

That a State Might Sing

by

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For readers who have perused the preceding numbers of the *Heritage of Kansas*, the format and general tenor of the publication must by now be familiar. It is therefore with distinct pleasure that this sixth number of the young series has been prepared for distribution, for it represents a signal departure. But I want to depart from the clumsy apparatus of literary diction to tell about it.

A couple of years ago I had some business at the Kansas State Historical Society in Topeka. Business—probably I was asking Nyle Miller, the secretary, for some favor or another. At any rate, the genial Mr. Miller showed me a copy of a handsome little pamphlet titled “The Story of HOME ON THE RANGE,” by Kirke Mechem. It was a reprint from *The Kansas Historical Quarterly* of November, 1949. I glanced through it and asked if I could have it for keeps. He said “yes” with a certain grace, coupled with a certain hesitation. The little book was important, he told me, it was popular, it was hard to keep a supply on hand, printing costs were prohibitive, etc. etc.

Now I accept at face value things Mr. Miller tells me. So I took “my copy” home and read it and could scarcely believe it. I had read sometime earlier Homer Croy’s account of the state song in his *Corn Country*. It was good, and I was satisfied that I knew enough about “Home on the Range” to get by on. Mr. Mechem’s work showed me that there was a bit else to pick up.

On a later visit to Topeka, I asked Mr. Miller if I might reprint the reprint—that is, issue the contents of the Society’s reprint of Mr. Mechem’s work in the *Heritage of Kansas* format. He said that as far as the Society was concerned there was no question that it would be all right, but suggested that I contact Mr. Mechem. Then began a series of letters between the author and me.

Kirke Mechem was for 21 years secretary of the Kansas State Historical Society. In 1951 he retired as secretary, but he still is editor of its publications. He now lives in Lindsborg, Kansas.

In addition to his long and active career with the Society, Mr. Mechem has written steadily. Some of his literary accomplishments are listed below.

A play in verse, *John Brown*, won the Maxwell Anderson Award at Stanford University; later it was published in book form by Kansas State College and given an hour’s production by NBC radio. *Lilac Lake*, another

play, won the Du Bose Heyward Award at Charleston, S.C., and was "on the boards" in the famous Dock Street Theatre there. Doubleday published his detective novel, *A Frame for Murder*; the scene of the book is laid in Wichita. Then there is a stream of magazine and newspaper verse.

He also prepared a fascinating study on "The Mythical Jayhawk." But that is another story which I hope *Heritage* readers can share in a later number.

And, of course, "The Story of HOME ON THE RANGE." Mr. Mechem wrote me that he undertook the study of the song story—I note some two dozen odd sources cited in the footnotes; that makes it a study—"to justify the claims of Kansas to the song." Beyond justifying them, it seems to me he has proved them.

Somewhere along the line in all these proceedings it occurred to me that we here at the college might do a real service if we tried to reproduce with some exactitude the reprint pamphlet of the Society. A saturation of the state, a placing within reading distance of those who want to know about things which represent them, must be a real service, I should think.

So this issue is what we came up with. But it is not an exact reproduction, and I want to enumerate the differences. The major difference is in the cover reproduction, page nine of this issue. The original reprint cover carries the title and author's name as we have reproduced it. But whereas our "cover page" is white, the Society's was a fancy blue-green. Furthermore, the latter carried at the top scattered impressions of "glittering stars"; at the middle and left a plunging "buffalo" (who apparently wasn't just then roaming); below, a series of animals which are obviously "deer and antelope" on their way to "play"; and at the bottom, a scene of "the graceful white swan" going "gliding along." And there are some rather undefined impressions, upper left, which might well be "wild curlew" about to "scream." All of the above are in brown. And, seriously, the background impressions contribute a good deal to the impressionistic cover which the Society was able to provide. I am sorry that we had to forego these—both the color and the background impressions. Aside from this, the only deviation from the Society's reprint and what appears here results from a slight difference in type face. So, as far as I can tell, the content of each page here corresponds roughly to that issued by the Society.

I take such pains to explain this because the Society's product is so infinitely satisfactory. Each of us who believes needs *its* copy. But this is impossible. And what is here will at least show you what it is.

To the story itself, then. And to the song itself. There is no better way to start, I think, than to quote a bit from the text of what you will read later. Thus . . . "from 1873, when the song was written, to 1910, 'Home on the Range' was in fact a folk song. The origins of folk music are seldom known, but in this instance we have a song whose three earliest versions

may be compared not only with each other but with a fourth version modified by 37 years of folk singing.”

This point made by the author is an important one, I think. And it is linked inseparably with the importance of the study he had made—the work done and the product he has achieved.

The quotation above, it seems to me, is more than a nodding agreement with the belief that things of the folk—songs, stories, superstitions, traditions, and so on, perpetuated in oral tradition—virtually always have a definite, if sometimes inexplicable, value. Yet Mr. Mechem’s whole scholarly and historical work gives new life to the value of factual studies. There is a dual attitude shown here, teaching us, certainly, what to believe but—much more important, I think—suggesting how to believe.

How to believe. Ah! that can tease you out of thought. But don’t we have enough here in Kansas to get a start? In this song? Sure, there is an impossible romanticism in “Home on the Range.” Higley had no business to write the words, any more than Kelley had to put them to music. They both should have been prosecuted. The very idea of dreaming dreams, of taking up habitation in realms of poetry and song. But they did. And we can’t change it. So we, if we will, stand to make the gain. A man in Lindsborg has prodded us on.

I have young friends who have commented to me about the state song. “That stupid thing,” they say. “It ain’t got no lilt. Its got no real rhythm. We like ’em gone, man, gone.”

As I would not be a master, neither would I be a slave, Lincoln said. Or something like that. As I would not be judged, neither would I judge—or something like that—comes from the Bible, I think.

But I still can be sorry for people who are constrained to think as my young friends do. That the song “ain’t got it.” Whose failure is greatest—he who does not teach well, but who himself knows; or he who does not know and will not try to learn?

Haven’t some 100 years of history, of life and death, of hope and feeling and jealousy and hate, of all that is our heritage—haven’t all these things been checked if only for a moment, by the friendly tune and words of “Home on the Range?” Aren’t these things all put at least vaguely into focus by the song?

Try to measure your debt to it.



Not "The Thinker," but Kirke Mechem, tennis umpire and sometime author and historian. This recent photograph of Mr. Mechem belies a fairly general belief that the scholar is out of touch with things of the world. Here he is shown calling shots at a tennis tournament in Topeka. He formerly played, and two of his sons gained eminence in Kansas and Missouri Valley play.