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Jingle, Jangle, Jingle: Using Cowboy Ballads to Teach Social Studies and Language Arts

ABSTRACT

The wealth of cowboy ballads and music in the public domain provide a resource for teaching social studies and language arts as well as music. The traditional, story-based cowboy songs can lead to discussions about Western expansion, the cowboy film genre, and many other aspects that interest young students. This article looks at ways to use traditional songs to build students' musical education and meet some of the non-music related Common Core standards.

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By Richard Lawton

As a general music teacher, I always keep an eye (and an ear) open for material that is fun, conveniently in the public domain, and embedded with cultural elements I can use to extend learning. Traditional cowboy ballads are just such a find. As bona fide pieces of Americana, these songs, sometimes known as Western music, provide an excellent way to introduce the subject of Western expansion. Because cowboy songs experienced a resurgence in the United States during the early days of talking pictures, they can be used to discuss the 1930s and 1940s as well.

Cowboy ballads also provide opportunities to teach language arts, since most contain narrative elements that upper elementary students are required to recognize and incorporate into their creative writing. And are these songs fun to sing? Try saying "yippee ki-yay" without smiling!

It's worth restating who the cowboys were, since the term has come to mean anyone who seems reckless or does foolish or dangerous things. To our students the original meaning is even murkier: As one of my fourth graders said

Figure 1: A few of the author's fourth graders get their "cowboy groove" on. Left to right, Danielle, Eric, Corey, Kendrick, and Tessa.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR.

to me recently, "Why do they call them cowboys? They ride horses, not cows."

The Original Cowboys

Cowboys were young men and boys who tended and drove large longhorn cattle herds from Texas north to the rail stations for transport to market. It was dangerous, low-paying work, and many of those who undertook it did so because they had few options. After the Civil War, a large number were veterans with little to show for the experience beyond fighting skills. They headed west in search, if not of fortune, then perhaps the peace of green pastures and the liberty of wide-open spaces.

Among the possessions many cowboys carried were small song books they had taken with them to war. These books contained the words to newer songs by Stephen Foster and older English ballads usually arranged in four-line stanzas of alternating iambic tetrameter and iambic trimeter. As it turned out, the iambic form, where the stress is on the second syllable (as in *i-amb*), matched the sense of movement the cowboys experienced on horseback.

There is some dispute about what role singing played in the cowboy's life beyond alleviating boredom. The customary view was that singing was used to keep the cattle calm, particularly at night. But Jack Thorp, an early collector of cowboy music and a cowboy himself, observed that he never met a cowboy who could actually sing, and most had trouble remembering the words (Thorp, 1984). Regardless, the image of cowboys crooning to the "dogies" (or cattle) while the sun set over the mesas became as iconic in the lore of the American West as six-guns and spurs.

Traditional cowboy songs describe experiences, including the prospect of death, with surprising tenderness. The unknown author of this bit of verse from the famous ballad *The Dying Cowboy* captures such a scene with typical poignancy (Thorp, 1984).

"O bury me not on the lone prairie."
These words came low and mournfully
From the pallid lips of the youth who lay
On his dying bed at the close of day.
He had wasted and pined 'til o'er his brow ;
Death's shades were slowly gathering now.
He thought of home and loved ones nigh,
As the cowboys gathered to see him die.

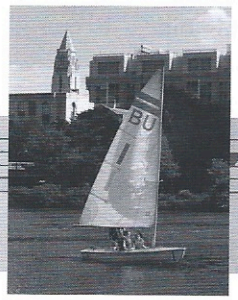
The Dying Cowboy was based on an earlier sailor's ballad, *The Sailor's Grave* (Green, 2002). The cowboys appropriated many such melodies, replacing the lyrics with words that were closer to home. When these new narratives were blended with common English-Spanish hybrid words of the West, such as buckaroo (*vaquero*), lariat (*la riata*), mustang (*mestato*), lasso (*lazo*), and a variety of yells derived from cowboy whistles and imitations of coyote cries, an idiom for Western music developed (Green, 2002).

Cowboys were a source of fascination to people in the eastern United States. By the 1890s they were being immortalized in fiction and in performances and entertainments such as "Buffalo Bill's Wild West" (Green, 2002). Ironically, by that time the most active cowboy period was over. The traditional open range was gone, and the semi-wild longhorns had been replaced with British Herefords. What persisted, in part because it had been immortalized in song, was an idealized version of the cowboy as a free spirit answerable only to his sense of honor... who also sang.

In Hollywood films, Westerns were a popular genre from the start, but the silent era prevented the sounds of cowboy songs. The songs were, however, hugely popular on the radio. The Saturday Night Barn Dance became a programming staple of many radio stations, and many of the future cowboy movie stars, including Gene Autry and Rex Allen, started on these programs (Green, 2002).

During the 1920s, Otto Gray and his Oklahoma Cowboys, an influential barnstorming cowboy band, expanded their instrument configuration of guitars and harmonica, adding fiddles, banjo, and steel guitar. They also dressed in over-the-top Western garb: sequined shirts, fancy boots, and hats. This look and instrumentation rapidly became the standard. As the genre became more commercialized, the repertoire needed to expand. Professional songwriters with sensibilities as refined as Cole Porter made their contributions. These new songs often featured clever wordplay, complex harmonies, and even jazz elements, and had less and less to do with cowboy life.





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With the advent of talking pictures, it was inevitable that screen cowboys would sing. In 1929, Warner Baxter won an Academy Award for playing a singing Cisco Kid in the first Western musical *In Old Arizona* (Green, 2002). But singing cowboy pictures were rarely prestige productions. Instead they became the province of low-budget motion-picture studios like Republic, Mascot, and Monogram that were already in the business of making Westerns.

Initially, existing cowboy stars including John Wayne sang or had their voices dubbed, but soon radio cowboy stars like Gene Autry and Roy Rogers were drafted to take the lead in these pictures, fancy boots and all. The cowboys they played no longer resembled the roughhewn individualists that John Lomax called "pioneers by instinct" (Lomax, 1918). Instead, they were a sort of an all-purpose hero, who sang as easily as he twirled a gun or rope.

By the time *Melody Time*, a Disney animated film with cartoon cowboys that featured Roy Rogers and the Sons of the Pioneers, was released in 1948, cowboy music ceased to have any real connection to the cowboy experience. Instead, Western music, with its gorgeous harmony, well-crafted lyrics, and sweeping imagery, was now about the West itself. Roy Rogers' signature song, *Don't Fence Me In* by Cole Porter and Robert Fletcher (Green, 2002), is a case in point:

Just turn me loose, let me straddle my old saddle
Underneath the Western skies.
On my cayuse, let me wander over yonder
Till I see the mountain rise.
I want to ride to the ridge where the West commences,
And gaze at the moon till I lose my senses;
I can't look at hobbles and I can't stand fences ~
Don't fence me in.

In the post-World War II era, Westerns took a grittier, more realistic view of cowboys, and singing cowboy films faded away. The singing cowboy-era songs, however, remained the dominant style of Western music.

Cowboy ballad lyrics contain wonderful examples of these narrative and language elements and provide a fun and manageable framework for practicing them.

Linking Cowboys to Common Core

Common Core English language standards call for students in grade four to be able to determine theme from details of a narrative text, including poetry, and to summarize. In grades four and five, students are also required to understand the use of figurative language, explain the difference between simile and metaphor, and recognize common idioms. These students' writing goal is to write narratives that use effective technique, well-chosen details, and appropriate style (Common Core State Standards, 2010).

Cowboy ballad lyrics contain wonderful examples of these narrative and language elements and provide a fun and manageable framework for practicing them. One way to do this is to set up substitution exercises where lines, couplets, or entire stanzas are removed, and students create replacements that honor the existing rhythm or rhyme scheme, just as the cowboys did 140 years ago.

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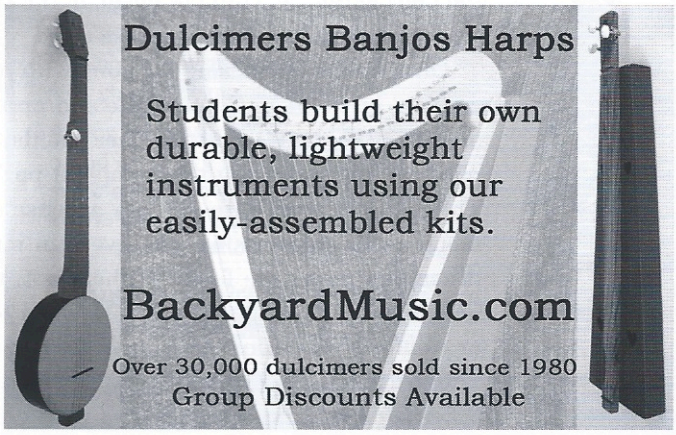
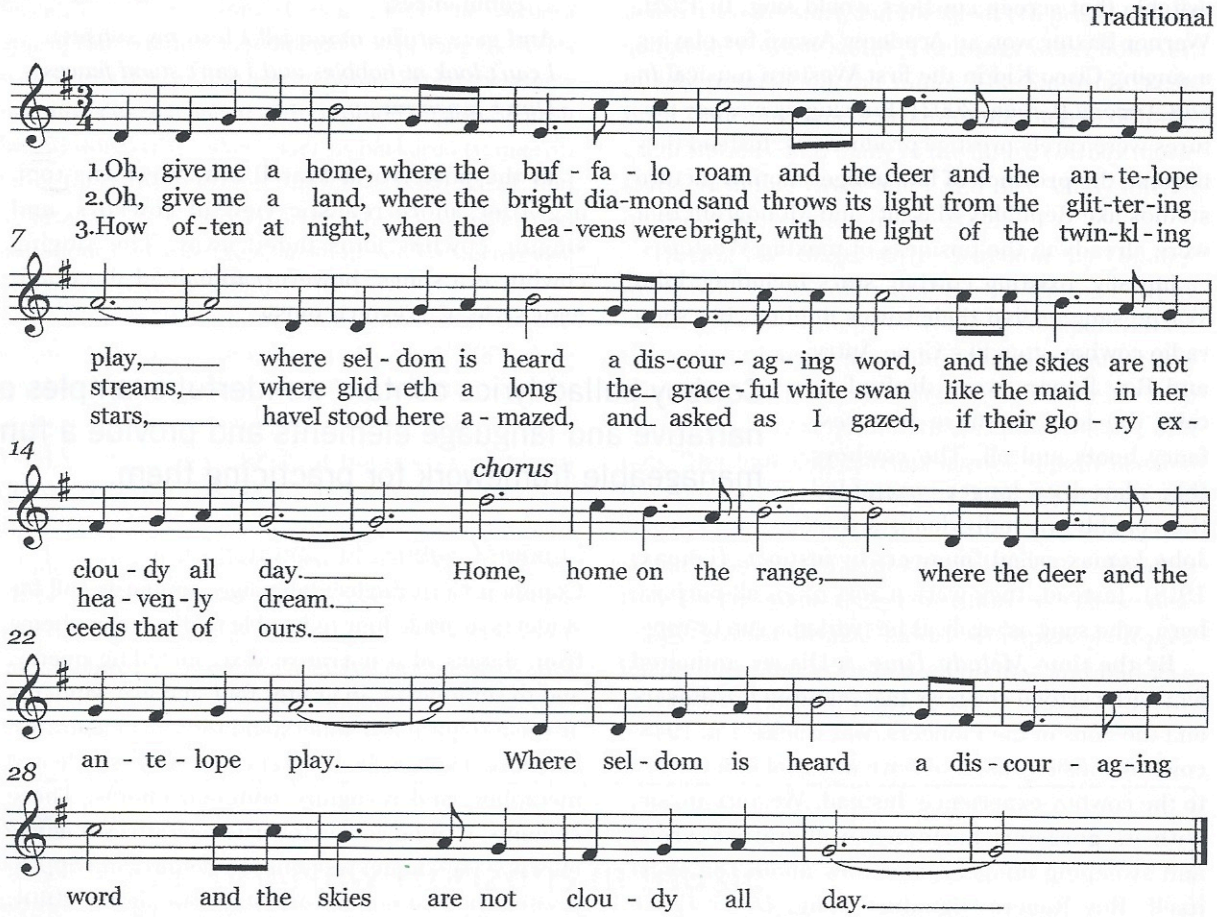


Figure 2: *Home on the Range.* This and other songs in this article are in the public domain, and arranged by the author.



Substitution can also consist of a single word, as in the following activity that uses one of the most famous cowboy ballads of all, *Home on the Range* (see Figure 2). Begin by asking students to clap out the meter in three, using a clap-pat-pat or similar body percussion pattern. As mentioned, iambic triple is probably the most common meter in Western music; be sure the kids understand that the lines of the song tend to begin on the third beat and not on the first (the clap).

Once students can sing the song with body percussion, invite them to substitute and/or add other animals to the line "where the deer and the antelope play" without breaking their clap-pat-pat pattern. The musical goal is to sustain a sense of triple meter while improvising. However, an interesting discussion about the fauna of the West, then and now, invariably ensues and can be used to extend or reinforce classroom learning.

Streets of Laredo (see Figure 3) is another well-known ballad in triple meter (and can be used as a partner song with *Home on the Range*). It tells quite a different story about the cowboy experience.

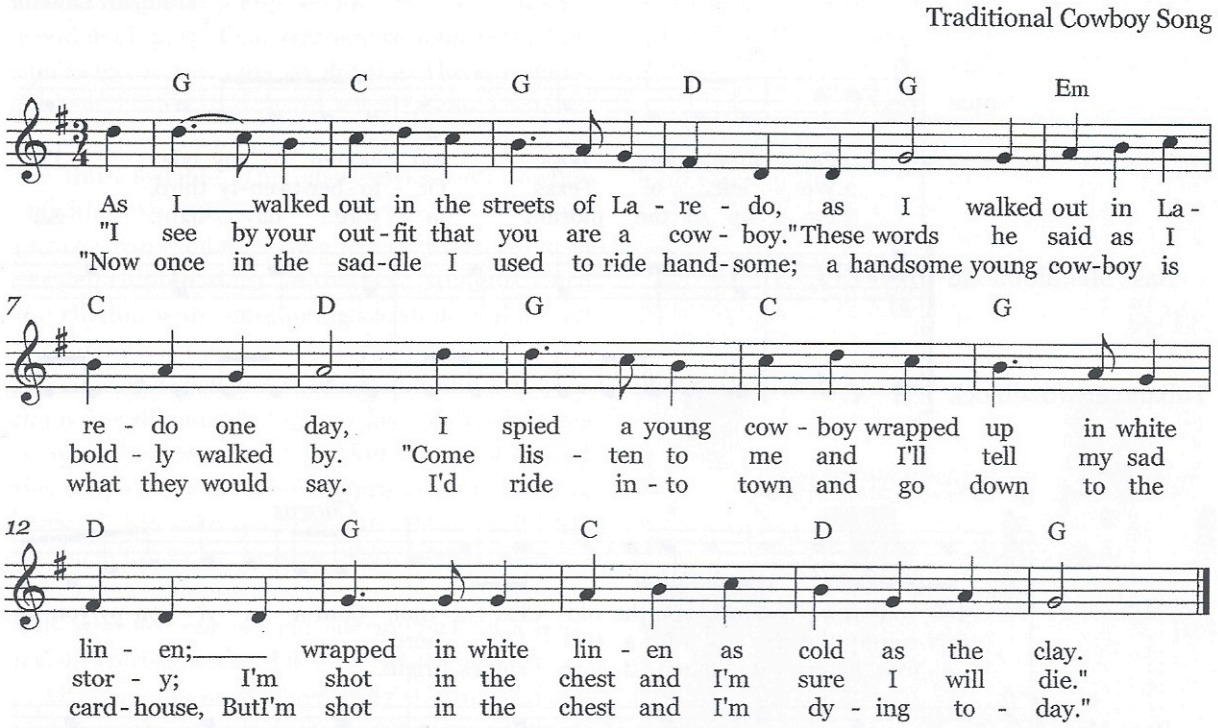
As I walked out in the streets of Laredo,
As I walked out in Laredo one day,
I spied a young cowboy wrapped up in white linen;
Wrapped in white linen as cold as the clay.

In the first stanza alone there are examples of first person, in medias res, and simile, not to mention a setting that's sure to provoke students' curiosity. They can be asked to identify narrative devices, rhyme scheme, and rhythm, and to brainstorm other cowboy-related narrative elements–such as spurs, hats, saddles, the girl who done him wrong, his rival, etc.–in anticipation of the next part of the exercise.

In the stanzas that follow (and there are many; one of the characteristics of cowboy ballads,

Continued on page 20

Figure 3: *Streets of Laredo*, a traditional and popular cowboy song. Arranged by the author.



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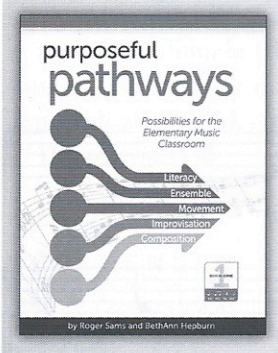

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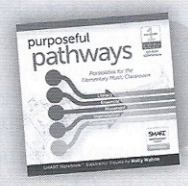

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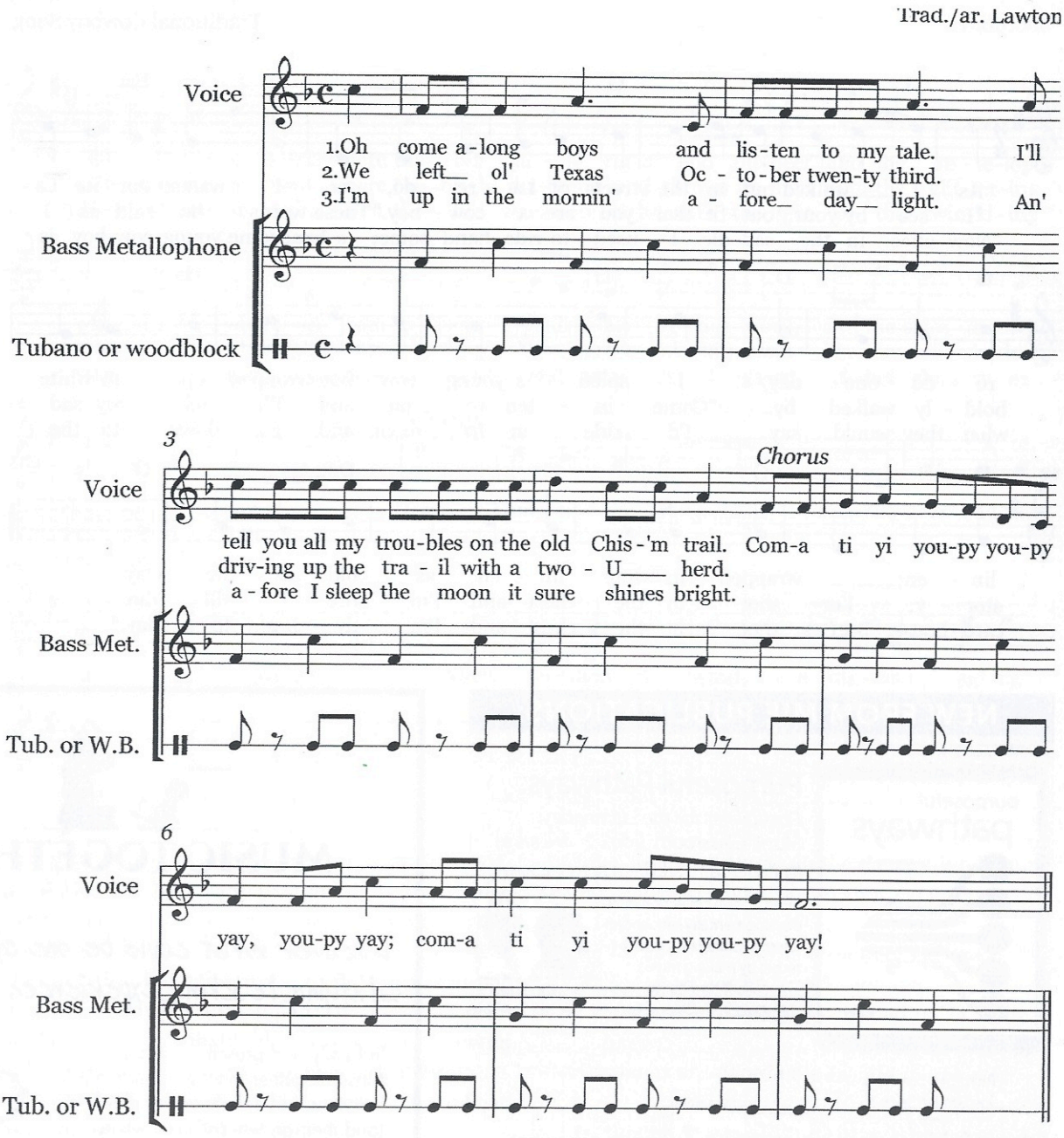
Figure 4: *The Old Chisholm Trail*, as arranged by the author.



thanks to long hours in the saddle, is an endless number of verses) students can be asked to replace certain lines. I usually start by asking them to replace the third line in stanza two, which does not require a rhyme, and then the second couplet in stanza three, which does. The ultimate goal is for students to write entire story-extending verses of their own, an activity that works especially well when students are working in songwriting teams.

Not all cowboy music is in three. (Otto Gray said that Western music consists of three tempos–lope, trot and gallop–all of them based on the movement of cowponies). (Shirley, 1959). An up-tempo duple meter turns up in *The Old Chisholm Trail* (see Figure 4). The real Chisholm Trail was one of the best-known cattle drive routes from Texas to Abilene, Kansas (Green, 2002), and the song details that experience. All the verses are couplets, followed by the "coma-ti-yi-youpy" chorus that kids never seem to get tired of singing.

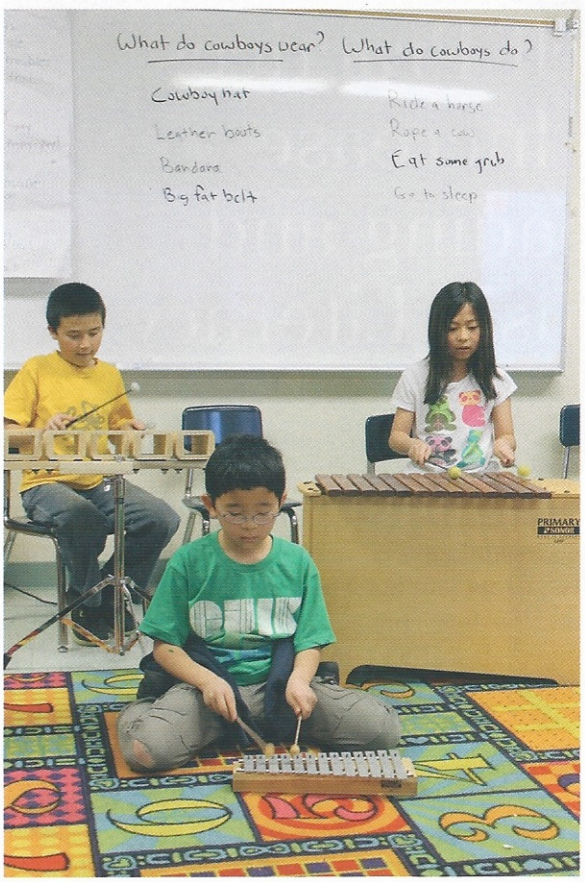
Here the music is a bit more challenging, particularly the bud-a-bop, bud-a-bop of the tubano/woodblock part. One strategy to help meet that challenge is for kids to develop three-syllable phrases having to do with what cowboys wear—for example "cowboy *hat*"—where the accent is on the third syllable. This also works with cowboy activities like "ride a *horse*" or "rope a *cow*." These phrases can then be strung together as a chant in varying combinations. In this way, students learn the rhythm while developing vocabulary they can use when creating new verses.

I've used *Chisholm Trail* several different ways in my fourth- and fifth- grade classes. What seems to work best is to give the kids the first line of the couplet and let them improvise the rhyming reply. If they take too long, the other "cattle" are instructed to begin mooing. This is followed by an instrument-accompanied chorus, during which the kids who are not playing instruments do a bow-legged cowboy walk while they sing.

Of course, these activities will not produce a real understanding of cowboy life, but they are a fun way to revisit a subject about which most of us probably thought we knew everything worth knowing. Meanwhile, "there's a lot of gold in them thar hills." As many as one hundred of these cowboy songs are in the public domain (think of them as free range songs), and there is no reason to think that this approach won't work equally well with any of them.

Happy trails! ■

Figure 5: Brainstorming about students' existing knowledge of cowboys helps provide a framework for understanding the rhythm of *Old Chisholm Trail*. Left to right, Louis, Daniel, and Mina.



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