

Not Hobbling Their Lips: Andy Adams' Use of Cowboy Dialect

Most of you know Andy Adams as a novelist, as the author of *The Log of a Cowboy*, a novel about a cattle drive from South Texas to Montana. He published it in 1904 and followed it with a collection of short stories and three other novels about the cattle business, *A Texas Matchmaker*, *The Outlet*, and *Reed Anthony, Cowman*. He later wrote two books for children about ranching. Andy Adams was also a collector of folktales. In each of his works, he includes stories told by his characters, usually referring to them as yarns, usually having them told around campfires. Wilson Hudson selected these stories from the various works and in 1956 published them as *Why the Chisholm Trail Forks and other Tales of the Cattle Country*.

I have been attracted to these tales because of my interest in the dialects of Texas, particularly that of the cowboy, and because Andy Adams has been praised for the authenticity of his writing. Hudson has said of Andy's cowboy talk.

Andy's rendering of the language used by tellers of the campfire tales is in keeping with his general literary attitude. It is colorful and appro-

priate but not overdone or exaggerated. It is the language of cowboys and Rangers reworked and made smoother than it actually was. Though it has the ring of real talk, it could hardly be studied by a modern scholar as an altogether accurate and reliable specimen of the language of the Southwest in the seventies and eighties. Andy has done what most writers attempt to do when they have to represent a specialized or localized way of talking: he has retained the idioms and figures and improved the grammar and connection. The result that he obtains is convincing and lively. (Adams, p. xxiv)

I would agree with Hudson that the language of these tales does not represent an altogether accurate rendering of the language of the Southwest at that time, but it is a part of the puzzle in discovering now what some of the features of Cowboy talk at that time were. I have cataloged features of the speech of those who were trail drivers as they are represented in print. I have been checking my results against what I see in books about Cowboy speech particularly the work of Ramon Adams, author of *Western Words* and *Cowboy Lingo*. I have also been checking how the language of the autobiographies of trail drivers compares to that of fictional representations.

Andy Adams is, in *Log of the Cowboy* much more formal, particularly in choice of words, than any of the others who wrote of the trail-driving days. He uses the

flowery diction of a turn-of-the-century editorial writer. For example consider this passage early in *The Log*.

Just why my father moved, at the close of the civil war, from Georgia to Texas, is to this good hour a mystery to me. While we did not exactly belong to the poor whites, we classed with them in poverty, being renters; but I am inclined to think my parents were intellectually superior to that common type of the South. Both were foreign born, my mother being Scotch and my father a north of Ireland man,—as I remember him, now, impulsive, hasty in action, and slow to confess a fault. It was impulsiveness that led him to volunteer and serve four years in the Confederate army,—trying years to my mother, with a brood of seven children to feed, garb, and house. The war brought me my initiation as a cowboy, of which I have now, after the long lapse of years, the greater portion of which spent with cattle, a distinct recollection.

With his campfire tales, though, Adams is less formal, yet still more formal than any of the trail drivers I have read. Even in the campfire tales we have examples of rather formal word choice and sentence structure.

“But a quart amongst eight of us was not dangerous, so the night passed without incident, though we felt a growing *impatience* to get into town.” (pp. 40-41)

“Something—it might have been his ambling walk, but, anyway, something—about my chum amused her, for she smiled and watched him as we passed.” (p. 83)

For the most part also Adams differs from writers such as Will James who intentionally use non-standard English, for example this passage from James’ *Sand* :

He wanted to see what they was holding them cattle for, and why they was taking some cattle out of the one big herd and chasing ‘em into a smaller one. (James, p. 51)

But he does occasionally use nonstandard English. For example one character uses a double negative, “Didn’t you never see the girl again?” (p. 17) Another has a problem with verb agreement, “Turkey eggs is too rich for my blood, . . .” (p. 35) And still another, a doctor, uses *ain’t*, “Billy, if the drinks *ain’t* on you, charge them to me.” (p. 81) But these are among the few examples I found in the whole collection of tales, in contrast to James’ using such in almost every sentence.

Maybe the more important consideration is what words and structures Adams employes to get the color that Hudson speaks of. I have separated examples of expressions into traditional parts of speech.

Distinctive Nouns

Terms for Ranch

outfit

Terms for People

man, Sonny, fellow, beau, horse wrangler, scrub, peeler, horse man, lawless characters, vigilance committee, stranger, bull-whacker, Injun, bucks, muzzle-loading daisy, auger, or big auger

Terms for Animals

General: herd, horse stock

Horses: saddle horse

Cows: range stock, wild cattle

Pack and Work Stock: pack mules, nigh wheeler, muley ox,

Terms For Animal Movement:

lope

Terms for Camping:

camp, bed-ground , campfire, hunting camp, a brand from the fire, horse camp

Terms for Ranching Activities:

cow hunt

Terms for Things

Ranching Tools: three-quarter rope, snubbing post, pack

Weapons: gun, old smoke-pole, cap-and-ball six-shooters, honk, peg

Miscellaneous: wad of money, team for your whiskers,

lick of sense, a peach, hides, provisions, squaw hitch, cattleman's ball, trail town,

Distinctive Verb Phrases:

After the labors of the day are over, the men gather around the fire, and the social hour of the day is spent in **yarning**. (p. 3)

“The first night we made camp, a boy **overtook** us” (p. 4)

“Hold on! **Hold your horses** just a minute,” interrupted Quince Forrest. (p. 6)

“One fellow in this second party **took a fancy to** my horse, and offered to help hang me on general principles,” (pp. 6-7)

“I was expected home within a week, as I was to go down on the Nueces on a cow hunt which **was making up**, and I only rested one day at the hunters' camp.” (p. 7)

“When evening came on, I sighted a little ranch house some distance off the trail, and **concluded to ride** to it and stay overnight.” (p. 7)

“You'll be watched for the first ten miles after leaving here, and if you've lied to us it will **go hard with** you.” (p. 8)

“They **threw lead** close around me,” (p. 9)

Bull had **given us the wink**, and every man in the outfit fell back, and the snoring that **checked** the story teller was like a chorus of ripaws running through pine

knots. (p. 9)

“A few doses like that will **cure him of sucking eggs** and acting smart, interrupting folks.” (p. 10)

I **reckon** the fellow who got her **ain’t** so powerful much, except his veneering and being a stranger, which was a big advantage. (p. 12)

“My sister **gives it as horseback opinion** that she’d been engaged to this fellow nearly eight months; girls, you know, **sabe** each other that way.” (p. 12)

“To be sure, if she **took a smile to** this stranger, no other fellow could **check** her with a three-quarter rope and a snubbing post.” (p. 12)

“I’ve seen girls walk right by a dozen good fellows and **fawn** over some scrub.” (p. 12)

“I simply **whipped out** my peg and helped him shuck out a shock or two while we talked over school matters. . . .” (p. 13)

“He was gruff and hearty, opened his mouth and laughed deep. I **built right up to** him.” (p. 15)

“Well, we **put up a job** to get him a place in a little town out on the railroad.” (p. 24)

“They’d have **lawed** me if I had, but I ought to have shot him and **checked the breed.**” (pp. 21-22)

“I **reckon** the girl was all right, but the family were these razor-backed, barnyard savages.” (p. 21)

“I **was banking plenty strong**, however, that next year,

if there was a good market in horses, I'd take her home with me. . . . (p. 20)

"If I failed to go, my landlady would **hatch up** some errand and send me over." (p. 16)

"I don't remember much about the supper, except that it was fine and I **came near** spilling my coffee several times, . . ." (p. 15)

"I rode in ahead to see **what was up**." (p. 28)

"While the men were eating their breakfast, I got on my horse and the night herder and I **scoured** and circled that country for miles around, but no ox." (p. 30)

"We **nooned** ten miles from our night camp that day." (p. 30)

". . . a Mexican, who had brought along a pet horse to ride home, thought he wouldn't hobble this pet one night, **fancying** the animal wouldn't leave the others." (p. 34)

"I don't **care a continental** who wins the egg now, for whenever I get three queens pat beat by a four-card draw, I have misgivings about the deal. . . ." (p. 35)

"The cook had a saddle in the wagon, so we caught him up a horse, **clapped** leather on him, and tied him behind the wagon in case of an emergency. . . ." (p. 38)

"One year maybe it's a little white dog with red eyes, and the very next it's a long bench-legged black dog with a Dutch name that right now I **disremember**." (p. 48)

On finishing his little yarn, Stallings arose, saying, "I must **take a listen** to my men on herd. It always **frets** me for fear my men will ride too near the cattle." (p. 48)

"The boys had **blowed in** their summer's wages and were feeling glum all over." (p. 52)

"He was **riding the chuckline** all right, but Miller **gave him a welcome**, as he was the real thing." (p. 52)

"But after the war, when the country had **settled up**, these old pioneers naturally hung together and visited and **chummed** with one another in preference to the new settlers." (p. 64)

"We had been **knocking around** the town for a week, until there was nothing new to be seen." (p. 83)

"I mentioned to him that he **made a mash** on the little blond milliner, and he at once insisted that I should show her to him." (p. 83)

"We were to be married during Easter week, but her mother **up and died**, so we put it off awhile for the sake of appearances." (p. 91)

"The girl **put up quite a mouth** about it, and I explained to her that a hundred a month wasn't offered to every man." (p. 91)

"I kept all this to myself, **mind you**." (p. 92)

"I take it that it's due to **running to neck** too much in their construction." (p. 95)

"Now **snicker**, you dratted young fools, just as if I wasn't

talking horse sense to you.” (p. 95)

Distinctive adverb:

“When evening came on, I sighted a little ranch house **some distance** off the trail, and concluded to ride to it and stay overnight.” (p. 7)

“Your letter would hang him **as sure as hell’s hot**, before he went ten miles farther.’ . . .” (p. 6)

“You hear me, it was a **slam-up** fine layout.” (p. 28)

“My girl was at the ball **all easy** enough, but she warned me that her brother was watching me.” (p. 21)

“He was really sorry I hadn’t come earlier, so as to look at a three-year-old colt that he set a **heap** of store by.” (p. 15)

“It will be a treat to those of us who have never been in love, and won’t interrupt the game **a particle**.” (p. 13)

“She dwelt **powerful** heavy on a girl who lived in a big brick house which stood back of the road some distance.” (p. 14)

“Well, fellows, that thing worried me **powerful**. . . .” (p. 30)

“Well, we were twenty miles on our way, and as it would take **some little** time to go back and return with the loaded mules, I volunteered, like a fool kid, to go on and take the packs through.” (p. 5)

“But in the old states fifteen miles from home makes you a **dead** rank stranger.” (p. 13)

“That was **some** strange. . . .” (p. 69)

“Well, it was a successful trip, and as this man was **plumb** white, anyhow, he concluded to show us the sights around his burg.” (p. 74)

“Girls that way don’t sabe cattle matters **a little bit**.” (p. 91)

“It was necessary to take them out supplies **about every so often**, and on one trip he begged my folks to let me go along for company.” (p. 4)

“Then the factions scattered to fight it out, and I was passing through the county **while matters were active**.” (p. 6)

A quiet wink from Bull to several of the boys held us **for the time being**, . . . (p. 9)

“It’s **a long time back**,” said Quarternight, meditatively, “and the scars have all healed, so I don’t mind telling it.” (p. 13)

“I had helped him at this work, **double-handed**, but now that I was to try it alone, he showed me what he called a squaw hitch, with which you can lash a pack **single-handed**.” (p. 5)

In the absence of a table, we unrolled a bed and sat down **Indian fashion** over a game of cards in which all friendship ceased. (pp. 11-12)

“. . . for I elevated my little hands **nicely**. . . .” (p. 5)

“He would . . . come back and rub himself against my

boots **friendly like**.” (p. 70)

Distinctive Adjectives:

“I was a **slim slip** of a colt about fourteen at the time, and as this man was a friend of ours, my folks consented to let me go along.” (p. 4)

“Well, we were twenty miles on our way, and as it would take **some little** time to go back and return with the loaded mules, I volunteered, like a **fool** kid, to go on and take the packs through.” (p. 4)

“Inside of half a minute a dozen men galloped up from every quarter, **all armed to the teeth**.” (p. 5)

“ . . . the next moment the judge fell **riddled with lead**.” (p. 6)

“If another Kentuckian came within twenty miles of him, and he found it out, he’d hunt him up and they’d hold a **two-handed** reunion. . . .” (p. 25)

There was a fellow drifted into the ranch where I was working, **dead broke**. . . .S # (p. 24)

It makes me **hot under the collar** yet when I think of it. (p. 22)

“ . . . and at this meet of the local gossips, someone had hinted that there was **liable** to be a wedding” (pp. 16-17)

“I . . . was feeling quite **gala** on my good fortune.” (p. 7)

“By this time I . . . got a **fair** night’s sleep, though there were men going and coming all night.” (p. 8)

“But in the old states fifteen miles from home makes you a dead **rank** stranger.” (p. 13)

“The woman was one of those **kindly** souls who never know where to stop.” (p. 14)

“In fact, she rather got me unduly excited, being a youth and somewhat **verdant**.” (p. 14)

“The fifth morning we were **anxious** to get a daybreak start, so we could load at night.” (p. 29)

“I ordered Joe to tie his mate behind the trail wagon and pull out one ox **shy**.” (p. 30)

“Our horses were good Spanish stock, and the Indians’ little **bench-legged** ponies were no match for them.” (p. 38)

“According to their report the boys had had a **hog-killing** time, old man Don having been out with them all night.” (p. 41)

“. . . they all seemed to be rapidly getting **locoed**.” (p. 46)

“He was **meaty** with news and scary stories.” (p. 53)

“I didn’t give the matter **overmuch** attention . . .” (p. 70)

“It was a **terror of** a long drive, but that wasn’t a circumstance compared to not hearing from Kate.” (p. 92)

“Now snicker, you **dratted** young fools, just as if I wasn’t talking horse sense to you.” (p. 95)

Distinctive Connective Words—prepositions and subordinating and coordinating conjunctions.

“Finally she lugged out a great big family album, and sat down **aside of** me on one of the horsehair sofas. (p. 16)

“**Inside of** half a minute a dozen men galloped up from every quarter, all armed to the teeth.”

“You take one of the long-necked cowmen and what does he know **outside of cattle.**” (p. 95)

“I was a slim slip of a colt about fourteen at the time, and **as** this man was a friend of ours, my folks consented to let me go along.” (p. 4)

“When it came time to go to bed, one man said to me, ‘Now, sonny, don’t make any attempt to get away, and don’t move out of your bed without warning us, for you’ll be shot **as sure as** you do.’” (pp. 7-8)

“He was really sorry I hadn’t come earlier, **so as to** look at a three-year-old colt that he set a heap of store by.” (p. 15)

Distinctive Comparisons

“She can **ride a string of my horses until they all have sore backs.**” (p. 86)

“Will you kindly **hobble your lip,**. . .” (p. 55)

“Now a girl can’t show her true colors like the girl’s brother did, but **get her in the harness once, and then she’ll show the white of her eye, balk, and possibly kick over the wagon tongue.** No, I believe in the breed blood’ll tell.” (p. 22)

“When a fellow gets it **burnt into him like a brand** that way once, it lasts him quite a while. He’ll feel his way next time.” (p. 17)

That album had a clasp on it, a buckle of pure silver, **same as those eighteen-dollar bridles.** p. 16

“But **lawlessness got into the saddle**, and had bench warrants issued and served on every member of this vigilance committee.” (pp. 5-6)

“My sister gives it as **horseback opinion** that she’d been engaged to this fellow nearly eight months;” (p. 12)

“Of course, I was too old to **stand any show on her string**, and I reckon the fellow who got her ain’t so powerful much, except his veneering and being a stranger, which was a big advantage.” (p. 12)

“To be sure, if she took a smile to this stranger, no other fellow could **check her with a three-quarter rope and a snubbing post.**” (p. 12)

“Those **old longhorns**, McNulta and Lovell, got us in with the crowd, . . .” (p. 42)

“The idea struck me that I would buy a sack of salt from this **eating ranch** and take it with me.” (p. 74)

“Well, I took a seat for a shine, and for two hours I sat there **as full as tick**, and as dignified as a judge on the bench.” (p. 75)

“As we came up he straightened himeself, caught her eye, and tipped his hat **with the politeness of a dancing master.**” (p. 84)

“Then I’m all ready,’ said he, ‘for I’ve just the right **gauge of steam.**” (p. 84)

“She could ride a horse **like an Indian.**” (p. 86)

“Some of you boys haven’t got much more sabe **than a fat old gobbler.**” (p. 95)

“Outside of these two there wasn’t one of us who could touch her **with a twenty-four-foot fish-pole.**” (p. 95)

“The truth is, I didn’t pay any more attention to him than I would to **an empty bottle.**” (p. 21)

“The family was **on the prod bigger than a wolf,** and there was no use reasoning with them.” (p. 21)

“I never questioned that man’s advice; it was ‘**die dog or eat the hatchet**’ with me.” (p. 8)

“... I was half a mile in the lead, **burning the earth like a canned dog.**” (pp. 8-9)

“You mean on the Cimarron last year when we mixed two herds,” said Quince, who had taken the bait **like a bass** and was now fully embarked on a yarn. (p. 9)

“We were in rather close quarters, herds ahead and behind us, when one night here came a cow herd **like a cyclone** and swept right through our camp.” (p. 9)

Bull had given us the wink, and every man in the outfit fell back, and the snoring that checked the story teller was **like a chorus of rip-saws running through pine knots.** (p. 9)

“My experience teaches me that when there’s a woman

in it, it's haphazard potluck with **no telling which way the cat will hop.** ” (p. 12)

“Fox,” said Durham, while Officer was shuffling the cards, “**your auger seems well oiled and working keen tonight.**” (p. 13)

“There was plenty of herds on the trail then, so this band of Indians got **bolder than bandits.**” (p. 37)

“When we came along with our horses—only six men all told—the chief of the band, called Running Bull Sheep, got on the bluff **bigger than a wolf** and demanded six horses.” (p. 37)

“Every gambler in town was there, with a fair sprinkling of cowmen and our **tribe.**” (p. 42)

“The professor was an oily-tongued fellow, and led off on the prelude to his lecture, while the audience was as quiet **as mice and as grave as owls.**” (p. 42)

“Masterson came to his feel **like a flash**, a gun in each hand, saying, ‘Stand up, you measly skunk, so I can see you.’” (p. 43)

“I drew my gun quietly and cracked away at him, when he let out the funniest little laugh, saying, ‘You’ve been drinking, Aaron; you’re nervous; **you couldn’t hit a flock of barns.**’” (pp. 70-71)

If you like these, you may be interested in reading more. You can find an extensive list in *Cowboy Slang* by Edgar R. Potter and in *Cowboy Lingo* by Ramon Adams.

Works Cited

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