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The Streets of Laredo

Frank Maynard

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The Streets of Laredo



FRANK MAYNARD
Courtesy Jim and Cathy Hoy Private Collection

One of the best-known of the old cowboy folksongs has a Butler County connection. In his memoir of his days as an open-range cowboy throughout the 1870s, Frank Maynard, whose home was Towanda in the western edge of the Flint Hills, told how he came to write the lyrics to the song we know as “The Cowboy’s Lament” or “The Streets of Laredo,” which he set at the doorway of Tom Sherman’s barroom in Dodge City. Texas cowboys who heard Maynard’s song moved the locale from Dodge City to the streets of Laredo on the Mexican border. Below, in his own words,

are the song and Maynard’s account of how he came to write it:

“During the winter of 1876 I was working for a Grimes outfit which had started north with a trail herd from Matagorda Bay, Texas. We were wintering the herd on the Salt Fork of the Arkansas River on the border of Kansas and Indian Territory, waiting for the spring market to open at Wichita.

“One of the favorite songs of the cowboys in those days was called ‘The Dying Girl’s Lament,’ the story of a girl who had been betrayed by her lover and who lay dying in a hospital.

“I had often amused myself by trying to write verses, and one dull winter day in camp to while away the time I began writing a poem which could be sung to the tune of ‘The Dying Girl’s Lament.’ I made it a dying ranger, or cowboy, instead of a dying girl, and

had the scene in Tom Sherman’s barroom at Dodge City instead of a hospital.

“After I had finished the new words to the song I sang it to the boys in the outfit. They liked it and began singing it. It became popular with the boys in other outfits who heard it after we had taken our herd to market in Wichita the next spring, and from that time on I heard it sung everywhere on the range and trail.”

THE DYING COWBOY

As I rode down by Tom Sherman’s bar-room,
Tom Sherman’s bar-room so early one day,
There I espied a handsome young ranger
All wrapped in white linen, as cold as the clay.

“I see by your outfit that you’re a ranger,”

The words that he said as I went riding by,
“Come, sit down beside me, and hear my sad story,
I’m shot through the breast and know I must die.”

Chorus:

Then muffle the drums and play the dead marches;
Play the dead march as I’m carried along;
Take me to the church-yard and lay the sod o’er me,
I’m a young ranger and I know I’ve done wrong.

Reprinted from Frank Maynard, *Cowboy’s Lament: A Life on the Open Range*, 2010, ed. Jim Hoy.