral, and the latter links the song to an old broadside in Ireland.

Discussion Questions:

1. As you close your eyes and listen to the song, imagine yourself on the streets of Laredo.

What are the sights and sounds?

2. What do we know about the life of this cowboy?

3. Using the details of the song, how do you think the cowboy met his death?

4. Why is it important to "beat the drum slowly and play the fife lowly"? What kind of funeral is that and what might that tell us about the cowboy's history?

5. Why do you think the other cowboys loved him even though he did wrong?

Vocabulary: lament, fife, coffin, Maker

Comparison Songs: "Oh Bury Me Not on the Old Prairie," "Little Joe the Wrangler," "Blood on the Saddle," "When the Work's All Done this Fall"

Lyrics:

As I walked out in the streets of Laredo,
As I walked out in Laredo one day,
I spied a poor cowboy wrapped up in white linen,
Wrapped up in white linen as cold as the clay.

"Oh, beat the drum slowly and play the fife lowly,
Play the dead march as you carry me along;
Take me to the green valley, there lay the sod o'er me,
For I'm a young cowboy and I know I've done wrong.

"I see by your outfit that you are a cowboy" --
These words he did say as I boldly stepped by.
"Come sit down beside me and hear my sad story;
I am shot in the breast and I know I must die.

"Let sixteen gamblers come handle my coffin
Let sixteen cowboys come sing me a song.
Take me to the graveyard and lay the sod o'er me,
For I'm a poor cowboy and I know I've done wrong.

"My friends and relations they live in the Nation,
They know not where their boy has gone.
He first came to Texas and hired to a ranchman,
Oh, I'm a young cowboy and I know I've done wrong.

"It was once in the saddle I used to go dashing,
It was once in the saddle I used to go gay;
First to the dram-house and then to the card-house;
Got shot in the breast and I am dying today.

"Get six jolly cowboys to carry my coffin;
Get six pretty maidens to bear up my pall.
Put bunches of roses all over my coffin,
Put roses to deaden the sods as they fall.

"Then swing your rope slowly and rattle your spurs lowly,

And give a wild whoop as you carry me along,
And in the grave throw me and roll the sod o'er me,
For I'm a young cowboy and I know I've done wrong.

"Oh, bury beside me my knife and six-shooter,
My spurs on my heel, my rifle by my side,
And over my coffin put a bottle of brandy,
That the cowboys may drink as they carry me along.

"Go bring me a cup, a cup of cold water,
To cool my parched lips," the cowboy then said;
Before I returned his soul had departed,
And gone to the round-up -- the cowboy was dead.

We beat the drum slowly and played the fife lowly,
And bitterly wept as we bore him along;
For we all loved our comrade, so brave, young and handsome,
We all loved our comrade although he'd done wrong.

"Little Joe the Wrangler"

Song Background:

In 1898, Jack Thorp, a collector of cowboy songs, wrote this song while sitting by a campfire. He was helping herd cattle from Chimney Lake, New Mexico to Higgins, Texas. He wrote it on a paper bag and with a pencil stub; it was about a wrangler he once knew. His partners on the trail were the first to hear the song.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why did Joe become a wrangler?
2. Look back in the song. What were some of the chores of a wrangler?
3. How was Joe like a stray horse?
4. Is there a modern day "Joe the Wrangler"? What kind of person would that be?

Vocabulary: wrangler, stampede, stray, washout, stampede, mashed to a pulp, rung the knell

Song Comparison: "The Cowboy's Lament," "Oh Bury Me Not on the Old Prairie," "Blood on the Saddle," "When the Work's All Done This Fall"

Lyrics:

Little Joe, the wrangler, will never wrangle more;
His days with the remuda- they are done.
'Twas a year ago last April, he joined the outfit here,
A little Texas stray and all alone.

'Twas long late in the evening he rode up to the herd
On a little old brown pony he called Chow;
With his brogan shoes and overalls, a harder- lookin' kid,

You never in our life had seen before.

His saddle 't was a southern kack built many years ago,
An O.K. spur on one foot idly hung,
While the "hot roll" in a cotton sack was loosely tied behind,
And a canteen from the saddle horn h'ed slung.

He said he'd had to leave home, his daddy'd married twice,
And his new ma beat him every day or two,
So he saddled up old Chow one night and "lit a shuck" this way-
Thought he'd try and paddle now his own canoe.

Said he'd try and do the best he could if we'd only give him work
Though he didn't know straight up about a cow;
So the Boss he cut him out a mount and kinder put him on,
For he sorta liked that little stray somehow.

Taught him how to herd the horses and learn to know them all,
To round 'em up by daylight if he could;
To follow the chuck-wagon and to always hitch the team
And help the "cosinero" rustle wood.

We'd driven to Red River and the weather had been fine,
We were camped down on the south side in a bend,
When a norther commenced blowin' and we all doubled up our guards,
For it took all hands to hold the cattle then.

Little Joe, the wrangler, was called out with the rest,
And scarcely had the kid got to that herd,
When the cattle they stampeded; like a hailstorm, long they flew,
And all of us were riding for the lead.

'Tween the streaks of lightnin' we could see that horse far out ahead-
"T was little Joe, the wrangler, in the lead;
He was ridin' "Old Blue Rocket" with his slicker 'bove his head,
Trying to check the leaders in their speed.

At last we got them milling and kinder quieted down,
And the extra guard back to the camp did go;
But one of them was missin', and we all knew at a glance
'T was our little Texas stray, poor Wrangler Joe.

Next morning just at sunup we found where Rocket fell,
Down in a washout twenty feet below;
Beneath his horse, mashed to a pulp, his spurs had rung the knell
For our little Texas stray, poor Wrangler Joe.

"The Yellow Rose of Texas"

Additional Cover, Sheet Music, and Lyrics: Lester Levy Sheet Music Collection

Song Background:

This song may have been written soon after the Battle of San Jacinto, April 21, 1836. The original "Yellow Rose" was a servant of Colonel Morgan who is credited with diverting Mexican General Santana's from the war and thus enabling the Texans to win their independence. In 1858, sheet music was issued; it was composed and arranged by J.K., whose identity was left to speculation. It was a marching song for the Confederates during the Civil War and was also included in blackface shows. It has become a popular cowboy song.

Discussion questions:

1. Do you have a friend or relative who lives far away? What do you remember about him/her?
2. Why was it popular for cowboys to sing about their girlfriends?

Vocabulary: songs of yore, belle, woe

Comparison songs: "The Girl I Left Behind," "Red River Valley"

Lyrics:

There's a yellow rose in Texas that I am going to see,
No other darky [*sic*] knows her, no darky only me
She cried [*sic*] so when I left her it like to broke my heart,
And if I ever find her, we nevermore will part.

[Chorus]

She's the sweetest rose of color this darky ever knew,
Her eyes are bright as diamonds, they sparkle like the dew;
You may talk about your Dearest May, and sing of Rosa Lee,
But the Yellow Rose of Texas beats the belles of Tennessee.

When the Rio Grande is flowing, the starry skies are bright,
She walks along the river in the quite [*sic*] summer night:
She thinks if I remember, when we parted long ago,
I promised to come back again, and not to leave her so. [Chorus]

Oh now I'm going to find her, for my heart is full of woe,
And we'll sing the songs together [*sic*], that we sung so long ago
We'll play the bango gaily, and we'll sing the songs of yore,
And the Yellow Rose of Texas shall be mine forevermore. [Chorus]

"Red River Valley"

Song Background:

It was originally a Canadian love song but became a cowboy song about the Texas- Oklahoma cattle country. There are many accounts of hearing this song sung in cattle country in the late nineteenth century.

Discussion Questions:

1. Has a close relative or friend left the place that you were living? Tell about that person and your feelings about his/her departure.
2. Where do you think the cowboy's sweetheart is going? Why would she go if she loved him?

Comparison Songs: "The Girl I left Behind," "The Yellow Rose of Texas"

Lyrics:

From this valley they say you are going
We will miss your bright eyes and sweet smile
For they say you are taking the sunshine
That brightens our path for a while

Come and sit by my side if you love me
Do not hasten to bid me adieu
But remember the Red River Valley
And the cowboy that loved you so true

Come and sit by my side if you love me
Do not hasten to bid me adieu
But remember the Red River Valley
And the cowboy that's waiting for you