

Historical Musings

“Happy as a Clam”: The Origins and Evolution of “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim,” the Anthem of the Plains

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In April 2020, as the COVID curtain descended on pre-pandemic life-ways, public intellectuals (scholars who prized their connection with the citizenry at large) sought means of maintaining connections. This was the context in which I, with production assistance and editorial counsel from my spouse and fellow historian, Suzanne Kelley, launched the Willow Creek Folk School, a weekly livestream devoted to balladry on the Great Plains of North America. My original conception, as an old folkie from the 1970s, was to revisit the venerable standards of that era’s folk revival and indulge in a nostalgic songfest. Taking up this material fifty years later as a research scholar, however, I quickly discovered that with the advent of digitized documentary resources, historic balladry had become a promising field of inquiry. It was now possible to research the very origins of all those old folksongs we had assumed just materialized from the mists of antiquity. There were texts, they had authors, and the story-songs, the ballads, had their own stories. Among the songs of the region, “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim” stands as the most salient of them all, a ballad known in the settler society throughout the Great Plains.

It was the very eve of the Dust Bowl era, the darkest time in the history of Euro American settlement on the Great Plains, when the *Greeley County News* (on the western tier of Kansas, smack on the Colorado line) chose to reprint the full text (eight stanzas plus chorus) of a ballad dating from the 1880s, “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim.” This was as if to say, “sure, we are entering into a horrific drought that is an existential threat to our civilization—but let’s all sing a song about overcoming hardship and anticipating a happy future.”

Oh, then we’d be content for the years that we have spent
In our little old sod shanty on the claim

Just a few years earlier, in 1926, Mrs. A. D. Anderson, formerly of Bismarck, North Dakota, wrote home from Bellingham, Washington, to her friends on the plains. She announced that her fellow expatriates in the northwest had formed a North Dakota Club and chosen as their club song “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim.”

And we'd forget our trials and our troubles as we rest
In our little old sod shanty on the claim

In good times and bad, this is the song that keeps surfacing to voice the settler experience on the Great Plains. I am a great lover of the folk masterpiece, “Home on the Range,” and have declared it the greatest piece of lyric folk poetry ever to grace the culture of the North American Plains. But “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Plains” is the people's choice, the anthem of the settler society on the plains. Its origins have, until recently, been obscure and disputed. Indeed, Nebraska's larger-than-life folklorist, the late Roger Welch, who sadly passed away last year, joked that in every town he visited, someone would come up to him and say he knew who wrote the song. And the purported author was always somebody different. I have experienced similar disclosures. In 1991, a great-granddaughter of Everett Calvin Motz, a German immigrant from Pennsylvania, asserted that her great grandfather was the true author of “Little Old Sod Shanty.” As proof she produced a cabinet card showing Motz standing on his homestead claim in western Kansas, with the text of the song printed on the back.

Somewhere in heaven, perhaps, Herr Motz is arguing with Henry A. Ball, a Civil War veteran who came to Walsh County, Dakota Territory, where he not only became affectionately known as “Baldheaded Bill,” but also, he claimed, wrote “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim.” According to Roger Welsch, Motz and Ball might find a Nebraska homesteader, Emery Miller, eager to intervene in the argument, because *he* was the true author! Or perhaps on a cloud somewhere, all the alleged authors of the anthem of the plains have, in the eternal fashion of old settlers, formed a choir to sing the stanzas in unison and reminisce about the early days.

Three years ago, I realized the potential of digitized, indexed pioneer newspapers of the prairies to solve this sort of mystery. Using the database *Chronicling America*, I quickly accumulated scores of variant

texts of the ballad from all parts of the plains. I determined that western Kansas was ground zero for the propagation of the song, but I lost the backtrail in 1883. The ballad seemed to emerge at that time, unattributed and in multiple sources. Since then, I have taken the search into the larger database, *Newspapers.com*, and cracked the case. I can tell you who wrote the ballad, under a different title, in Smith County, Kansas, in 1880. I also know the song traveled to Dakota Territory, and after metamorphizing on the northern plains, returned to Kansas in 1883 and sprawled all over the plains from there.

To trace this ballad, “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim,” through the bounty of now-available documentation is to become conscious of the promise for rediscovering the vast and rich literature that is balladry on the Great Plains of North America. It also is to glimpse, in the context of the ballads, the social and cultural context of prairie life as it was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The first public notice I have of Frank E. Jerome is a January 1873 newspaper article. The writer calls Jerome “the swiftest compositor in Kansas,” claiming that he had set 2,600 ems (a printer’s term, essentially pieces of type) in an hour. This is to say that Jerome was a printing professional who set type for a living. Such people were numerous on the newspaper-rich prairie frontier, and they were legend, for various reasons—their mercurial habits when it came to employment, for instance, as well as a reputation, earned or not, for frequent recourse to the bottle. Jerome certainly was a legend in his own mind, as he avowed himself to be the true author of “John Brown’s Body,” the American Civil War marching tune that would become the iconic anthem “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Reporters and literati of the time laughed at this claim from a man they considered a tramp printer, but I am not sure about that. Jerome’s detractors did not seem able to clinch who, then, exactly, *did* write “John Brown’s Body.” So I leave it as an open question.

What I can say with certainty, however, is that Frank E. Jerome, the English-born printer scratching out a living on the Kansas frontier, was indeed the original author of the anthem of the plains, “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim.” Only he originally titled the piece “That Little Old Sod Dug-out on the Plains,” which is what threw me at first as I attempted to track the ballad to its headwaters. In addition, there was a

disconnect between Jerome's original composition, which he wrote and published in 1880, and the song as it would be known from 1883 on.

After rattling around from one newspaper and town to another, Jerome settled for a while in Smith County, Kansas, where he went to work for Will Jenkins, publisher of the *Smith County Pioneer*. Here the evidence gets a little thin, but it appears Jerome and Jenkins took up batching together on a homestead (it was common for single male homesteaders, or those who had come west without their spouses, to lodge and take meals together on a claim). From this experience came "That Little Old Sod Dug-out on the Plains," first published in the *Pioneer* on 12 March 1880. It was soon being reprinted all over the state of Kansas.

The song's appeal was limited, however, because it described a particular situation not necessarily applicable to broad classes of settlers. Jerome's ballad is a buddy song, built upon the common experiences and fond memories he and Jenkins shared as early settlers. In fact, Jerome explicitly addresses Jenkins:

I thought I'd write, dear Billy,
Of the days not long ago.

The ballad is full of self-deprecating humor referencing the pair's common experiences, such as getting flooded out of the dugout, fighting grasshoppers, cooking flapjacks on a spade, and suffering disasters in bachelor cookery. Yes, these might be general things on the frontier, but the song packages them as the specific bonding experiences of the two men (who, I might mention, were both married, with kids back east). The ballad closes, too, with a ringing redemption of the reputation of Kansas—often disparaged at the time for its unsettled state and grasshopper infestations—with Jerome's poetical defense also serving to fix his song in that place. Yet for all that, the song had legs and soon spread to the Dakota Territory, where unknown parties, in the folk tradition, worked over the song and broadened its appeal until it morphed into a song for all the prairies. By 1883, the circumstances described and the theme developed in the song differed from Jerome's 1880 version, but the two iterations are undeniably the same song, reconfigured to changing circumstances. Over the ensuing generation the song would continue to evolve as the work of folk adapters.



This photo, the only known image of typesetter Frank Jerome, the original author of "That Little Old Sod Dug-out on the Claim," was published with his obituary in the *St. Louis Star and Times* on 9 March 1926.

This process in December 1916 led Kasper F. Ebner, an old farmer from Cando, North Dakota, to make a startling declaration in the columns of the *Nonpartisan Leader*, the Nonpartisan League newspaper: he claimed to be the author of "Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim." Ebner wrote, "I claim authorship and copyright to this song and its title, other claims of it to the contrary notwithstanding."

I like this fellow Ebner, who came to Dakota Territory in 1884 as a bachelor homesteader. At some point he attended North Dakota Agricultural College—perhaps just the winter short course for farmers—and in 1908 he wrote a fond reminiscence in verse of a college friend, Norman B. Powell, and published it in the NDAC *Spectrum*. Ebner prospered, married, raised sons, and hired multiple farmhands. He led a Methodist Sunday School. He organized his neighbors in gopher control campaigns. He was an agricultural innovator and a keen observer on the land, developing a labor-saving method of putting up prairie hay, using a binder rather than pitching it loose. He planted dent corn in 1908, before others dared to try it. He made notes on the ground

squirrels of Dakota that were used in a bulletin of the U.S. Biological Survey. He obtained cans of pike and trout from the state hatchery and released them in local waters.

And he was a poet of sorts, but did he really write “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim”? I think not. Perhaps he thought everyone else who might know better had died or forgotten. Perhaps his memories were wishful, or perhaps—and this was common among balladeers on the prairies—in his mind, he came to own the song by learning it, then reworking it until he convinced himself he was its author.

Studying his stanzas, it is clear Ebner did make his imprint on the song. He incorporates idiosyncratic details and devises a whole new chorus celebrating the salubrious seasons of Dakota, lest anyone (perhaps some singer from Kansas!) malign the northern climate:

Where the summers have fair weather and the winters quickly pass
Here the seasons are of joy an endless chain
When one scents the fragrant posies that are nestled in the grass
'Round the little low sod shanty on the claim.

Late in the song a spasm of evangelical rapture grips Ebner as he envisions himself and all the other persistent denizens of sod shanties elevating from the prairies to be “ransomed to the sky.”

Return, though, to Ebner’s chorus, with its reference to a “little low sod shanty on the claim.” Not a little *old* sod shanty, but a little *low* sod shanty. Rhetorical details matter; they are the DNA by which the lineage of a song can be established. Ebner, in his introductory comments to his 1916 text, says he first encountered the song in 1880, when he was still in Iowa, in correspondence with one J. J. Nierling at Jamestown on the James River in present-day North Dakota. The James, of course, is locally and familiarly known as “the Jim.” This background undermines Ebner’s claim of authorship, but it is also an important assertion. Ebner is telling us that within the first year of its publication, “Little Old Sod Dug-out on the Claim” had traveled folk-fashion to Dakota, where it was localized and sung as “My Little Low Sod Shanty on the Jim” —Ebner in 1916 remembers specifically that his 1880 informant so phrased the geography of the ballad. Proceeding from this, we can continue to track how the song erupted to become the anthem of the settler society on the plains.



With lumber scarce, early settlers of Dakota Territory constructed buildings like this one out of blocks of sod. The handwritten note, explicitly referencing the ballad of the Plains, speaks to the song's popularity.

Along this track of discovery linking the central and northern plains, we may also resolve a mystery that has always bothered me about the first verse of "Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim." The lines, as commonly sung, go,

I am looking rather seedy now while holding down my claim
And my victuals are not always served the best
And the mice play slyly 'round me as I lay me down to sleep
In my little old sod shanty on the claim

No, I am not afraid of mice. What troubles me is the failure to rhyme; prairie balladeers were insistent rhymers. For years I thought we must be missing something; there must be an earlier text of the song that celebrates a "little old sod shanty in the west," in order to rhyme with "best." So now I find—thank God, because this has really bugged me

over the years—that there is such a text, in the 12 April 1883 *National Tribune*:

The mice play slyly around me as I lay me down to sleep
In my little old sod shanty in the west [emphasis added]

The stanza was sent to the *Tribune* by a writer from Pierre, Dakota Territory, identified only by the initials J. R. But wait, there is more—J. R. closes his verse this way:

I'm happy as a clam on these lands of Uncle Sam
In this rich and fertile valley, all for Jim

So J. R., whose given name must be James, is acknowledging the blessings of God and Uncle Sam in setting aside the rich and fertile valley of the Missouri River—for him. This is an inside joke. The ballad that originated as “Little Old Sod Dug-out on the Claim” had been circulating since 1880 in the valley of the James River, Dakota Territory, as “Little Low Sod Shanty on the Jim.” J. R. just makes the “Jim” reference in the ballad about him, not the James River. I am picking over details, I know, but there is a larger issue at stake: how Jerome’s ballad, “Little Old Sod Dug-out on the Claim,” had localized to the Jim River of Dakota Territory before 1883.

I have finally put the pieces together. The song died out in Kansas between 1880 and 1883, languishing because its plotline, involving two specific men batching on a homestead and sharing inside jokes, was too idiosyncratic for general circulation. Folk revisers of the ballad in Dakota, however, had fixed this problem. They rewrote the lyrics to embrace the general situation of every homesteader—at first, just every homesteader in the valley of the Jim. Gone were the references to specific individuals in Smith County, along with their specific misadventures as bachelor housekeepers and their expressions of affection for Kansas. Henceforth the balladeers of the sod shanty would mourn and celebrate their most common experiences: rodent infestations, leaky roofs, fuel shortages, the monotonous diet, and most of all, the lack of female companionship. After that the Jim disappeared from the stanzas and the song took root in every locality of the plains. But before that could happen, first it had to travel back to its place of origin, in Kansas.

As the song resurged from Dakota Territory in 1883, the narrator

morphed from one half of a settler bromance, celebrating fond memories with his buddy, into a lonely chap on a claim who wishes his wife back east would come out and join him. He envisions himself and his bride as an Edenic couple, peopling a new civilization on the prairies where

heaven should smile upon us, with now and then an heir,
To cheer our hearts with honest pride to flame.

The ballad thus assumed the general form which would be recorded by song catchers in the twentieth century, and by which is known and recognized today.

To summarize: the anthem of the settler society on the Great Plains may have originated in western Kansas in 1880 from the pen of the homesteading printer, Frank E. Jerome, but it was a hardy traveler. During the early 1880s the song percolated in Dakota Territory, especially along the Jim River, living a quiet life of little public notice, only to emerge full-blown as a popular favorite in 1883.

Details of the exchange remain inscrutable, but its contours are clear from newspaper evidence. In June 1883 the song appeared in the *Arcadia Reporter* (Arcadia, Kansas). The text contains vivid details not present in early iterations of the ballad—a hungry coyote sneaking through the grass, for instance—and, more importantly, it modifies the plotline. The song no longer celebrates two buddies batching together on a homestead. Rather it channels a plaintive claimant struggling alone, wishing his dear wife would join him in the West, and foreseeing them populating the plains with a happy agricultural society.

Swiftly the ballad permeated the press across the Sunflower State, and once again, textual details matter. Key texts that summer of 1883 situate the singer as

happy as a clam on these lands of Uncle Sam
In the rich and fertile Valley of the Jim.

But there is no James River in Kansas. The same texts also speak not of coyotes but rather of “prairie wolves,” thus employing the northern plains term for *Canis latrans*. The Dakota marks are showing.

In Kansas, the returning ballad was readily recognized as a reworking of Jerome’s original song. Editors and correspondents claimed it as a



The James River, colloquially known as the Jim, featured in some versions of "Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim." Sabir Trad snapped this undated photograph of the Jim near Freeman, South Dakota—the "23" may refer to 1923.

Kansas product; one of them wrote in pique to the *Chicago Inter Ocean* to protest all claims to authorship emanating from Dakota and to demand credit for Frank Jerome. Meanwhile the song spread, generally without attribution, across the other states of the plains and, notably, resurged in Dakota Territory. In 1883 and thereafter we find "Little Old Sod Shanty" in the *Mitchell Republican*, the *Hope Pioneer*, the *Dickey County Leader*, and elsewhere in the Dakota press. The author of a Ransom County history details how in 1883 a substitute typesetter at the *Ransom City Pilot* heard the ballad circulating and "was anxious to have a copy of her own, so she worked long and earnestly setting it up."

"Little Old Sod Shanty" was not only printed across the territory, but it also won the hearts of Dakota pioneers, such that in memory, as celebrant old settlers on public occasions, they made the song central to rituals of remembrance. Newspaper accounts report that in 1892 at Williamsburg schoolhouse, Emmons County, North Dakota, following an address entitled "The American Pioneer," a male duo comprised of

Charles Stuart and D. H. Yoder rendered a version of “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim” that registered resounding approval.

In 1909, an organized gathering of the Old Settlers of the Red River Valley in Grand Forks opened with a toast requesting those assembled join in singing “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim”—and they knew the words! According to local press, those present sang “with a familiarity which hearkened back to the old sod shanty and hungry coyote days of the early settlers.” A couple months later, there was a meeting in the same city of the state Grand Army of the Republic, opened by one Comrade Ball of Grafton, a beloved raconteur, who got up and sang “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim.” It was, a reporter tells us, “the big hit of the evening,” just as it was at multiple Chautauqua and old settler gatherings in Valley City, where citizens sang fondly,

The hinges are of leather, and the windows are not glass
While the roof it lets the howling blizzard in
And I hear the hungry coyote as he sneaks up through the grass
'Round my little old sod shanty on the claim

There is much more to the story of “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim,” and research is ongoing, but the most important thing to recognize about this story, as a case study in the regional balladic tradition, is that it is representative; it indicates the possibility today of tracing, telling, and interpreting the stories behind the beloved folksongs of the Great Plains. The genealogies of the songs from the heyday of prairie balladry are interesting in themselves. The immersion entailed by this research, however, induces a consciousness of a larger whole, a realization that the efflorescence of balladry sprang from a regional society and community culture discernable in the sources around the ballads. The discovery, canonization, and contextualization of the ballads of the plains promises fundamentally new understandings of a generation of prairie life and a renewed legacy of song for contemporary regional society.

“That Little Old Sod Dug-out on the Claim”

Original text by Frank E. Jerome

As published in the *Smith County Pioneer*, 12 March 1880

I thought I'd write, dear Billy,
Of the days not long ago,
When we arrived 'neath Kansas' sunny clime—
Of the days that were the hardest,
And the life we thought so blue,
And where buffalo were roaming all the time;
When “roughing it” was all the go,
And trials made the man,
No matter if his clothes were somewhat plain—
Yes, those were happy days, my boy,
If we did have to live
In that little old sod dug-out on the claim.

The years are rolling over me
Wherever I may roam,
And the Past has its pleasures and its pain—
But down within my heart
I'm thinking of those days
In that little old sod dug-out on the claim.

We had no harvests then to reap,
And sod corn was our all,
And we had the hardest work to make it grow,
For the grasshoppers were hungry, Will,
Their appetites were good,
And a thousand of them marching up each row!
And how we raved and “cussed,” dear Will
To see our bread destroyed,
And made our cries echo o'er the plain,
How we “cussed” poor Kansas, Will,
When we laid down to sleep
In that little old sod dug-out on the claim.

The way we made the dug-out Will,
Was first to dig the hole
Along the lonely path by buffalo trod,
And we cut us down a tree or two,
With which to make the roof,
Then covered it all o'er with prairie sod.
The window was a stove-pipe, Will.
The floor was simply earth,
And the door always creaked as tho' with pain,
And didn't we have a "high old time"
The first night we did sleep
In that little-old sod dug-out on the claim.

The roof, you know, was leaky,
And the rain came pouring in,
And we walked 'round the dug-out all the night,
And the water still kept rising.
And the bed-clothes did the same
And both of us were in a wretched plight.
And how we cursed the country,
And cursed our wretched selves,
And cursed at the roof and at the rain,
And cursed the team for bringing us
To such a hole as that,
And the little old sod dug-out on the claim.

Our dishes they were meagre, Will,
Likewise our furniture,
And we didn't care just how it was made;
And we washed our clothes so neatly
In the horse-trough near the door,
And cooked our frugal slap-jacks on a spade.
The coffee mill it ground the corn,
But sugar we had none,
So we used to boil the sorghum cane,
And our shirts all went for dish rags,
'Twas the best that we could do
In that little old sod dug-out on the claim.

You remember when we bought those beans,
A dollar's worth, I think,
And how we resolved to have a feast,
And how you filled the pot with them
To soak them over night—
Forgetting that the beans could rise like yeast.
And how you went to sleep, dear Will,
And how the beans did swell,
And covered you, and the floor, the same,
And what a startling sight of beans
At morn that met our gaze
In that little old sod dug-out on the claim.

But the scene has changed around the place,
And wheat was made to grow,
And settlers gathered in a hundred strong,
And dug-outs soon were plenty,
And new friends were then made,
And the nights were spent in dancing and with song.
What jolly boys our neighbors were! —
How kind to every want—
A blessing seemed to linger when they came,
And soon we began to love
With a pride both firm and strong,
That little old sod dug-out on the claim.

And you remember Nellie, Will,
Whom we both learned to love.
With sunny laugh, and brightest golden hair,
And how she tried to cheer our lives,
Which were dark indeed,
And how she helped to drive away our care.
But, alas! poor Nellie's gone,
And her face we'll see no more,
And our hearts will ever throb with pain,
And through the busy, noisy life
I'm thinking of poor Nell,
And the little old sod dug-out on the claim.

We now love Kansas, don't we, Will?
We've learned her sterling worth,
And bless the day that we settled here,
Though our trials have been many,
And the way seemed dull and dark,
Yet the crown is won by those who know no fear.
The friends we knew are scattered, Will,
But a prayer still follows them—
The old tried friends in joy or pain—
May the peace and comfort follow them
The same as when they lived
Near that little old sod dug-out on the claim.

Then, here's your health, dear Billy,
May your life be long and fair.
May we both glide down the stream of life
With a faith that is unshaken
In our glorious proud young State,
Which hath outlived the trials and strife.
May the golden tie of friendship
Still bind around our hearts.
And manhood's virtues be our aim,
And "keep the fire burning,"
As we did in bye-gone days—
In that little old sod dug-out on the claim.

“The Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim”

Anonymous text

As published in the *Mitchell Capital*, 22 January 1886

I am looking rather seedy now, while holding down my claim,
And my victuals are not always served the best;
And the mice play slyly round me as I nestle down to sleep,
In my little old sod shanty on the claim.

The hinges are of leather and the windows have no glass,
While the board roof lets the howling blizzard in;
And I hear the hungry coyote, as he sneaks up through the grass
'Round my little old sod shanty on the claim.

Yes, I rather like the novelty of living in this way.
Though my bill of fare is often rather tame.
But I am happy as a clam on the land of Uncle Sam,
In my little old sod shanty on the claim.

But when I left my eastern home, a bachelor so gay,
To try and win my way to wealth and fame,
I little thought that I'd come down to burning twisted hay
In my little old sod shanty on the claim.

My clothes are plastered 'er with dough and I'm looking like a fright,
And everything is scattered round the room;
But I wouldn't give the freedom that I have out in the West,
For the bauble of an Eastern mansard home.

Still I wish that some kind-hearted girl would pity on me take,
And relieve me from the mess I'm in;
The angel—how I'd bless here, if this her home she'd make,
In my little old sod shanty on the claim.

And when we'd made our fortune on the prairies in the West,
Just as happy as two lovers we'd remain;
We'd forget the trials and troubles which we endured at first,
In our little old sod shanty on the claim.

And if the fates should bless us with, now and then, an heir,
To cheer our hearts with modest pride to flame,
O, then we'd be content with the toils that we had spent
In our little old sod shanty on the claim.

When time enough has lapsed and all those little brats
To man and modest womanhood had grown,
It won't seem half so lonely when around us we shall look,
And see other old sod shanties on the claim.

“The Little Old Sod Shanty”

Unattributed text provided by John Lomax
Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads, 1910

I am looking rather seedy now while holding down my claim,
And my victuals are not always served the best;
And the mice play slyly round me as I nestle down to rest
In my little old sod shanty on my claim.

The hinges are of leather and the windows have no glass,
While the board roof lets the howling blizzards in,
And I hear the hungry coyote as he slinks up through the grass
Round the little old sod shanty on my claim.

Yet I rather like the novelty of living in this way,
Though my bill of fare is often rather tame,
But I'm happy as a clam on the land of Uncle Sam
In the little old sod shanty on my claim.

But when I left my eastern home, a bachelor so gay,
To try and win my way to wealth and fame,
I little thought that I'd come down to burning twisted hay
In the little old sod shanty on my claim.

My clothes are plastered o'er with dough, I'm looking like a fright,
And everything is scattered round the room,
But I wouldn't give the freedom that I have out in the West
For the table of the Eastern man's old home.

Still, I wish that some kind-hearted girl would pity on me take
And relieve me from the mess that I am in;
The angel, how I'd bless her if this her home she'd make
In the little old sod shanty on my claim.

And we would make our fortunes on the prairies of the West,
Just as happy as two lovers we'd remain;
We'd forget the trials and troubles we endured at first
In the little old sod shanty on my claim.

And if fate should bless us with now and then an heir
To cheer our hearts with honest pride and fame,
Oh, then we'd be content for the toil that we had spent
In the little old sod shanty on our claim.

When time enough had lapsed and all those little brats
To noble man and womanhood had grown,
It wouldn't seem half so lonely as round us we should look
And we'd see the old sod shanty on our claim.

“My Little Low Sod Shanty on the Claim”

Text of 30 December 1916 by Kasper F. Ebner

As published in the *Nonpartisan Leader*, 18 January 1917

I am looking rather seedy now while holding down my claim,
Where everything is scattered 'round about,
And the mice play slyly 'round me when I nestle down to sleep,
In my little low sod shanty on the claim;
My clothes are splattered o'er with dough (I'm really quite a sight)
And everything is very much the same,
'Till I've feared if T. C. Barnum would get his eyes on me,
He would capture me and my little cabin home.

Where the hinges are of leather and the windows have no glass,
Where the board roof lets the howling blizzards in,
And one fears the hungry coyotes that are sneaking through the grass,
'Round the little low sod shanty on the claim.

When I left my eastern home, a bachelor so gay,
To try to win my way to wealth and fame,
I little thought that I'd come down to burning twisted hay
In a rusty "Two-lid Buffer" on a claim;
Still—I wonder if some kind-hearted maiden won't pity on me take,
And extricate me from this mess I am in?
Oh! the Angel—how I'd bless her if this her home she'd make,
In my little low sod shanty on the claim.

Where the summers have fair weather and the winters quickly pass,
(Here the seasons are of joy an endless chain)
When one scents the fragrant posies that are nestled in the grass,
'Round the little low sod shanty on the claim.

Then when others would be happy for our dwelling on the claim
And would rise and shine and call us Blessed,
Though they'd weep and mourn our parting they would lay us down
to rest,
Near the little low sod shanty on the claim;

But, no—that sounds too faithless—we’d never, never die,
But work and wait and watch and pray,
’Till the summons of our Saviour of Earth’s “Ransomed to the sky.”
E’en the inmates of the “Sod Shack” on the claim.

To be “translated in a moment—in a twinkling of an eye”—
At the sound of “Gabriel’s Trumpet” we’d join the glad acclaim—
‘The elements dissolving,” and Heaven and Earth made new—
E’en the little low sod shanty on the claim.

Note as to Sourcing

This essay is presented as a work of literary nonfiction (rather than a closely annotated monograph), with resort to first person in order to narrate the search for prairie ballads (the great songcatcher John Lomax, after all, entitled his autobiography *Adventures of a Ballad Hunter*) and with in-text references that signpost especially important documentary landmarks. As is evident to the reader, the ongoing research behind the essay is mainly in digital sources: *Chronicling America*, *Newspapers.com*, *Ancestry.com*, and other more specialized sources such as the land office and patent records of the Bureau of Land Management, <https://glorerecords.blm.gov/>. The specific research treated here is parcel to a much more substantial line exploring the historic balladry of the Great Plains as grounding for a weekly online program, the *Willow Creek Folk School*, wherein the journey of ballad discovery unfolds in real time. The video archive of the WCFS accumulates in a YouTube channel accessible at <https://www.youtube.com/@willowcreekfolkschool3348>. Parties with assiduous interests in the ballad, “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim,” can consult the online research collections of the WCFS.

SodShantyNewspaperResearch, 47 pages of newspaper clippings from *Chronicling America* in search of multiple versions of the ballad — bit.ly/41aozew

LittleLowSodShanty, 10 pages of material on K. F. Ebner and his version of the ballad — bit.ly/3SjEWEr

Kansas1883SodShanty, 17 pages of texts from Kansas newspapers via *Newspapers.com*, during the year, 1883, when the ballad returned to Kansas and then achieved breakout status across the plains - bit.ly/3ElpBh3

Dakota1883SodShanty, 10 pages of texts from Dakota Territory in 1883, as the ballad emerged on the northern plains - bit.ly/41ofEPA

Finally, for ready reference to previously known and published versions of “Little Old Sod Shanty on the Claim,” here is a selected bibliography:

Federal Writers’ Project in Nebraska. *Cowboy Songs*. Nebraska Folklore Pamphlet 1. May 1937. 4-6.

Lomax, John A. *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads* (New York: Sturgis & Walton, 1910), pp. 187-89.

Moore, Ethel and Chauncey O. *Ballads and Folk Songs of the Southwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), pp. 293-95.

Pound, Louise. *Folk-song of Nebraska and the Central West: A Syllabus*.

Nebraska Academy of Sciences. *Nebraska Ethnology and Folk Lore Series* 9, no. 3 (1915): 24-25.

Sandburg, Carl. *The American Songbag*. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1927), pp. 89-91.

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On the cover: In 1919, citizens of Deadwood, South Dakota, paraded this effigy of Kaiser Wilhelm II, hanged it in front of the First National Bank on Main Street, and later shot it to pieces with shotguns.

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