

SING ME BACK HOME:

COUNTRY MUSIC AND THE OKIE MIGRATION TO CALIFORNIA,

1930s-1950s

by

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When the Okies swept into California during the desperate years of the 1930s, they brought with them very little of material value. Nevertheless, they did carry with them much that was rich in a cultural sense. One bit of their baggage that held enormous intangible value was their music--country and western music. Once a purely regional folk art of interest only to the poor whites of the South, it grew during the mid-twentieth century into a national artform of great commercial potential and realization, and the Okies helped make it so by assisting in its spread beyond Southern borders.<sup>1</sup> But it had a more immediate, direct, and vital value to the Okies who rode into the Far West during the depression, World War II, and the post-war period. In these years of emigration and settlement, country and western music helped provide these people with a center. Many emigrant groups have found music a source of comfort, a palliative or even remedy to the loneliness that comes from immersion in a foreign culture. So too was country and western music to the Okies. If not quite foreigners, they were yet alien to the Pacific Coast way of life and different enough to foster fears, prejudice, and discrimination among Californians. The music "sung them back home."<sup>2</sup> But even more, the music helped give them a sense of community that might have otherwise been elusive. Country and western music was a tie that bound, taking the place of other more formal cultural binds. It was a chief form of emotional support for this group during their transition from Oklahomans, Texans, and Arkansans to Californians and a cultural marker for them afterwards.

There seems to have been little real country and western music on the West Coast prior to the 1930s and 1940s. The "western" music produced in Hollywood during the early thirties was a thoroughly commercial product of Tinseltown, having little to do with anything except the movie-makers' idea of the cowboy. It was the Okie emigrants who first brought country music--then called "hillbilly" or "old-time music"--to the West Coast. The strains of fiddles and guitars were sounds familiar to the Okie camps and ditch-bank settlements. Often these sounds came from phonographs or radios, but just as often they were from amateur musicians playing for themselves and others. Bill Malone has quoted one listener of those melodies as recalling that he heard "fragments of tunes that a more prosperous America has forgotten in the process of growing and getting rich." Of course not all the Okies were country music fans and many of those who were surely listened to other forms of music. For example, Walter Stein has pointed out that the Tin Pan Alley tunes "Twelfth Street Rag, and "Five Foot Two" were the most popular songs at one FSA camp during the period.

Nevertheless, music from "back home" was a favorite way to pass time and ease troubled minds for these people--so much so that folklorists found the migrant camps a rich source for collecting folk songs. Just how much of the music they heard was true "folk music" and how much was simply amateur performances of commercial melodies learned off the radio or recordings is uncertain. But what is important here is simply that those songs were present if not omnipresent.<sup>3</sup>

After a short period of following the crops--usually just a year or two--the average Okie family settled into a community, many times one populated by other families from the Oklahoma/Arkansas/Texas region. Once settled, they would revive a tradition native to their homes back east--that is, Saturday night house parties and barn dances. Live country & western music was almost always a central feature. Charles Townsend, in his biography of Bob Wills, has depicted these parties in Texas and Oklahoma as an American social institution that endured from colonial times through various frontiers until the 1920s and 1930s in Texas and Oklahoma. With the dustbowl migration they moved nearly unchanged to yet another frontier. Townsend writes: "They were great social events, for some people the greatest of their lives." Frequently lasting most of the night, the dances were yet family affairs. The children bunked down in the bedrooms, while the younger adults danced and courted, and the older ones socialized in more sexually segregated groups. Alcohol was usually present, but drunkenness was not encouraged--drinking was usually an adult male prerogative and kept somewhat separate physically from the more family oriented portion of the party. The music was usually performed in a central room in the house where everyone could hear it either for listening or for dancing. The musicians most frequently played for free or for a pass of the hat. Hugh Thrower was only thirteen when his family left western Oklahoma in 1933 to settle in Fairfield, California, but half a century later he vividly recalled in an interview how he used to play fiddle and guitar "just for the fun of it" at Okie house parties almost every Saturday night during the years of 1936 and 1937, sometimes fiddling until the early morning hours. The parties, he recollected, were just like the ones he and his family had attended back in Oklahoma. The people who came were Okies, people with whom he and his family "were rooted in friendship."<sup>4</sup>

With the entrance of the forties, the return of good times, and the growing urbanization in American life, country music in California--as elsewhere--became more commercial. Professionals, full-time and part-time, came into the field in growing numbers. This increase of professional country performers on the West Coast occurred in response to a demand for live music in the honkytonke and dance-halls that had begun to spring up near defense industries, military bases, oiltowns, and agricultural centers, anywhere, in fact, that Okies settled in number.<sup>5</sup> Some of the first clubs featuring country music on any sort of regular basis were little more than dives, catering to single adult male transients. Loyd Jones, a young man fresh from Texas during the early forties, played guitar in such bars throughout the Central Valley of California. His memories of these bars are not too

complimentary. But, although these bars featured country and western music, they were not typical of the general development of the genre and they meant little to typical Okies who were more often than not family members.<sup>6</sup>

Soon more reputable and respectable situations came into being where Okies could listen to live performances of their music. Increasingly through the forties, country and western reviews featuring nationally known stars as well as local and regional performers appeared at civic auditoriums and ballrooms. The service clubs established for the burgeoning military population and civilian defense workers also featured country bands. But the most common meeting places for Okies who loved their music were the honkytonks. Established just for the particular patronage of the Okie, these places were nearly identical in looks and operation to those that Bill Malone has described as coming into widespread existence in Texas and Oklahoma in the 1930s. Present in some number during the war, after the summer of 1945 they multiplied substantially, reflecting the prosperity of the post-war period as well as the greater leisure time afforded most people by the end of lengthy wartime work schedules.<sup>7</sup>

The honkytonks varied widely in their decor, facilities, and the music they offered. Paul Westmoreland, an Okie country music performer, opened up the Bell Avenue Corral just northwest of Sacramento in 1946. Tired of playing guitar and singing in clubs owned by others, he built the Corral with his own hands and without plans, using money he had saved while working at a defense job in Southern California. His building permit cost \$1.50 and the county inspector never even dropped by to check out his rattletrap shack with its sandy concrete floor. He bought his first stock of beer with his last unemployment check. The first day he opened, Westmoreland served his customers over a plywood bar and entertained them with country and western songs accompanied only by the chords from his guitar. He sold completely out of beer in the first few hours. Okies from the nearby community of Del Paso Heights wandered into the place, liked it, and stayed. As years went by, Westmoreland hired a bartender, built a dance floor and stage, and began leading his own three-piece band, featuring a brand of country and western music appropriately called "honkytonk." When he sold the place in 1979, it was still a going concern and continues so today--one of the oldest country and western bars in Northern California.<sup>8</sup>

Only a few miles away from the Bell Avenue Corral was an Okie dance hall that was light-years away in style. This was Wills Point, owned by the famous western swing band leader Bob Wills. Originally from the Texas/Oklahoma region, Wills moved to Southern California in 1943 and then to Fresno two years later, seeking a base from which he could establish a steady regional concert circuit. Wills failed to find that in Fresno and so moved north in 1947 to Sacramento where he bought the old Aragon Ballroom, renaming it Wills Point. Wills and his band played at Wills Point when they were not on the road, and they broadcast regularly on the local Sacramento radio station KPBC to advertise the club. But, although he attracted sizeable audiences in the area, Wills soon grew restless and in 1949 returned to Oklahoma. Bob Wills came back to the

Sacramento area twice in the early 1950s, but neither time did he stay for any longer than a few months.<sup>9</sup>

Although Bob Wills did not find a permanent home in Sacramento, he held onto the ownership of Wills Point for nearly ten years and apparently spent thousands of dollars remodeling the building and surrounding grounds. In addition to general work on the four thousand person capacity ballroom, Wills added a restaurant, an amusement park, a swimming pool (one of the few in the area at the time), and apartments for some of his employees, establishing the dance-hall as an all-around recreation center. Charles Townsend claims that the club was not a particularly successful financial venture for Wills. But, according to Tiny Moore, who played mandolin and fiddle for the Texas Playboys from 1946 to 1949 and then managed Wills Point until 1955, the investment was a sound one, paying off with weekend crowds ranging from a thousand to twenty-five hundred paid admissions. After Bob Wills left California, crowds came to see the band that Tiny and Billy Jack Wills (the brother of Bob Wills) put together featuring some of the best musicians within the area. The music at Wills Point tended toward a swing sound rather than the honkytonk style prevalent at the Bell Avenue Corral, and, when Billy Jack and Tiny Moore were not appearing there, the club presented the best in local western swing bands or top name national country and western stars. When Wills Point burned down on June 15, 1956, totally lost in a blaze that many attributed to arson, an era passed.<sup>10</sup>

As different as Wills Point appeared to be from the Bell Avenue Corral, the two clubs still had much in common, for they were both typical of honkytonks in general--their differences merely illustrated a range of forms taken by these establishments. They had many of the same customers, nearly all of whom were Okies. Those who might drop by "the Point" one Saturday to see Bob Wills, his brother Billy Jack, or one of the other western swing bands that played there, might decide to go see Okie Paul's trio at "the Corral" the next weekend. Another similarity was that the crowds at either place held a large percentage of families. Alcohol was sold only in a limited part of either building with the remainder of the hall open to all ages. Perry Jones, the son of Loyd Jones who was mentioned earlier, remembers watching and listening to the music in these and other honkytonks on many weekend nights as a young child. While his parents danced until late, he and scores of other children would play together and then finally fall asleep on the big comfortable couches or wooden benches--depending upon the place--that usually lined the dance floor. Tiny Moore confirms that at the end of most evenings there would be "a dozen or a half-a-dozen kids asleep on these couches." Kathryn Davis, then a teen-aged girl fresh from Oklahoma, recalls going with her girlfriend's family to see the bands at various dance halls--slipping out from under the eye of her severely religious grandmother to do so. California honkytonks in the 1940s and 1950s were generally places where Okie families could go. They were an urban extension of the old house parties and barn dances described earlier.<sup>11</sup>

That the audiences in honkytonks of the 1940s and 1950s consisted almost entirely of Okies was an indication of the ethnic nature of the music and the situations where it occurred. But more, it was indicative of California's initial rejection of the music and representative of a wider prejudice felt toward the Okies and their ways in general. Although there were some Californians in those years who liked country and western music, many if not most categorized it as degenerate and generally lacking in taste--a view frequently extended toward the Okies themselves. Bill Malone writes: "The Okies' choice of songs was resented by many staid, respectable Californians who looked upon the music as one long wailing, nasal lament . . . ." This attitude continued beyond the most intense years of Okie/Californian conflict during the depression and into the next two or even three decades. Henry Davis, a young Oklahoman who arrived in the Far West during the forties, recalled that he lost his taste for country music under the scathing ridicule of his California friends. His sister-in-law Kathryn Davis encountered similar taunts from her non-Okie schoolmates who thought that the music and its setting were "strictly hicksville," although, unlike Henry and perhaps more typically of Okies in general, she continued to enjoy country and western music and to attend the dances. Even on a professional level there was aversion and even outright discrimination against the music in California. Joe Hobson, a North Carolinian who was one of the first country and western booking agents in the state, had to appeal to the national headquarters of the musicians' union in the early 1950s in order to join the union as an agent after being turned down repeatedly by state and local chapters. Hobson claimed ever after that the reason for his rejection was anti-Okie--or in his case anti-Southern--prejudice. Jim Conley, sales manager for KRAC radio in Sacramento--nationally recognized today as a top country music station--remembered that as late as the mid-sixties, half a decade after the station went to a country and western format, there was considerable reluctance on the part of advertisers to buy air time. This was in the face of overwhelmingly positive reports from market research studies and polls regarding numbers of listeners. Conley, who is not an Okie, attributes this to a feeling on the part of businessmen that Okies were of no particular account--an image of poverty and shiftlessness that extended three decades beyond the dustbowl years. Country music and honkytonks were generally "for Okies only" during these years.<sup>12</sup>

Because the Californians shunned the music and the places where it was played, the house parties and the honkytonks were a unique Okie cultural institution, and the dances an Okie ritual. The presence of so many people with a similar cultural heritage in effect suspended geographic reality. Kathryn Davis said in her 1983 interview that it was like being home--like being with family. Seeing the Wills brothers, she recalled, reminded her that there were other Okies in California for Bob Wills and the other musicians were Okies, too. Hugh Thrower and other Okies who lived in California during this period have also remarked that these gatherings made them feel just a little more at home--and home is the word they all use. The music brought the people together and together they helped each other recall that they

were Okies and that Okies were good people. If, as Okie Paul Westmoreland contends, "there was a barrier there for a long time . . ." between Okies and other Californians, then the honkytonks and the music at least made the fence more bearable.<sup>13</sup>

All this does not mean that country music had or has some magical quality that makes it a cultural glue--this article is not intended to analyze it for such a power nor even to discuss or describe the musical genre. That has been done elsewhere. The music was merely a form of ethnic expression that appealed to a particular aspect of the Okie group personality. One of the foremost identifying characteristics of the Southerner has been the cult of individuality; a dislike for hierarchical or formal structure within group relations and resistance to the submersion of individuality in such structures. The Okie in California has been no exception to this cultural trait, and both historians and social scientists have commented upon the Okies' general independence and preference for informal social institutions. But the Okies still had a need for social group situations unique to their own cultural identity. One such situation was the Southern church with its emphasis on personal salvation, a near absence of rites and rituals, and congregational autonomy--and the story of the Southern church in the Far West is a worthy tale in itself. Not all the Okies were churchgoers, however, and the church could not meet all the social needs of even many who did attend. So for many the house parties, the dances, and the honkytonks were a place to find group support without structured ties, non-institutional institutions if you will, the Okie version of the German turnverein or the Chinese benevolent association. The predominant family attendance at both the house parties and honkytonks points up their relevance to the Okie culture. A majority of the Okies who came to California during the thirties and after were members of families, perhaps the strongest association possible in a people so averse to group ties.<sup>14</sup>

In time, the Okies assimilated into and became part of California. Sometime during the years from the late fifties through the early seventies, the Okies gained the acceptance they sought from the people around them and, with a few exceptions, the Okie "community" died a natural death, or at least became less visible and distinct from the general populace. This is really not surprising. After all, Okies are native-born Americans and they are usually white Protestants. Indeed, the initial alienation and feelings of separation from other white Americans in the state may have been due more to the fears and desperation of the Great Depression than any major ethnic differences. When the crisis passed and times got better, need for cultural cohesion and uniqueness passed, and the Okies became simply Americans from another state. Their visibility as a group grew gradually less as they slowly dispersed throughout the state. Certainly their children, largely free of Okie accents and virtually indistinguishable from other California children, thought and think of themselves as Californians, not Oklahomans or Texans. Today the word "Okie" is a generic California term for rustic persons, sometimes known as "rednecks" in other parts of the

country. Even persons from states such as Nebraska and Indiana have been known to call themselves "Okies."

But if the Okie "ethnic group" has passed from the scene, their influence has not. They have left lasting cultural footprints all over the region, and one of the clearest, most sharply imprinted of those tracks is country and western music. No longer a preserve of the Okies, it continues to mark their presence. Along with the Southern church, country and western music has proven to be one of the two most tangible and important contributions of the Okies to West Coast regional culture. Today country music radio stations blanket the region, and as many country and western hits may be recorded in Los Angeles as in Nashville. Countless country music songs, including such classics as "Faded Love" and "Making Believe," have sprung from the pens of transplanted Okies as well as other Californians. Country and western dance halls may no longer be the family affairs they once were, but they still exist in great numbers; the movie "Urban Cowboy" sparked a country and western dance craze a few years ago that supplanted disco as "King of the Dance Floor" in many places.

Moreover, country music is currently serving as a focal point of what may be described as an Okie revival--a resurrection of awareness within Okies of their cultural heritage. The California Odyssey Project of California State College at Bakersfield was a three year research project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities to study the dustbowl migration and its aftermath. One of the major goals of the project was to provide public outlets for its findings: slide shows, radio programs, theater docu-drama, and folkcraft fairs. Country music played a central role in each of these programs. Further north, the Western Swing Society of Sacramento has formed. Founded to preserve both the history of the musical genre and the music itself, the Society funds local music scholarships and has established a Northern California Western Swing Hall of Fame to honor those who have substantially furthered the art form as performers or otherwise. A rather informal organization, the Society's monthly meetings are held, appropriately enough, in a honkytonk.

A cohesive force, a soothing comfort, and source of continuity and rejuvenation, country and western music has been all of these and perhaps more to the Okies of California. Brought with them and planted in the dust blown from the plains, this hardy but beautiful weed has thrived. It is now one of the fairest of Pacific flowers.

#### NOTES

1. The term "Okie" used here and hereafter in this paper is according to the California definition of Okie which included during the 1930s and 1940s, anyone from the state of Arkansas and Texas, as well as Oklahoma. For a discussion of this definition see Walter J. Stein, California and the Dust Bowl Migration (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1973), 6-7; Okies are generally regarded as Southerners by many social scientists and historians,

based both upon their historical origins and similarities to Southerners in a cultural sense, but the most telling argument may be their inclusion in the South by the U.S. Census Bureau. See U.S. Census of Population, 1970, Vol. I, Characteristics of the Population, Section 7 (Washington, 1972), 7; for a general discussion of the out-migration of country music from the South, see Bill C. Malone, Country Music USA (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1968), 135, 140-141; Bill C. Malone, Southern Music, American Music (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1979), 86, 89.

2. The phrase "Sing Me Back Home" is from a song of the same name by Merle Haggard (Blue Book Publishing Company)..

3. Malone, Country Music, 140, 160; Stein, Dust Bowl Migration, 168.

4. Jacqueline Gordon Sherman, "The Oklahomans in California During the Depression Decade, 1931-1941," Ph.D. diss., UCLA, 1973, 356; Charles R. Townsend, San Antonio Rose: The Life and Music of Bob Wills (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 10-11; Hugh Thrower, interviewed by Thomas D. Norris, 12 August 1983, recording on deposit at Sacramento History Center, Sacramento, CA.

5. Paul Westmoreland, interviewed by Thomas D. Norris, 23 May 1983, recording on deposit at Sacramento History Center, Sacramento, CA; Malone, Country Music, 210-211; Loyd Jones, interviewed by Thomas D. Norris, 30 August 1983.

6. Joe Hobson, interviewed by Thomas D. Norris, 15 June 1983; Malone, Country Music, 162; Westmoreland interview.

7. Westmoreland interview.

8. Tiny Moore, interviewed by Thomas D. Norris, 9 August 1983; Townsend, San Antonio Rose, 232-298.

9. Moore interview; Townsend, San Antonio Rose, 252-255; Sacramento Bee, 16 June 1956, 1.

10. Perry Jones, interviewed by Thomas D. Norris, 18 May 1983; Moore interview; Kathryn Davis, interviewed by Thomas D. Norris, 23 May 1983, and 14 July 1983; Thrower interview.

11. Malone, Country Music USA, 140; Henry Davis, interviewed by Thomas D. Norris, 17 May 1983, recording on deposit at Sacramento History Center, Sacramento, CA, Kathryn Davis interview; Hobson interview; Avery County Historical Society, Avery County Heritage, Vol. 2, 1979; Jim Conley, interviewed by Thomas D. Norris, 21 June 1983; Broadcast Profile, "Station Profile of KRAK," unpublished report, Hollywood, CA, 1975.

12. Kathryn Davis interview; Thrower interview; Westmoreland interview.

13. Bennett M. Berger, Working Class Suburb: A Study of Auto Workers in Suburbia (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1969), 59, 65-66; Stein, Dust Bowl Migration, 172, 268; most of those who have studied the Okie in California stress the family nature of the migration. One of those is Donald Friend Ferris, "The California Farm Worker, 1930-1942," Ph.D. diss., University of California at Davis, 1955, 160.