

# Oral variation, interpretation and crowdsourcing. “I Ride an Ol’ Paint”

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One role of the Internet seems to be acting as a corpus which expands interpretations which may or may be not based on real data. Oral variation, together with folk etymology and false interpretation are not limited to the Middle Ages. Crowdsourcing constitutes a rich source of information, more or less reliable. It is easier to dig than to filter, though. In the rich Western folklore, what seems handier is to discover how tradition is well and alive, and people may drive along versions of the same song. The exchange of information carried on, and the use of different media to convey different interpretations, seems to be useful for the analysis of textual variation and interpretation in a particular sub-field of heritage lore. The analysis of a traditional song of the West seems to be adequate for a tentative diving into that folkloric pool.

**Keywords:** American West, anthropology and folklore, text variation analysis, Internet, crowdsourcing

## 1. Believing and seeing

In a conversation with filmmakers Ken Burns and Stephen Ives several years ago, the Kiowa poet N. Scott Momaday remarked that the American West “is a place that has to be seen to be believed, and it may have to be believed in order to be seen”. Mr. Momaday was arguably a follower of U2, because they used a closely related expression in the song *Walk On* of their Album *All That You Can't Leave Behind*. It is one of the many Biblical references used by U2: *A place that has to be believed to be seen*. In this case the source is John 11:40, *Then Jesus said, “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?”* The Old Testament anchor here is Isaiah 53:1, *Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?*

N. Scott Momaday had lent his rich bass voice and broad expertise to the *This I Believe* (that verb again) series on The Disney Channel. He had also participated in the “Last Stand at Little Big Horn” episode of *The American Experience*, for the PBS network. Momaday’s is also the voice of many exhibits at the Museum of the American Indian at the Smithsonian Institution. Ken Burns was the executive producer and creative consultant of *The West*, a new 8-part documentary that premiered on PBS stations nationwide in September 1996. Stephen Ives was the director/producer. To help provide on-screen context for the differences among dozens of different tribes, each with its own language, culture and traditions, as well as the fundamental element of common ground, Stephen Ives sought out N. Scott Momaday, whose contribution was a success.

## 2. Extending the limits with crowdsourcing

The Merriam-Webster defines *crowdsourcing* as “the practice of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people and especially from the online community rather than from traditional employees or suppliers”. In the particular field of cultural heritage, users get naturally involved in the generation of knowledge. The Internet is the means used for that type of contribution to heritage awareness. That is the use which will be given to the term “crowdsourcing” in this contribution. Digitation can be the result of institutional work or of spontaneous commitment. Scholars, though, might not be very receptive to this application. The reason is clear: using the Internet as a source of knowledge is like opening a can of worms. The solution is to do it with care. Fishermen and anglers do it all the time. The web constitutes a rich source of information, more or less reliable, depending on the sources. It is easier to dig than to filter, anyhow. The role of the Internet may sometimes look like expanding interpretations which may or may be not based on real data. This paper proposes an experiment based on a sample of the rich Western folklore. What seems handier is to discover how tradition is well and alive, and people may drive along versions of the same song, which they perform without realizing what they are saying. The exchange of information carried on, and the use of different media to convey that information seems to be useful for the analysis of textual variation and interpretation in the particular field of folklore. Trying to wind the hank is a too attractive pleasure to let it pass, lest when you are a European-American, longing for horses and the prairie.

### 3. "I Ride an Ol' Paint"

The analysis of a traditional song of the West seems to be adequate for a diving into that folkloric pool. The tune is easy to find on the internet; here are the words:

#### **I Ride an Old Paint<sup>1</sup>**

I ride an old paint, I lead an old dan  
I'm goin' to Montana to throw the hoolihan  
They feed in the coulees, they water in the draw  
Their tails are all matted, their backs are all raw

Ride around little doggies, ride around them slow  
For the fiery and snuffy are rarin' to go

Old Bill Jones had a daughter and a son  
One went to college, the other went wrong  
His wife, she got killed in a poolroom fight  
But still he's a-singin' from mornin' till night

When I die, take my saddle from the wall  
Place it on my old pony, lead him out of his stall  
Tie my bones to my saddle and turn our faces to the West  
And we'll ride the prairie we love the best

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<sup>1</sup> The Internet role in this process started some time ago. Jamy Faulhaber sent the author of this contribution an e-mail asking for his cooperation in the interpretation of a very popular song. A friend of hers had requested her help for it. Jamy and Charles thought at the time that this author was much more interested in the Old West than any other of their friends. They also shared some benevolent ideas about his capacity to decipher western materials, what he is not interested in denying. That e-mail, which then carried with it a lot of fun, and has become a token of thirty years of friendship, now will be the excuse to go rambling into the less Wild West of today. A relatively free Spanish translation (that was required at the time) could be: Monto un viejo pinto, guío un viejo pardo / voy a Montana a lazar con hulihán, / Pastan en los cañones, abrevan al paso, / sus colas son marañas, los lomos puro cuero. / Rodeo a los terneritos, los rodeo despacio / porque el ardiente y el tonante claman por lanzarse. / El viejo Bill Jones tenía hija e hijo, / uno fue a estudiar, otro por mal camino, / su esposa murió en una pelea en el bar; / pero él sigue cantando de la noche a la mañana. / Cuando yo me muera, toma mi silla del muro, / ponla en mi viejo pingo, sácalo del establo, / a la silla ata mis huesos, al Oeste vuelve la cara / y así cabalgaremos por las praderas tan amadas. / Monto un viejo pinto, guío un viejo pardo / voy a Montana a lazar con hulihán, / Pastan en los cañones, abrevan al paso, / sus colas son marañas, los lomos puro cuero.

I ride an old paint, I lead an old dan  
 I'm goin' to Montana to throw the hoolihan  
 They feed in the coulees, they water in the draw  
 Their tails are all matted, and their backs are all raw

From here on, the use of the Internet as a large and, in this experience, friendly corpus, proves particularly useful. Sometimes it might simply remind us of the existence of data which can be rediscovered now. It can be learned, f.i., that an old Burl Ives record has a slightly different, less academic version:

Old Bill Jones had two daughters and a song;  
 one went to Denver; the other went wrong.  
 His wife, she died in a pool room fight.  
 Still he keeps singin' all day and all night.

Specific sites, such as the PBS website *History of the West*, confirm their validity and, at the same time, let see some flaws. So the PBS website dates the song in the 1868-1874 period, but without documentation.

#### 4. A selection of words

As it is said in Spanish, *cuando el diablo no tiene nada que hacer, con el rabo mata moscas*. Apparently a lot of flies have been killed by idle devils with their tails, because the curious gets a lot of interpretations that are due to the imagination or the wrong experience of those who utter them. However, much can be learned from the average Westerner, who keeps a seed of knowledge prone to give fruit, when the right questions are properly asked. In order to reduce the scope and reach some straightforward answers quizzes have been limited to four terms, two of them coordinated: *dan*, *fiery and snuffy* and *hoolihan*.

#### 5. A *dan*

A first question could be *what is a dan?* In *Songs of the Wild West*, published in 1991, with commentary by Alan Axelrod, from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, he writes: "Some versions of this song say *old dam* rather than *old Dan* which suggests the pack horse is the old paint's mother." Others have suggested it is "dun," a reference to the color of the horse, a brownish, grey color. And there are also references to "wiki", reminding the readers of "Cool Water", a song written in 1936 by Bob Nolan, in which *Dan* is the name of the mule: *Old*

*Dan and I with throats burned dry and souls that cry for water.* It could be a case of intertextuality (the adjectival phrase is the same), although many contributors are in favor of *Dan* as a generic horse name. Nothing seems very convincing.

## 6. Fiery and snuffy

Nevertheless, the peak of interest is reached somewhere else. In the same anthology *Songs of the Wild West*, the compiler says "...fiery (another term for paint) and the snuffy (a buff- or snuff-colored horse)..." Is it true? It does not seem so.

The color interpretation is outweighed by the folk etymological type. An internet commentary reads, literally:

Regarding the meaning of "the fiery & snuffy" have always meant (to me) that the ones prone to spooking & snorting (the fiery & the snuff-y) are just LOOKING for an excuse to stampede. Seems perfectly obvious! And therefore, you would want to "ride around them SLOW."

And in July, 2006, no other less than Milton wrote:

Having worked as a cowboy in Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, and Idaho, and about the terms "fiery and snuffys": whenever you're holding up a herd of cattle to work, be it branding or cutting out steers, there are always a certain few in the herd that are looking for a chance to breakout of the hold up and head back to their home range.

Paternal authority, a must for old timers, is reflected when Don adds:

[My dad] said "fiery" and "snuffy" were the campfire and branding iron.

Close enough, there is some fire in it. Popular musician, auctioneer and DJ Stan Howe from Montana offers:

The "Fiery & Snuffy" in "I Ride an Old Paint" refer to Lighting and Thunder. Those names for it were well known to anyone in Wyoming and Montana at the time the song was written. Note that the line is: "For the fiery and snuffy are ready to go." Often it is sung as: "For they're fiery and snuffy and ready to go," which also works if you consider the cattle to be fiery and snuffy. What it really refers to, though, is lightning and thunder.

For those who have ever seen a stampede, there can be no doubt. Howe takes the data from old time cowboy fiddler and singer Jim Beebe, son of Steve Beebe, famous Texas/Montana trail hand featured in many of the early books on Montana including *Before Barbed Wire: L. A. Huffman, Photographer on Horseback* by Mark H. Brown (1956).

## 7. Some consideration should be given to hoolihan

Rod Miller, a winner of the Lariat Laureate competition, posted a note on the Internet on the subject:

The line “throw the Hoolihan” that appears in “I Ride an Old Paint” almost surely refers to a type of loop used in roping, often for catching horses. A hoolihan is a kind of backhand loop, but distinct from a regular backhand loop in that the roper rolls his wrist and the loop rolls over in the air. That rolling motion also describes the motion of a hoolihanned steer in bulldogging -- it does a forward roll. It is unlikely that the line in the song has reference to bulldogging as Bill Pickett is credited with inventing that particular activity long after, I suspect, “I Ride an Old Paint” was first written and sung.

Miller further edified the readers by quoting the definition of “hooley-ann” in Ramon F. Adams’ *Cowboy Lingo* (1936):

The term “hooley-ann” was a roping term and the throw was used mostly to catch calves out of a bunch and to rope horses. The roper rode with his loop in his hand, and when the chance presented itself, he swung the loop backward instead of forward, and as it came over it was turned in such a way as to cause it to flatten out before it reached the head of the animal to be roped. Just one swing and it could be tossed thirty feet forward. The size of the loop depended upon the distance it was to be thrown and the size of the animal. A good calf-roper who used the “hooley-ann” might be thirty feet from a wee tot of a calf and start a loop that a beef steer could pass through, but the noose ran out by reason of the distance, and by the time it reached the calf, it was barely large enough to pass around the calf’s neck.

Adams’ definition of “hoolihaning” is word-for-word the same as that in Jules Verne Allen’s *Cowboy Lore*, which was published three years before Adams’ book.

A history site here: <http://historywired.si.edu/detail.cfm?ID=49> claims “A Hollihan (*sic*) is a left-hand-and-around horse throw. The rope is released with minimum of movement.”

Another site here: <http://home.att.net/~basicbrian/iride.html> has the song and a note: "A very dangerous rodeo move, jumping from a horse at full gallop onto a moving cow, to flip it over. The move, named after its originator, is now banned in competition."

Father loving Don, in May, 2006, comments:

My Dad, who grew up in the 1920's and 1930's on a ranch in west Texas, said that throwing the hoolihan could be used to mean "getting ready to die" similar to "headin" for the last roundup.

Ready to die recalls Milton who, in fact, in July, 2006, writes:

Hoolihan is a loop thrown, usually when you're roping horses.

The right interpretation and explanation of the word *hoolihan* seems to be found in the *Cowboy Lore*, by Jules Verne Allen (1933), plagiarized by Adams, as has already been said. One interesting section of commonly used terms includes entries such as "HOOLIHANING, the act of leaping forward and alighting on the horns of a steer in bull-dogging in a manner to knock the steer down without having to resort to twisting the animal down with a wrestling hold. Hoolihaning is barred at practically all recognized contests." This prohibition, no doubt, led to the misinterpretations given to the term later.

## 8. Final considerations

Although the method has not provided a solution in the case of *dan*, it has solved the other two quizzes. *Fiery and snuffy* refers to "lightning and thunder", and *to throw the hoolihan* would be "the act of leaping forward and alighting on the horns of a steer in bull-dogging in a manner to knock the steer down without having to resort to twisting the animal down with a wrestling hold".

The application of crowdsourcing, albeit limited, has made it possible to start riding an ol' paint knowing not only what it means, but also what it implies in terms of using the Internet as the largest possible corpus. Folk etymology reflects what could be expected: an easy way to find an explanation to the unknown. There is not much more to get from it. Source analysis, on the contrary, has proven very useful. Plagiarism may find an apparently easy path on the internet. However, users share a huge amount of information, what was hidden might easily be unveiled, when a crowd is looking for it, and plagiarism is no exception. Scholars might still look at it with some false superiority. Never

mind, contributions will not stop and, what conveys more meaning to them, they are becoming a new form of cultural heritage. Lexical analysis was always the door to cultural interpretation. The amplitude of the information provided by crowdsourcing enlarges the magnitude of cultural interpretation, introducing the combination of right and wrong that can be found at the foundations of every culture.

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