



*Three people with musical instruments and one with a rifle pose on the roof of the Anderson sod house in Logan County in a photograph taken in the late 1880s. In the foreground are Isabel, Matilda, and Pete.*

---

# The Stern Old Bachelor, Arthur L. Stokesberry, and His Ballad: Reigniting Research in Great Plains Folksong

*by Thomas D. Isern*

In August of 1886, the teachers of Kingman County, Kansas, gathered in the county seat for a summer normal (teacher training) institute supervised by faculty from the normal school in Emporia. Their opening session was a social at the United Brethren Church, where attendees answered a roll call according to their states of origin. The informative gathering turned hilarious when a bogus Arkansawyer, a teacher named Arthur Loreny Stokesberry, entered the sanctuary from an anteroom with, as he declared, “a right smart of gladness” and with a fiddle under his arm. Stokesberry, assuming the persona of the Arkansas Traveler, recited a litany of fictional facts about the Toothpick State and sawed his way through the fiddle tune “Arkansas Traveler,” inducing waves of laughter and applause from the delighted educators. The man was an entertainer.<sup>1</sup>

The talents on display that night were characteristic of Stokesberry, who soon afterward would pen a canonical ballad of the Great Plains entitled “Kansas Bachelor Song,” a.k.a. “A Bachelor Song” and later “The Stern Old Bachelor.”<sup>2</sup> Stokesberry and his ballad are historically significant on two counts. First, they contribute to the establishment of Kansas as a cultural hearth for Great Plains folksong, as the Jayhawk State, of all prairie states north of Texas, was foremost in the generation and propagation of ballads during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Second, Stokesberry and his ballad are strong evidence in a regional and national debate about the cultural origins of balladry, evidence that serves to characterize the nature of Great Plains folksong.

Prairie folk of the settlement generation not only appreciated ballads when they heard them but also had a reasonable understanding of the genre. In 1882, a newspaper editor in Broken Bow, Nebraska, reviewing a recent English work of literary criticism, offered his sandhill readership the cogent quotation “all ballads are songs, but all songs are not ballads.” “Ballads,” the editor explained, “are really stories in verse of a historical, narrative, humorous, or pathetic character”; they often are of a “complex nature” and detail “the actions of men.” Other songs, however, are “lyrical in form”; they give “the representation of simple moods or emotions” and practice “condensation.” The Nebraska editor wrote in this fashion in the

---

Thomas D. Isern was born and raised in Barton County, Kansas, and is Professor of History and University Distinguished Professor at North Dakota State University. He is a specialist in the history and folklore of the Great Plains. One of his active research interests is the history of balladry on the prairies, a line of inquiry (and performance) he makes public with his weekly Friday evening livestream, the Willow Creek Folk School.

1. *Kingman Courier*, August 18, 1886.

2. Examples of the ballad’s appearance in folksong collections are “The Old Bachelor,” *American Ballads and Folksongs*, comp. John A. Lomax and Alan Lomax (New York: Macmillan, 1934), 354–55, and “The Old Bachelor,” *Songs of the American West*, ed. Richard E. Lingenfelter, Richard A. Dwyer, and David Cohen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 449. The song was recorded in various versions by a series of country music artists, including the Carter Family, in 1938.

popular press and assumed that his readers would know what he was talking about.<sup>3</sup>

They would indeed have known, both because his readers were participants in a folk balladic tradition and also because the press explained it to them. It was public knowledge that at Harvard University, Professor Francis James Child had published a multivolume collection of ballads dating back to the seventeenth century; that he had labored in the latter decades of his life toward the completion of a more compendious and definitive corpus; and that on his death, Professor George Lyman Kittredge had taken over to bring out the final, tenth volume of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* in 1898.<sup>4</sup> Songcatchers, ballad hunters, soon determined that many of the 305 “Child ballads” still circulated in America even as the folk tradition resurged on the Great Plains. One American scholar observed that ballads were “coming up out of the earth.”<sup>5</sup> Another elaborated, “A ballad is a song that tells a story; it has no known author and it has been orally transmitted.”<sup>6</sup> Songcatcher and later literary critic Louise Pound simplified the definition in her 1914 collection: “The chief requisite for inclusion as belonging to folksong . . . was recovery from oral tradition.”<sup>7</sup>

The closing decades of the 1800s and early ones of the 1900s witnessed an efflorescence of folksong on the plains due to a convergence of causes, which may be briefly sketched. Certain systemic developments were fundamental: the

rapid emergence of communities, urban and rural, and ready communication among them owing to railroad development; the proliferation of newspapers, which thrived generally on community growth and specifically by publication of homestead notices—they needed copy and thus published every ballad that came their way; the exchange system of newspaper composition, which compounded or perhaps supplanted oral tradition in the propagation of ballads; and successive frontiers and agrarian unrest, which provided notable experiences to be chronicled through balladry. These conditions were important, but *people*, such as Arthur L. Stokesberry, not circumstances, composed and sang ballads. A balladic culture was abroad in the land. As William Allen White observed of his boyhood, “All the world seemed singing.”<sup>8</sup> The public was highly literate and appreciative of local literary efforts. The people patronized literary societies and other organizations and venues wherein balladeers held forth.<sup>9</sup>

Such developments invited a reinterpretation of the phenomenon of balladry, as something seemed to be happening on the plains that was an ill fit with traditional literary conceptions of the subject. There was an establishment of such scholarship, at the pinnacle of which stood George Lyman Kittredge of Harvard University.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on old-

8. William Allen White, *A Certain Rich Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1909), 8.

9. The evidence for this broadly synthetic paragraph is primary and too massive for ready citation here, consisting mainly of the transactions of the newspapers published during the era treated, now accessible digitally, which not only published the ballads but also reveal the grassroots social context in which they germinated. A more extended discussion of the proliferation of ballads and the rise of a balladic culture on the prairies is provided in the author’s paper “‘There Will Be No More Ballads’: Revisiting the Efflorescence of Folksong on the Great Plains,” presented to the Western History Association in 2022 and currently undergoing revision for publication.

10. See Clyde Kenneth Hyder, *George Lyman Kittredge: Teacher and Scholar* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1962). Kittredge’s papers, including his files on American ballads, are at the Houghton Library, Harvard University. Kittredge completed the ballad compilation largely done by Francis James Child (the famous Child ballads). See Francis James Child, Helen Child Sargent, and George Lyman Kittredge, eds., *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1904).

3. *Custer County Republican*, August 10, 1882.

4. Stephen C. Winick, “Francis James Child and the English and Scottish Popular Ballads,” Library of Congress, [www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200196779/](http://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200196779/).

5. Gordon Hall Gerould, “The Making of Ballads,” *Modern Philology* 21, no. 1 (August 1923): 15.

6. H. S. V. Jones, review of *Poetic Origins and the Ballad*, by Louise Pound, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 22, no. 1 (January 1923): 136.

7. Louise Pound, “Folk-Song of Nebraska and the Central West: A Syllabus,” *Nebraska Ethnology and Folk Lore Series, Nebraska Academy of Sciences Publications* 9, no. 3 (1915). The author of this article credits his appreciation of balladry to the teaching of the late William Berenson, his instructor in the ballad as literature at Bethany College, Lindsborg, where together they parsed the then-current definitions of the ballad as codified by Roger D. Abrahams and George Foss, *Anglo-American Folksong Style* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968).



*Undated studio portrait of Louise Pound. As a student at the University of Nebraska, Pound was close with fellow student Willa Cather. Later, Pound joined the faculty. Bernice Slote Papers, RG 12/10/16. Archives & Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries.*

country philology, Kittredge and company treated the ballad as a deceased genre to be stretched out and subjected to autopsy-like dissection under the assumption that its creators were nameless and tribal. This sterile approach, so at odds with what was happening on the plains, came under criticism first by Frank Egbert Bryant of the University of Kansas, who died before his great work was done. Bryant resisted “championing any theory of ballad origins,” thus questioning the given wisdom of

previous scholars. Moreover, he espoused a catholic definition of what constituted the ballad as a form, insisting that it was not homogeneous but comprised “a family, not a mere species.”<sup>11</sup> Bryant’s scholarship, although focusing on English and Scottish material, opened up definitions in such a way as to admit new material and new forms to a flexibly defined genre.

11. Frank Egbert Bryant, *A History of English Balladry and Other Studies* (Boston: Gorham Press, 1913), 38, 36. For a tribute to Bryant, see the booklet *Frank Egbert Bryant, 1877–1901* (Lawrence, 1911).

More explosive was the work of Louise Pound of the University of Nebraska. She not only compiled a pioneering collection of Nebraska folksong but also authored the provocatively revisionist work *Poetic Origins and the Ballad*. The Nebraska-born Pound took offense at prevailing treatments of balladry and, in effect, stood up for her home country. She spoke contemptuously of “the accepted or orthodox view” of “the authorship of primitive song” as “an absurd chronology” consigning ballads and their originators to some precivilized state. Ballads, she insisted, sprang from “individual artistry”—not from anonymous tribal traditions but rather from self-conscious folk artists. Pound was collecting folksong in Nebraska and, turning to traditional scholarship, adjudged it “thrown out of focus.” In her country, balladeers were artists, not primitives.<sup>12</sup>

Which brings us back to Stokesberry, the fiddling teacher from Kingman County. By 1884, the young bachelor, born in Iowa, had moved from Indiana to establish residence in Kingman County, where he commenced normal training. He had arrived in a county on the cusp of development. Kingman County, in south-central Kansas, had been organized in 1874 but saw only modest immigration on account of its lack of railroad connections. In 1884, new arrivals poured in with the building of the Wichita and Western Railroad (later incorporated into the Santa Fe system) from Wichita through Kingman County. By the winter of 1886, Stokesberry was teaching school in the country district of Ninnescah. Stokesberry was a well-known local personality who took part in teacher institutes and who held office in local literary societies, recited his own poetry for these societies, and squired female teaching colleagues to their meetings. Stokesberry was, indeed, a local literary lion whose compositions and declamations delighted audiences in Kingman County. When school let out in spring of 1887, however, he

12. Pound, “Folk-Song of Nebraska”; Louise Pound, *Poetic Origins of the Ballad* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 4, 9, 20, 34. For a biography, see Robert Cochran, *Louise Pound: Scholar, Athlete, Feminist Pioneer* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009).

bought a used wagon, left behind his friends and sweethearts, and lit out for Lane County to take up a homestead claim.<sup>13</sup>

The people in Kingman County heard back from Stokesberry, however, in the columns of the *Ninnescah Herald* on July 28, 1887. From Lane County, the homesteading teacher had mailed the Ninnescah editor an original ballad of seven four-line stanzas, plus chorus. It appeared under the title “Kansas Bachelor Song” with the author credit “A. L. Stokesberry.” Kingman County Superintendent of Schools Frank Roberson, either having also heard from Stokesberry or having picked the ballad up from the *Herald*, decided to incorporate it into his educational column under the title “Kansas Bachelor” in the *Kingman Leader Courier* on August 18, 1887. Roberson included the helpful note that the song was sung to the tune of a popular song, “Pure Cold Water.”<sup>14</sup> Roberson poked fun at his old friend by expressing amazement that with so many handsome female teachers in the country, Stokesberry remained unmarried. From Kingman County, the piece grew legs by virtue of newspaper exchanges and also established itself in oral circulation.<sup>15</sup> In addition to instances of publication

13. William G. Cutler, *History of the State of Kansas* (Chicago: A. T. Andreas, 1883), [www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/kingman/kingman-co-p1.html](http://www.kancoll.org/books/cutler/kingman/kingman-co-p1.html); “Kingman County, Kansas,” Kansapedia, Kansas Historical Society, [www.ksks.org/kansapedia/kingman-county-kansas/15303](http://www.ksks.org/kansapedia/kingman-county-kansas/15303); Forsyth Library, “Kansas Heritage: Kingman County,” [fhsuguides.fhsu.edu/kansasheritage/kingmancounty](http://fhsuguides.fhsu.edu/kansasheritage/kingmancounty); *Kingman Leader Courier*, December 25, 1884, August 6, 1885, December 24, 1885, December 16, 1886, February 10, 1887, March 3, 1887; *Ninnescah Herald*, December 2, 1886, December 23, 1886, December 30, 1886, March 3, 1887, March 17, 1887, April 14, 1887; *Kingman County Democrat*, February 10, 1887; *Kingman Morning News*, February 20, 1887.

14. “Pure Cold Water” was a temperance song made popular by a New England ensemble, the Hutchinson Family Singers. See “Cold Water” in *Book of Words of the Hutchinson Family* (New York: Baker, Goodwin & Co., 1851), 6–7.

15. Early iterations of the ballad accessible via Newspapers.com include *Kansas City (KS) Daily Gazette*, October 20, 1887; *Arkansas City Daily Traveler*, October 22, 1887; *Hutchinson Weekly Interior Herald*, October 22, 1887; *Winfield Daily Telegram*, October 25, 1887; *Lawrence Daily Journal*, October 25, 1887; *Lyons Daily News*, October 27, 1887; *Topeka Daily Press*, October 27, 1887; *Coffeyville Weekly Journal*, November 3, 1887; *Lane Commercial Bulletin*, November 4, 1887; *Wetmore Spectator*, November 11, 1887; *Ottawa Daily Republic*, November 16, 1887; *Wakeeney Tribune*, November 18, 1887; *Wellington Morning Quid-Nunc*, December 9, 1887; *Salina Herald*, March 15, 1888; *Peru Weekly Call*, April 20, 1888; *Stafford County Rustler*, May 16, 1889.



Postcard depicting the Kingman County courthouse.

throughout Kansas, Stokesberry's ballad, generally without his name attached, appeared in newspapers across the country.

The *Ninnescah Herald* was not the first publication venue for Stokesberry's composition, for Stokesberry, ever the self-conscious author, had also circulated his song in Lane County. It had been published two weeks earlier in the *Dighton Herald* on July 14, 1887. According to the editor's note, the ballad was "Published by Request." This was a common sort of legend attached to the publication of ballads in prairie newspapers; it indicated that a ballad was circulating, citizens were aware of it, and someone had asked that the text be published. Given the near-perfect correspondence between the *Ninnescah Herald* text and the *Dighton Herald* text, the two editors almost certainly obtained the song, in writing, directly from its author.

The lyrics to the *Dighton* version read,

I am a stern old bachelor,  
My age is forty-four.  
I do declare I'll never live  
With women any more.

CHORUS—Little sod shanty,  
Sod shanty give to me.  
For I'm a stern old bachelor.  
From matrimony free.

I live upon a homestead claim;  
From women I am hid.  
I do not have to dress a wife,  
Or take care of a kid.

I cook my little dirty bite,  
Three times or less a day;  
I lick my plates to keep them clean,  
And just shove things away.

I have a stove that's worth ten cents,  
A table worth fifteen;  
I cook my grub in oyster cans,  
And always have things clean;

On Sunday morn I go to church,  
Without a wife to storm;  
My latest paper is not rolled up,  
To beautify her form.

I go to bed whene'er I please,  
And get up just the same.  
I change my socks three times a year,  
With no one to complain.

And when I die and go to heaven,  
As all old bachelors do,  
I will not have to gri[e]ve for fear  
My wife won't get there too.

In the twenty-first century, Stokesberry's bachelor song seems like a spoof; audiences laugh and are moved to make their own jibes in tune with what they see as an age-old tension between the sexes. In its time, however, the ballad had a double resonance that engaged the public. To begin with, the stanzas deployed what people recognized as a stock character, rooted in true experience, of agricultural settlement on the plains: the man alone on his homestead, either a bachelor or a married man come west to make a start on proving up before sending for his wife and family. This character recurs in other regional ballads, such as "Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim" and "The Lane County Bachelor."<sup>16</sup> Such characters struggle

16. "The Lane County Bachelor" apparently originated in the same county, and at about the same time, as Stokesberry's "Bachelor Song." This coincidence caused at least one western Kansas commentator to theorize that the author of the "Bachelor Song" might have been the same person as the one who wrote "Lane County Bachelor." Folklorist Jan Brunvand thinks not, but his case regarding the true author of the latter song is dubious. See "'The Lane County Bachelor': Folksong or Not?," *Heritage of Kansas* 10 (Winter 1977): 3–20. The study here suggests, however, that because of Stokesberry's showman-like penchant for self-promotion, if he had been the author of "The Lane County Bachelor," then he would have been identified as such in the press at the time. For the initial suggestion, see *Healy Homestead*, August 28, 1931.

with the logistics of domestic life and also express their longing for female companionship.

Stokesberry's stanzas take a different posture. His bachelor is alone, he lives an unkempt life, and he declares himself pleased with the situation. The scenario as described could not have failed to connote among listeners the national conversation during the Gilded Age about the status of bachelors in American society—a conversation of particular pertinence in a part of the country where men living without women were numerous and prominent. A culture of bachelorhood was emerging in the country as young men deferred marriage to concentrate on business and advancement. Popular writers decried the proclivity of bachelors to frequent saloons and waste their time with manly sports. Social commentators decried the surplus of bachelors and wondered aloud what was wrong with them, or with the country. Some local governments enacted bachelor taxes to encourage young men to marry or move on.<sup>17</sup> Here is where the over-the-top bachelor humor of Stokesberry's ballad finds its place. In it, the unrepentant bachelor caricatures himself, as it seems obvious that he is protesting too much. Sure enough, bachelorhood did not last long for the balladeer himself.

As his ballad circulated throughout the region, Stokesberry was living the reality of his ballad—the independent bachelor on his Lane County claim—but only for a short time. In the first place, although he may have filed on a homestead and intended to prove up, he ultimately opted to make cash entry on the property in December 1889. (He would go on to secure a second quarter of land by cash entry in 1892 and a timber claim in 1899, by which time he was no longer resident in Kansas.)<sup>18</sup>

17. See the discussion in Timothy Mahoney, "A Bachelor's World," review of *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture*, by Howard Chudacoff, *H-NET Reviews*, [history.unl.edu/docs/Faculty/pdfs/ChudacoffReview2.pdf](http://history.unl.edu/docs/Faculty/pdfs/ChudacoffReview2.pdf). For more extended treatment, see Matthew Cohen, "The Still Life: Domesticity, Subjectivity, and the Bachelor in Nineteenth-Century America" (PhD diss., College of William and Mary, 2002), [dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-rxd1-cj24](https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-rxd1-cj24). See also Jill Frahm, "Taxing the Bachelors," *Society for Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, June 1, 2021, [www.shgape.org/taxing-the-bachelors/](http://www.shgape.org/taxing-the-bachelors/).

18. US Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records, Land Patents, [gloreCORDS.blm.gov/](http://gloreCORDS.blm.gov/).



A train depot in Shields, pictured in 1927, possibly the building in which Stokesberry worked and for a while lived.

Stokesberry soon forsook bachelor life to marry a woman named Elisabeth E. Smith in 1889; they had a son, Paul, the same year.<sup>19</sup>

During his new life in Lane County, Stokesberry continued to maintain a considerable public persona.<sup>20</sup> On first arriving in the county and taking up a claim there, he made certain to call in and introduce himself at the offices of the *Herald*. There is no record that he taught school in the county, but he occasionally attended teachers' meetings. From 1887 until his departure from the county in late 1894 or early 1895, he frequently made trips with neighbors to the land office in Wakeeney to testify to their residence on and cultivation of their claims as they sought final proof for homesteads. Stokesberry secured appointment as the depot

19. Stokesberry's marriage is thinly documented. Online genealogies list the date of marriage simply as 1889, with no more specific date given, but precisely date the birth of son Paul on May 14, 1889. Moreover, although Stokesberry was a visible and gregarious public figure in Lane County, newspapers do not mention the marriage or the birth. The sequence and timing of events do not seem to have incited public concern, however, for Stokesberry would be elected to public office in 1890, and his wife and son would be mentioned solicitously in the public press thereafter. Arthur Stokesberry remained married to Elizabeth until his death in 1918.

20. Annotation of sources for Stokesberry's life in Lane County is a problem, as they are many and fragmented, consisting of scores of mentions in the county-seat newspaper, the *Lane County Herald*. Thus, in this section of the current study, a blanket statement applies: the details, unless otherwise annotated, come from the *Herald* and are easily accessed via Newspapers.com, as "Stokesberry" is an easy search term. Quotations are specifically annotated.

agent in the small settlement of Shields, where he also opened the town's general store. (Stokesberry made his residence in the depot; his residence and business in Shields likely were the reason that, although he had declared his intention to prove up his original homestead, he elected to convert to cash entry.)<sup>21</sup>

The country correspondent in Shields indicated in 1893 that Stokesberry was not only a big man in the community but also still played his fiddle and sometimes still flashed the theatrical character of the Arkansas Traveler that he had displayed in Kingman County:

L. Stokesberry is the "Pooh Bah" of this community, as he is acting post-master, justice of the peace, express handler, freight rustler, grain buyer, scale master, yard master for the Missouri Pacific at this point, and besides that he runs the only store we have and sells dry goods and groceries, silks, satins and dry salt sow belly, so to speak. In addition to all this he plays first violin in the Shields orchestra and his work bears the true impress of the Arkansas artist. Great man is Stokes.<sup>22</sup>

21. Homestead notice of intention by Arthur L. Stokesberry, published in the *Dighton Herald*, September 8, 1887.

22. Shields country correspondent "Aron," *Dighton Herald*, September 14, 1893.

At the same time, Stokesberry was turning his theatrical talents toward another field of aspiration: politics. The local editor observed his style of operation, writing, “A. L. Stokesberry, superintendent of public schools elect, was in Tuesday absorbing heat [frequenting a popular stove-side, evidently] and swapping lies with the boys.”<sup>23</sup> As this report indicates, Stokesberry sought and gained local political office. By July 1890, he was secretary of the county Republican Party. In October, he was listed on the county ticket as a candidate for county superintendent of schools, to which office he was elected easily in November. Stokesberry’s earthy, garrulous style suited the political needs of the moment, for, previous to his arrival, there had been complaints of an aristocratic clique controlling the local Republican Party and its patronage. Aside from politics, Stokesberry kept the depot and store going in Shields, with Elizabeth filling in at the depot; spent Saturdays at his superintendent’s office in the county seat (or, more likely, chewing the fat with constituents around town); and made day trips to visit schools around the county.<sup>24</sup>

Stokesberry would not stand for reelection to office, however, as by late 1892, he was winding down his political and business interests and casting his aspirational eyes toward Oklahoma, specifically the Cherokee Strip, which opened by land run on September 16, 1893. Republican political fortunes in Lane County had deteriorated a bit, as the party had lost some offices to the Populists.<sup>25</sup> Economic conditions, not politics, however, were likely the reason Stokesberry decided to leave Lane County. The western Kansas boom of the 1880s had given way to general and severe drought in the early 1890s. As the region’s historian Craig Miner has observed, “The bust was as painful as the boom had been stimulating. Drought and depression in the 1890s severely

inhibited the growth of Kansas and in the west it rolled it back with a vengeance.”<sup>26</sup>

It is possible that Stokesberry had been thinking about leaving Lane for some time. Indeed, in the very year of his arrival, 1887, when times were good, he had penned a second ballad, full of dry humor, seeming to poke fun at homesteaders leaving the country.

I have made my final proof;  
Farewell to my homestead shanty  
The cattle will hook down the walls  
And some one will steal the roof.<sup>27</sup>

Irony, perhaps, but perhaps also an expression of the author’s own latent, main-chance attitude.

Stokesberry would have been aware of the land run from southern Kansas into the Oklahoma District on April 22, 1889, when times were still rather good on the Kansas frontier. He surely became more restive when, as conditions worsened in Kansas, the land run into the Cherokee Strip (more formally, the Cherokee Outlet) threw open the northwest quadrant of Oklahoma Territory to homesteading on September 16, 1893. Stokesberry did not make the 1893 run into the strip, but before long—in late 1894 or early 1895—he headed south and linked up with a collection of Lane County neighbors who had gone to the strip earlier.<sup>28</sup> After this, he was back and forth between Oklahoma and Kansas, plowing and planting wheat and row crops in the strip, living the bachelor life again on a claim until Elizabeth took up residence with him there in May 1898, as reported by the *Herald*. In Oklahoma, Stokesberry would finally prove up a homestead:

26. Craig Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854–2000* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 148.

27. *Cunningham Chronicle*, December 8, 1887. This second ballad by Stokesberry, which circulated and came to be known as “The Homesteader’s Farewell” or “Farewell to My Homestead Shanty,” was discovered following this article’s drafting; because of its wide dissemination, it deserves a study of its own.

28. The first definite dating of Stokesberry’s relocation is a *Herald* notice on February 28, 1895, that he had attended a birthday party in the strip.

23. *Dighton Herald*, December 11, 1890.

24. *Dighton Herald*, January 16, 1890, October 2, 1890.

25. *Dighton Herald*, September 3, 1891, October 22, 1891, November 5, 1891.



*A crowd waits in mid-September 1894, south of Arkansas City, for the Cherokee Strip land run.*

SW/4 S5 T22N R8W, in Garfield County, to which he received final patent via the Enid land office in November 1900.<sup>29</sup>

Stokesberry was not a man to settle down contentedly on a quarter-section farm, however. He returned to storekeeping, this time in the little western Oklahoma town of Lahoma. Prior to receiving his homestead patent, he and Elizabeth had already arranged the sale of their farm for \$1,600, which set them up for the mercantile venture. Stokesberry, at the same time, visited the Kiowa-Comanche reservation in the far southwest of the territory in search of other opportunities. In 1901, the Stokesberrys moved to Rush Springs to open another store, only to sell out there too and return to Lahoma. The Enid papers reported Stokesberry buying numerous lots in Lahoma, while he rented

offices and set up a real estate business, providing notary services, selling insurance, and brokering mortgages.<sup>30</sup>

Suddenly, in November 1903, the papers reported Stokesberry selling lots, not buying them, and after that, he and Elizabeth headed for another country town, Goltry, once again to open a store. Still the storekeeper was not content, as he scouted Sulphur Springs, in the Indian Territory, for other opportunities and briefly relocated there, although evidently keeping his store in Goltry. This he sold in early 1907, although the Stokesberrys remained in Goltry.<sup>31</sup>

Stokesberry's life on the plains, which had commenced so happily and creatively in Kingman County and then achieved reasonable success in Lane County, where he wrote his famous ballad, did not unfold in Oklahoma as he had hoped. The Stokesberrys eventually settled into a quiet life in

29. Stan Hoig, "Land Run of 1889," Oklahoma Historical Society, *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma*, [www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=LA014](http://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=LA014); Alvin O. Turner, "Cherokee Outlet Opening," Oklahoma Historical Society, *Encyclopedia of Oklahoma*, [www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=CH021](http://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=CH021); US Bureau of Land Management, General Land Office Records, Land Patents, [gloreCORDS.blm.gov/](http://gloreCORDS.blm.gov/). Stokesberry's notice of final proof is in the *Enid (OK) Sun-Eagle* of June 7, 1900.

30. *Enid (OK) Echo*, May 9, 1900; *Enid (OK) Daily Morning News*, July 25, 1900; *Enid Echo*, September 12, 1900; *Lahoma (OK) Sun*, December 27, 1901, January 3, 1902, November 7, 1902, July 31, 1902.

31. *Goltry (OK) News*, September 16, 1904, November 25, 1904, July 21, 1905, February 1, 1907.



Maps showing the state-by-state frequency of appearance of phrases across newspapers, suggesting the centrality of Kansas in the distribution of these songs. The left image illustrates newspapers.com search results for “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim.” The right image presents search results for “I Am a Stern Old Bachelor.”

Goltry, where, according to newspaper reports, Arthur and Elizabeth both assumed leadership roles in a local church, Arthur was elected to village offices, and his son, Paul, came into his own as a baseball pitcher.<sup>32</sup> At one point, Stokesberry was reduced to hard physical labor shoveling grain at a local elevator—but fortunately, he got a few breaks in the latter years of his life. In June 1910, his record as a good Republican finally paid off, for he received appointment as Goltry’s postmaster, a position he retained thereafter by successfully navigating the examination system by which the federal government was implementing civil service reform. The following year, he added a second job as assistant cashier in the Bank of Goltry. Finally, he developed a side business selling subscriptions to the *Wichita Eagle*, the *Wichita Beacon*, and the *Oklahoman*. This was how he spent his final years until his death in 1918 and burial in Goltry.<sup>33</sup>

Stokesberry was survived by his ballad. Interestingly, the song evaded capture by renowned early-twentieth-century western

songcatchers such as Jack Thorp, John Lomax, and Louise Pound but remained in informal circulation and was propagated by early country musicians, such as the Carter Family, none of whom knew the song’s origins or authorship. Nor did folksinger and scholar Joanie O’Byrant of Wichita University, who recorded the song for Folkways Records in 1958.<sup>34</sup>

If the lineage of the “Bachelor Song” was long-lost, how is the study presented here even possible? It is not because of superior literary scholarship or research skills but rather because of the wonders of optical character recognition and the digitization of newspapers in such collections as *Chronicling America* and *Newspapers.com*, along with other digital resources such as *Ancestry.com*, which make it possible to trace songs previously listed as “Anonymous” or “Traditional” all the way to their headwaters and then track the songs and their authors through time and space.

Such digital research suggests that Kansas holds place as a touchstone for Great Plains balladry. A feature of *Newspapers.com* is the capacity to instantaneously produce a map of the places where a given term or phrase

32. Here, again, documentation of details in Stokesberry’s biography lies in a score or more local newspaper articles, mainly in the *Goltry News*, accessible via *Newspapers.com*.

33. *Goltry News*, June 3, 1910; *Lahoma Sun*, December 9, 1910; *Goltry News*, February 3, 1911, 29 March 1912, 16 April 1915; “Arthur Loreny Stokesberry,” Find a Grave, [www.findagrave.com/memorial/94761439/arthur-loreny-stokesberry](http://www.findagrave.com/memorial/94761439/arthur-loreny-stokesberry).

34. Joan O’Byrant, vocalist, “The Stern Old Bachelor,” on *American Ballads and Folksongs*, prod. Kenneth Goldstein (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Folkways, 1958).

appeared in the popular press. Maps charting the usage of key phrases from such ballads as “A Bachelor’s Song” or “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim” are not good evidence of the absolute origin of a song, but they are excellent evidence of its currency. Kansas emerges as ground zero for such currency. Not only the intensity of circulation of ballads in Kansas but also the evident profusion of such songs originating in the Sunflower State argue that the reignition of research on traditional balladry, using the wealth of digital source material now available, will prove particularly fruitful here. Well-known ballads (well-known because songcatchers brought them into the canon of known literature a century or more ago) such as “The Kansas Bachelor Song,” “Quantrill’s Raid on Lawrence,” “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim,” “The Cowboy’s Lament,” “Home on the Range,” “The Lane County Bachelor,” “In Kansas,” “The Dewey Case,” and “The Farmer Is the Man” all

originated in Kansas. Forgotten but notable ballads such as “Three Per Cent,” “Going Back to Kansas,” “Stealing Land,” “After the Run,” and “Uncle Sam’s Cow” likewise originated in Kansas and deserve to be brought into the canon.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, Stokesberry and his bachelor ballad are an identifiable thread in the thick, tangled web of ballads emanating from Kansas. Moreover, Stokesberry himself, a self-conscious poet and performer, was exactly the sort of folk artist that Louise Pound, without benefit of digital searching, imagined must have been the instigators of the grand emergence of folksong on the Great Plains in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The opportunity exists to research, study, sing, and canonize the prairie ballads of that era and to incorporate them properly into the cultural history of Kansas and the plains. This history comprises not only texts and tunes but also a lost regional poetical and musical culture that gave rise to them.

[KH]

35. Pursuant to operation of his weekly livestream devoted to Great Plains balladry, the *Willow Creek Folk School*, the author of this article commenced compilation of an online catalog of ballads, the *Willow Creek Songbag*, accessible at [docs.google.com/document/d/1R5LkDI8RGaTYso0GmsQFfi8EPaWSWLpiX1v5dbWrgTA/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1R5LkDI8RGaTYso0GmsQFfi8EPaWSWLpiX1v5dbWrgTA/edit?usp=sharing). Although a work in progress, the songbag comprises detailed documentation of the provenance and context of Great Plains ballads, including those mentioned here. He also acknowledges the essential work done by previous generations of Kansas songcatchers: Myra Hull of the University of Kansas, Joan O’Bryant of Wichita State University, and William E. Koch of Kansas State University. Koch and S. J. Sackett included pathbreaking songcatcher essays by Henry H. Malone (138–60) and O’Bryant (161–81) in their edited work, *Kansas Folklore* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961).