

# At the Edge of the Spotlight

A NEW BOOK CELEBRATES THE COWBOY  
AND RANGE POETRY OF BRUCE KISKADDON.

by William C. Reynolds

I WAS INITIALLY INTRODUCED TO THE WORK of cowboy poets in the early 1980s. The first of many popular cowboy poetry gatherings was being held in Elko, Nevada, and I attended to hear what all the hubbub was about. The early gatherings were very casual affairs and primarily populated by the real deals—cowboys and buckaroos straight from the sagebrush of Nevada’s high desert and surrounding mountain states. All sorts of poems and songs were performed, but it became apparent that a favored source for these performers was the body of work by a deceased poet named Bruce Kiskaddon [1878-1950], a Los Angeles bellhop who had been a real cowboy early in his life and who quietly and persistently wrote poetry—more than 470 poems—until his death in 1950.

Kiskaddon wrote of the authentic cowboy experience in a style and tone that was uniquely unromantic. His was a world of unflinching realism that held an artistic strength that still sets it apart, making his work relevant for modern readers. He was described by a contemporary as “an old cowhand who just naturally thinks in rhymes. He never took no poem lessons, nor for that matter not many of any other sort of lessons, but he’s got ’em all tied to a snubbin’ post when it comes to building cowboy and range poetry.”

Little was written about Kiskaddon, although his poetry was published regularly in a variety of livestock publications, including the *Western Livestock Journal*, a weekly Los Angeles periodical. There his poems were accompanied by charming pen and ink line drawings by a young, unknown illustrator, Katherine Field [1899-1951]. Field, who grew up on her family’s New Mexico ranch, was self-taught in her art. Although she was a victim of polio, it did not stop her from being horseback as much as any ranch kid. Her artwork has widely been compared to the works of Will James and Edward Borein.

Between 1919 and 1959, Kiskaddon’s poetry continued to be published in a variety of books and publications. In 1947, he self-published a volume entitled *Rhymes of the Ranges and Other Poems*, which contained many previously unpublished writings. The book was re-published in 1987 through Western publisher Gibbs Smith under the watchful editing of folklorist and historian Hal Cannon—a carrier of the flame of cowboy poetry—and helped shine the spotlight on Kiskaddon’s work. While Kiskaddon’s poetry continued to be remembered and spoken, it wasn’t until this year that a true history and collection of Bruce Kiskaddon’s life work would become available. Enter Bill Siems.

The term “passionate collector” could aptly describe Mr. Siems. He is a true patron of the poetry and life of Bruce Kiskaddon. I learned



Bruce Harvey Kiskaddon, circa 1904.



**A horseback Katherine Field on her family's New Mexico ranch.**

of his efforts over a year ago, reading a rare book catalog from a dealer in San Francisco. It seemed an extensive collection of fine Western books was being sold to enable the Washington-state collector to pursue his next project—that of a major book on the life and range poetry of Bruce Kiskaddon—a project that literally took him all over the country in search of Kiskaddon's trail. Here if ever there was one was a passion-based publishing effort that could bring a broader and deserved voice to the poetry of an authentic westerner who, as Hal Cannon described, “lived the last third of his life as a bellhop in Los Angeles. Every day he went to work at the Mayflower Hotel. Between calls, he sat in the corner of the lobby with a stubby pencil and opened up a world of memory—of cow camps, horses, and open land.”

Siems' homage to Kiskaddon—all 609 pages of it—entitled *Open Range*, features the first complete collection of the poetry of Bruce Kiskaddon. The book includes 481 poems, 337 illustrations, and most importantly, 242 pen and ink line drawings by Katherine Field—all rejoined to the poems they were created for. Siems' incredible achievement in bringing together Kiskaddon's life work is underscored by the remarkable modern grass-roots revival and artistic expansion of rangeland poetry that continues to thrive.

The two poems that follow are classic examples of Kiskaddon's work. They are favorites of those who know his work and have been recited at countless cowboy poetry gatherings and in quiet murmurings on horseback. With Bill Siems' help, the work of this important Western poet will have center stage—finally illuminated by the light of recognition some 56 years after his passing.

## The Time to Decide

*Did you ever stand on the ledges.*

*On the brink of the great plateau,  
And look from their jagged edges  
On the country that lay below?*

*When your vision met no resistance*

*And nothing to stop your gaze,  
Till the mountain peaks in the distance  
Stood wrapped in a purple haze.*

*On the winding water courses*

*And the trails on the mountain sides,  
Where you guided your patient horses  
On your long and lonesome rides.*

*When you saw Earth's open pages,  
And you seemed to understand  
As you gazed on the work of ages  
Rugged and tough, but grand.*

*There, the things that you thought were strongest  
And the things that you thought were great,  
And for which you had striven longest,  
Seemed to carry but little weight.*

*While the things that were always nearer,  
The things that you thought were small;  
Seemed to stand out grander and clearer.  
As you looked from the mountain wall.*

*While you're gazing on such a vision  
And your outlook is clear and wide,  
If you have to make a decision,  
That's the time and place to decide.*

*Although you return to the city  
And mingle again with the throng;  
Though your heart may be softened by pity,  
Or bitter from strife and wrong.*

*Though others should laugh in derision,  
And the voice of the past grow dim;  
Yet, stick to the cool decision  
That you made on the mountain's rim.*



## When They've Finished Shipping Cattle in the Fall

Though you're not exactly blue,  
Yet you don't feel like you do  
In the winter, or the long hot summer days.  
For your feelin's and the weather,  
Seem to sort of go together,  
And you're quiet in the dreamy autumn baze.  
When the last big steer is goaded  
Down the chute, and safely loaded,  
And the summer crew has creased to hit the ball;  
When a feller starts a draggin'  
To the home ranch with the wagon —  
When they've finished shippin' cattle in the fall.

Only two men left a standin'  
On the job for winter brandin',  
And your pardner he's a loafin' at your side.  
With a bran new saddle a creakin',  
Neither one of you is speakin',  
And you feel it's goin' to be a silent ride.  
But you savvy one another,  
For you know him like a brother,  
He is friendly but he's quiet, that is all;  
He is thinkin' while he's draggin'  
To the home ranch with the wagon —  
When they've finished shippin' cattle in the fall.

And the saddle hosses stringin'  
At an easy walk a swingin'  
In behind the old chuck wagon movin' slow  
They are weary gaunt and jaded  
With the mud and brush they've waded,  
And they settled down to business long ago.  
Not a boss is feelin' sporty,  
Not a boss is actin' snorty;  
In the spring the brutes was full of buck and bawl;  
But they're gentle, when they're draggin'  
To the home ranch with the wagon —  
When they've finished shippin' cattle in the fall.

And the cook leads the retreat  
Up there on his wagon seat,  
With his hat pulled way down forrud on his head.  
Used to make the old team bustle,  
Now he hardly moves a muscle,  
And a feller might imagine he was dead,  
'Cept his old cob pipe is smokin'  
As he lets his team go pokin'

Hittin' all the bumps and bollers in the road.  
No the cook has not been drinkin'  
He's just settin' there and thinkin'  
'Bout the places and people that he knowed  
You can see the dust a trailin'  
And two little clouds a sailin',  
And a big mirage like lakes and timber tall.  
{And you're lonesome when your're draggin'}  
To the home ranch with the wagon —  
When they've finished shippin' cattle in the fall.

When you make the camp that night,  
Though the fire is burnin' bright,  
Yet nobody seems to have a lot to say.  
In the spring you sung and hollered,  
Now you git your supper swallowed  
And you crawl into your blankets right away.  
Then you watch the stars a shinin'  
Up there in the soft blue linin'  
And you sniff the frosty night air clear and cool.  
You can hear the night boss shiftin'  
And your memory starts a driftin'  
To the little village where you went to school  
With its narrow gravel streets  
And the kids you used to meet,  
And the common where you used to play baseball.  
Now you're far away and draggin'  
To the home ranch with the wagon —  
When they've finished shippin' cattle in the fall.

For more information on Bruce Kiskaddon's poetry and the limited-edition book *Open Range*, go to [www.oldnighthawkpress.com](http://www.oldnighthawkpress.com).

