Shmanners 245: Cowboy Poetry

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Travis: And now, a poem. A horse is a horse, of course, of course.

Teresa: It's Shmanners.

[theme music plays]

Travis: Hello, internet! I'm your husband host, Travis McElroy.

Teresa: And I'm your wife host, Teresa McElroy.

Travis: And you've been listening to Shmanners!

Teresa: [laughs] It's extraordinary etiquette…

Travis: … for ordinary occasions. Hello, my dove.

Teresa: Hello, dear.

Travis: How are you?

Teresa: Doing alright. Y'know.

Travis: Freshly awoken from a nap.

Teresa: Yeah… we'll say that.

Travis: Yeah. The sleep lines, still etched into your face, like the footprints of the cattle across the plains.

Teresa: Oh boy.

Travis: It's spoken word. It's kind of a non-rhyming…

Teresa: How provocative.

Travis: Well, you see, provocative and evocative, I would say! So…

Teresa: Yeah. I sleep on my stomach, by the way, listeners, so that's why…

Travis: I sleep on a bed. [laughs]

Teresa: [laughs] Which is why I have, uh, sleep lines on my face.

Travis: So what are we talking about this week, you're wondering? Well, my friends… of course, we're talking about the one and only cowboy poetry. I mean, you probably could've guessed that, 'cause you know, uh, the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering is happening January 25th through the 30th. So you're like, "When are they gonna talk about it?"

Teresa: It's not ac—I mean, it's happening, but it's virtually happening.

Travis: Virtually, yes.

Teresa: Y'know, I picked out this topic, going through the national day calendar. And afterwards, after we agreed on it, I was like, y'know… Do you remember when we went to Las Vegas…

Travis: Yes.

Teresa: The same weekend as… was it a rodeo?

Travis: Yes, it was a rodeo!

Teresa: So we were staying at The Venetian, and… where was the rodeo?

Travis: It was at the—whatever the pyramid is. Luxor, maybe? Whatever the one that's shaped like a big pyramid that has like, a huge arena in it.

Teresa: Yeah! There were *so* many people.

Travis: Cowboys to the left of us. Cowboys to the right.

Teresa: Cowboys to the right! Uh, there was a lot of western wear, and that's great for a rodeo. 'Cause you need that, right?

Travis: Makes a lot of sense. If you're wearing a tuxedo, it's gonna get ruined.

Teresa: It's gonna get ruined. And we walked through… why were we walking through that casino? Through that hotel?

Travis: 'Cause I think that's where the aquarium was?

Teresa: Yesss. No! That was Monterey.

Travis: Okay. Welcome to Travis and Teresa reminisce about a vacation they half remember.

Teresa: [laughing] We went to go visit… maybe it was a garden, or something.

Travis: Something.

Teresa: In the same hotel, and we were astonished to find a rodeo happening.

Travis: And I think it was one of those things, too, where we did not put together that it was a rodeo. It was just like, "We just saw another cow—why is there another cowboy here? You're seeing all these cowboys, right?" And then it was like, "Ahh!"

Teresa: Ahhh!

Travis: Okay, but let's be clear. One, we're not talking about cowboys in the like, Hollywood sense. We're talking about actual, factual cowboys, the ones who like, y'know, drove cattle from place to place. That kind of thing.

Teresa: Yes. Historically, there were a lot of African Americans…

Travis: We will get to that, too!

Teresa: … and, uh… and people from Mexico.

Travis: We're gonna talk about that!

Teresa: Oh, okay. Alright! Ararara!

Travis: I'm presenting this week, Teresa!

Teresa: I just—I just want to show you how well-versed I am, even without reading the copy.

Travis: But my love… the dynamic of the show is, one person is the expert, and the other is a dummy! Okay. Listen, this is—I'm usually the dummy, so let me give you a little tip. When you do that, you have to be half right, so I can go, "Well, sort of."

Teresa: Ohh.

Travis: And then, I kind of bring in the information.

Teresa: All this time, I thought that you really didn't know.

Travis: No, I don't.

Teresa: Oh.

Travis: But I'm telling you how to pretend like you don't know.

Teresa: Got it.

Travis: So, here's the thing. Cowboy poetry is probably something that you don't know the like, name of. Like, that you wouldn't call it cowboy poetry. But I guarantee… mm, no, I would say that there is a 99% chance that, here in a second, I'm gonna tell you a cowboy poem, and you're going to be like, "Well, I know that one."

Teresa: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Travis: But it is a 150 year old tradition. So, there is an article that a lot of this information comes from. Thank you, Alex, for researching it, and thank you to Ryan T. Bell who wrote a National Geographic article titled, "Cowboy Poetry is a 150-Year-Old Tradition: Will it Survive in the 21st Century?" So, check that out if you want to.

So, cowboy poetry could be argued to be the most American art form there is, because it's pretty much exactly what it sounds like. It's poems written by cowboys while they herded their cattle across the American west. But I mean, that's like saying, y'know, like… still life. You paint, y'know, some fruit in a bowl. It's like, well, that doesn't really cover it.

Teresa: And I think that it probably has a rich oral tradition?

Travis: Oh, indeed. Cowboy poetry is distinctive because its subject matter, as you might imagine, is very much based on like, nature, animals, being out there in the wilderness… But also, a traditional use of rhyme and meter. The tones of the poem can range from joyful and humorous, to questioning and thoughtful, grief-stricken, or love-struck. But mostly, it reflects the culture of the American west, and it follows, typically, iambic pentameter of all things.

Teresa: Oh, really!

Travis: Which is the same as Shakespeare, in case anyone is wondering.

Teresa: Right, yeah. Which is a very natural cadence, once you…

Travis: Ba-bump, ba-bump, ba-bump, ba-bump, ba-bump. Yeah.

Teresa: Yeah. Once you figure it out.

Travis: This is the thing – once you hear it, you will instantly be like, "Okay, I totally get it." This is one that you probably don't recognize, but I'm going to read in its entirety, because I think it's absolutely beautiful.

Teresa: Alright.

Travis: Uh, this is a poem called Ridin' by Charles Badger Clark, and it is a pretty wonderful example of cowboy poetry. So, please enjoy.

Teresa: Now, wait a second. If you enjoy this poem… might I recommend Wonderful!, the podcast, wherein our sweet sister-in-law reads poems quite often in her Poetry Corner?

Travis: Indeed. Okay, so here we go. And I'm gonna do it in a cowboy voice, so everybody enjoy.

"There is some that like the city—
Grass that's curried smooth and green,
Theaytres and stranglin' collars,
Wagons run by gasoline—
But for me it's hawse and saddle
Every day without a change,
And a desert sun a-blazin'
On a hundred miles of range.

Just a-ridin', a-ridin'—
Desert ripplin' in the sun,
Mountains blue among the skyline—
I don't envy anyone
When I'm ridin'.

When my feet are in the stirrups
And my hawse is on the bust,
With his hoofs a-flashin' lightnin'
From a cloud of golden dust,
And the bawlin' of the cattle
Is a-comin' down the wind
Then a finer life than ridin'
Would be mighty hard to find.

Just a-ridin', a-ridin'—
Splittin' long cracks through the air,
Stirrin' up a baby cyclone,
Rippin' up the prickly pear
As I'm ridin'.

I don't need no art exhibits
When the sunset does her best,
Paintin' everlastin' glory
On the mountains to the west
And your opery looks foolish
When the night-bird starts his tune
And the desert's silver mounted
By the touches of the moon.

Just a-ridin', a-ridin'—
Who kin envy kings and czars
When the coyotes down the valley
Are a singin' to the stars,
If he's ridin'?

When my earthly trail is ended
And my final bacon curled
And the last great roundup's finished
At the Home Ranch of the world
I don't want no harps nor haloes
Robes nor other dressed up things—

Let me ride the starry ranges
On a pinto hawse with wings!

Just a-ridin', a-ridin'—
Nothin' I'd like half so well
As a-roundin' up the sinners
That have wandered out of Hell,
And a-ridin'."

Thank you! Thank you everybody! Thank you so much. So…

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: You can see, it's pretty standard. I mean, there's the occasional break of a line that's kind of like, if it's A-B-A-B, it's like a C, right? But it's pretty A-B-A-B-A-B. Pretty well-metered.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: What I think is interesting to me – and I'm sure that this is intended, and I'm not the first person to figure it out – but the iambic pentameter is very much like hoof beats, right? Ba-bump, ba-bump, ba-bump, ba-bump, ba-bump. It very much fits like a natural rhythm of a hoof beat or heartbeat.

Teresa: [sings a short Western tune]

Travis: So, now you're thinking, "That's beautiful, Travis! But I have never heard cowboy poetry." Well… do you know a little song called Home on the Range?

Teresa: Sure do!

Travis: That's cowboy poetry, baby! Home, home on the range!

Teresa: What about Oh My Darlin' Clementine?

Travis: I bet so. I mean, works for me.

Teresa: She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain?

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: Y'know, we sing a lot of these songs to our children. [laughs]

Travis: Yes. Um, there's also—

Teresa: The Yellow Rose of Texas.

Travis: Sure. I bet the stars at night are big and bright, deep in the heart… I don't know, maybe that works. Uh, there's a Pixar short called Boundin'.

Teresa: Oh yeah! Yeah, we've seen that.

Travis: That is cowboy poetry right there. It played before The Incredibles. And I watched it in prep for this… written and directed by the person who does the voice in the thing, who also narrates it, is the voice of Eeyore from Winnie the Pooh.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Um, here's the thing, is… this is… there are some forms of Americana. For example, we talked about old what's-his-face who did all the drawings. What was his name?

Teresa: [bursts into laughter] Norman Rockwell?

Travis: Norman Rockwell! We talked about Norman Rockwell, and his art was like, reflective of a period that didn't really necessarily exist, right?

Teresa: Right, yes. It was a time period that was largely, um, in his mind. I mean, it did not really happen that way.

Travis: And he created it after the time period had happened, right?

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: This is what we see a lot of, of like, um, movies where we watch and get an idea of like, what the 1920s were like. And it's like, well, no, but this is… and the thing about cowboy poetry is, I mean, the historical stuff was written by the cowboys themselves while they were doing it. Right? So it might not be 100% accurate, but it is like, as old as the job. Y'know what I mean?

Teresa: Nice!

Travis: Um, so, it became a thing in about the 1870s. And what it evolved from was them telling stories, right? You're out on the trail. You got a lot of time to kill. You can't travel at night, for reasons I'll explain in a bit. And you had people, as you have said, who came from all kinds of different lives and cultures. You had civil war veterans, former slaves, Mexican vaqueros, Native American cowboys, and they all would tell stories. And the easiest way to remember a story is in verse. Right? If it rhymes…

Teresa: Right. Absolutely.

Travis: It's a lot easier—it's a reason so many of like… it's a reason poetry has lasted throughout history.

Teresa: And why, maybe, a lot of these poems survive in song as well.

Travis: I mean, yeah. Like, we have epic poems, like Beowulf, where it's just like, anyone can remember it 'cause it rhymes. Well, not anybody, but it's easier to remember, because it rhymes, right?

Teresa: It gives you a fighting chance to remember it.

Travis: Right. And so, these were like, very long-form poems. So, there is a cowboy poet legend, BJ Smith, and his interpretation of how cowboy poetry

came to be is thus. Believe it or not – and this like, boggled my mind, right? But these massive herds of cattle, right? To get cattle from place to place, before trains, right?

Teresa: Mm-hmm.

Travis: You had to drive 'em. You had to like, move them on foot.

Teresa: Yep. They gotta walk there.

Travis: And sometimes, that pathway, that trail, was like, from Texas to Canada. Right?

Teresa: Mm-hmm. Well, because you have different seasonal pastures that you need to get through.

Travis: Correct. This was before barbed wire. This was before all of that stuff, right? And so, to get cattle to go to sleep, what they would do is start circling the herd, and kind of condensing them, right? Getting smaller and smaller. But the problem is, is cows have like, excellent eyesight, but really bad depth perception. And so, they can see almost 360 degrees, because they're basically the prey-iest prey you can imagine.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: So, fun fact – you can tell if an animal is a predator or prey based on how their eyes are positioned, 'cause if they're in the front, they have great depth perception. Meaning they're great hunters. And if they're on the side, it means that they can see a wider kind of field, so that they can see if something is sneaking up on them. But poor depth perception.

Teresa: That makes complete sense when I think about things like rabbits…

Travis: Deer…

Teresa: Deer…

Travis: Yep.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: Yep. So, cows are like—have almost 360 degree—I mean, y'know what I mean? Like, they're incredible fields of vision, very poor depth perception.

Teresa: Fun fact – I also have very poor depth perception. But I can't see 360 degrees.

Travis: Yeah, you get the worst of both worlds.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And so, they would circle the herd. But the problem is, that is the same… that's predator behavior too, right?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: And so, to keep the herd from getting spooked, they would talk to them. Or sing to them. Because you wouldn't want to like, hoop and holler. That's scary. They would talk to the cows in like, low voices. Or they'd like, whistle or something. Something more soothing. And so, they had kind of this like, natural kind of like… rhythmic speaking way about them, or singing thing, to keep the cattle calm.

So they would like, sing to the cattle or talk to the cattle. Right?

Teresa: Much like you sing a baby to sleep.

Travis: Very much so. 'Cause basically, you're circling them until they lay down and go to sleep. And then once they lay down and go to sleep, all you really have to do at that point is sit around a fire and like, talk. Right? So then, that's where the storytelling comes in.

Teresa: Right. Someone has to keep watch for predators.

Travis: Right. So at this point, really all you're doing is kind of like, singing, talking in a rhythm, and sitting around telling stories. And so, I think that you can see where that is a natural evolution to like, telling stories in verse.

Teresa: Of course! Of course.

Travis: Um, so! The oldest known anthology… y'know what? We'll get to that. But first, how about a thank you note for our sponsors?

Teresa: Let's go.

[theme music plays]

Travis: We want to write a thank you note to Zola. Zola is dedicated to making wedding planning easier and less stressful. Oh… oh how I wish! Oh how I wish we had known about Zola when Teresa and I were planning our wedding. Y'know, when you get started out, it feels like there is so much to do! You don't even know where to begin. It feels like you have to talk to 80,000 different people about 80,000 different things. But imagine having all of that in one place! Wedding vendors, save the dates, invitations, websites, registries, all of that stuff all in one place. How amazing is that?

Well, Zola can give that to you. You can find wedding vendors in your area with personalized recommendations based on your style, budget, and more. You can explore hundreds of beautiful designs for save the dates and invitations. And just in case, all purchases come with free change-the-dates.

And you can also use Zola to create free wedding websites, including building your registry. So go to Zola.com/Shmanners today and use promo code SAV50 – that's S-A-V-5-0 – to get 50% off your save-the-dates. You can also get free personalized paper samples before you purchase. That's Zola.com/Shmanners, promo code SAV50.

We also want to write a thank you note to Quip! Listen, I love gum. I love it! When I was a kid, when I got Halloween candy, my go-to wasn't chocolate. I was excited if there was gum in there. But y'know, now, as an adult, I've

had to give up my gum habit, because everyone knows gum is bad for you. Or so we thought!

Because Quip has changed the way we've done gum. That's right – Quip has launched a new gum that's actually good for your oral health, and comes with a dispenser that will remind you of the one-click candy you loved as a kid. It's easy to use, it's fun to use, oh man. It'll take you right back. It takes me right back every time.

And you can use it to share with a friend, or like, break the ice with a stranger – when we, y'know, get to meet strangers – without having to worry about them touching all the gum. Y'know, 'cause it's one at a time. It's a one-click dispenser. It's amazing, folks.

And, in addition to gum packs, you also will get delivered to you fresh brush heads, floss, and toothpaste refills every three months from five dollars. Shipping is free, so you can save money and skip the misery of in-store shopping. Get chewing for less than two dollars per gum pack. And if you go to GetQuip.com/Shmanners right now, you can get a free dispenser at GetQuip.com/Shmanners. Quip: The good habits company.

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[music plays]

Speaker 1: Welcome back to Fireside Chat on KMAX. With me in studio to take your calls as the dopest duo on the west coast, Oliver Wang and Morgan Rhodes. Go ahead, caller.

Speaker 2: Hey, uh, I'm looking for a music podcast that's insightful and thoughtful, but like, also helps me discover artists and albums that I've never heard of.

Morgan: Yeah man, sounds like you need to listen to Heat Rocks. Every week, myself – and I'm Morgan Rhodes – and my cohost here, Oliver Wang, talk to influential guests about a canonical album that has changed their lives.

Oliver: Guests like Moby, Open Mike Eagle, talk about albums by Prince, Joni Mitchell, and so much more.

Speaker 2: Yooo. What's that show called again?

Morgan: Heat Rocks. Deep dives into hot records.

Oliver: Every Thursday on Maximum Fun.

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Travis: So, as I was saying, the oldest known anthology of cowboy poems is a two-volume set, Songs of the Cowboys, which was published by Jack Thorpe in 1907 and 1921, and it was compiled because Jack himself was a rancher in New Mexico.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: And as you may not be surprised by 1921, was beginning to feel that, perhaps, the cowboy way of life was in danger.

Teresa: Yes. All of this makes sense, because trains were well-established at that point.

Travis: And barbed wire.

Teresa: Barbed wire, and the west had been won, and manifest destiny had concluded, and there didn't seem to be any wild west anymore.

Travis: Right. So, one of the most famous of the poems from this was called The Campfire Has Gone Out – an evocative title – by Don Edwards, which was an ode to what Jack Thorpe was watching happen to the west.

So the poem, a little bit of it, went like this. This is just a verse.

"Through the progress of the railroad our occupation's gone;
So we put ideas into words, our words into a song.

First comes the cowboy; he is pointed for the west;
Of all the pioneers I claim the cowboys are the best;
You will miss him on the round-up; it's gone, his merry shout,—
The cowboy has left the country and the camp-fire has gone out."

Now, it is important to note… because this is where we start talking about like, oh, the cowboy is a dying breed, and oh, it's a dying way of life. This is also around the same time where the Native American way of life was being systematically destroyed.

Teresa: Yes.

Travis: And that is not just like, "Oh, our jobs are going away." This was like, our land is being stolen, we are being slaughtered…

Teresa: And children are being placed in institutions instead of being allowed to learn their traditional ways.

Travis: Right. At this point, like, they are actually losing their actual culture and lives, and not just like, "Oh, we have a lot of fun being cowboys, and we don't get to do it anymore.

Teresa: Right.

Travis: So it's important to take a step back and see everything with a grain of salt as we talk about this stuff. So, I wanted to highlight that. Alex made sure to highlight that.

Teresa: Idiom alert.

Travis: Yeah.

Teresa: Grain of salt.

Travis: Yeah. Take it with a grain of salt. That is a good one. I don't—I have no idea what it is. Okay! So, let's talk more about The Campfire Has

Gone Out. Folklorist, Hal Cannon, agrees that that verse is a pretty perfect snapshot of how people felt in the United States as, y'know, the world was getting more and more modern around them. He says, quote, "It has been a slow dying process. At the time of the American Revolution, 90 percent of Americans made their living in agriculture. By the turn of the 20th century, around 40 percent did. Now it's probably under two percent, and there are far fewer cattle on public and private land than in the history of the American West."

Right? It just became… the world changed, right?

Teresa: Yeah. It's always a'changin'.

Travis: And I think the thing about that that… I think that there are many things we can see as we look throughout history, right? The 20th century… in 100 years of history, right? So much technology changed and developed, compared to the rest of time.

Teresa: Technology that changed everyone's lives, I think, is really—because there was also a lot of technology that happened in the Renaissance period. But, because it was only available to the wealthiest among Europeans, right? It was—isn't, I would say, as impactful.

Travis: Yes, but I'm talking more about the evolution, right? Because if you think about the time between the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk, and landing a man on the moon, it's like a century. Right? Like, the speed at which that developed… and I think there are a lot of industries that like, developed like that. And I think what makes this different is, one, I think that, for good or for bad, the idea of the cowboy is so intrinsically linked to America as being like… "Oh, that's pure American, right there!" Y'know?

Teresa: Nostalgically so, also thank you to the spaghetti westerns of the late '50s, early '60s.

Travis: Right, very much so. I mean, it still is a thing now. If you see a movie in which—or a TV show in which a person from the USA goes to a

foreign country, nine times out of ten, they're gonna get referred to as a cowboy at some point, right?

Teresa: Ted Lasso!

Travis: Right? It happens. That is what happens.

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: And so, I think that that – plus, there was a bit of romance to the cowboy… like, the idea of it, right?

Teresa: Well, absolutely. It was not just thanks to the spaghetti western, but the kind of like, quote, "idealism" of the people who rounded cattle, who lived off the land, who, y'know, were able to be completely self-sufficient, and all that kind of stuff, is very... is deep-rooted in the United States of American culture.

Travis: Right. And if you see… I mean, think about, y'know, someone working an office job during times at which there were actual cowboys, and they're like, "Ugh, I'm in here, and there's someone out there on horseback." Y'know? Like, I think it's very easy for people to project onto that. Like, that's livin' right there, out on the open plains, right?

Teresa: I'm reminded of Newsies.

Travis: Yes! Very much so.

Teresa: Yeah! Where Jack Kelly talks about, y'know, Santa Fe. I need space, not just air.

Travis: Right. So by the 1980s, right? Cowboy culture, for whatever you want to consider that, like, true cowboy culture… it was… [sighs] At that point, it went from like, driving cattle across almost three quarters of the country, to land—stretches of land in California, Utah, Nevada, Oregon, and parts of Idaho. Which may sound like a lot, but you went from like, three quarters of the country to maybe ten percent of the country or less, right?

Teresa: Yeah.

Travis: And so, during this time, a team of folklorists who were supported by the national endowments for the arts started like, scouring the west, looking for examples of cowboy poetry. And they found a wealth of it, uh, printed everywhere from agricultural magazines to feed store calendars to menus in diners.

Teresa: Okay.

Travis: Like, it was just kind of like, popping up from here to there. And so, they started collecting it, and… to keep it alive, they proposed a cowboy poetry competition.

Teresa: Alright!

Travis: And cowboys said no.

Teresa: What?

Travis: Yeah. So, um…

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Wally McRae, a rancher and poet from Montana, told National Geographic that, quote, "A poetry competition didn't sound as fun as simply getting together to share poems. There'd only be one winner. Why couldn't we all be winners?" End quote.

Teresa: I love it.

Travis: Right. So, they changed it from a competition to a gathering, and that's the same thing we've been talking about. The, y'know, the poetry gathering in Elko, Nevada. That's where it normally is.

And so, since 1985, every year during the last week in January, various artists have gathered in Elko, Nevada for poetry, conversations, songs, and all-around rooting and or tooting.

Teresa: Probably also camp coffee.

Travis: Indeed. Oh, probably. There's probably lots of coffee. Probably a bagel, maybe a donut.

Teresa: [laughs] I was thinking beans. Coffee and beans.

Travis: Oh, okay. Well, now—now… now you're being reductive, Madame! They ate all kinds of things!

Teresa: Including… coffee and beans.

Travis: Sure. They did not eat coffee beans, though. Well, maybe they did. I don't know.

Teresa: [laughs] Maybe they ate chocolate-covered espresso beans! [laughing]

Travis: Probably not in like 1870.

Teresa: [laughing]

Travis: So, the festival quickly caught national attention, and several poets became repeat guests on the Johnny Carson show. Two of them actually, Buck Ramsey and Joel Nelson, were named National Heritage Fellows.

By the turn of the 21st century, I should say, the average age of ranchers was higher and higher. And so, many people had moved away, into a more modern lifestyle, and… [sighs] There is… it's interesting, because throughout the history of kind of cowboy culture, it seems that almost as soon as it was a thing, people started talking about it dying out. Right?

Teresa: Right, yeah. I mean, it's like—it's kind of like the pony express syndrome, right?

Travis: Right. But the pony express only lasted for like, two years or something. It was bonkers.

Teresa: Right. But what I'm saying is, as soon as it started, the train happened, and everyone was like, "Welp, we don't need that anymore."

Travis: Right. And I think, once again, I think that the idea of it dying out has become part of the romanticism.

Teresa: Oh, absolutely! Because you have to save this way of life, right?

Travis: Well, and also, if you think about movies, like, literally a movie called No Country for Old Men, right? That there are movies that are about like, oh, how hard it is bein' out here, and oh, who knows if we're gonna make it, and…

Teresa: Y'know what I think of, though?

Travis: What?

Teresa: City Slickers.

Travis: Sure.

Teresa: Yeah. [laughs]

Travis: Sure. I get that, too.

So, the board of directors at the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering noticed that things were kind of like… that ticket sales were falling away. And so, in an effort to introduce the poetry to a more urban audience, they hired a new executive director in 2017 named Kristin Windbigler.

So, Windbigler had previously worked for TED. Capital, like TED talks.

Teresa: Oh, okay.

Travis: Uh, in New York, and Wired magazine in San Francisco. And you might be like, "Why her?" But she also actually had like, a cowgirl background. She grew up in a ranching community in California, and she was kind of the perfect middle ground. And she said, quote, "I've spent a lot of time crossing back and forth between those two worlds. The National Cowboy Poetry Gathering can bridge that gap." End quote.

So, she brought the festival into the 21st century, focusing on growth in the event's social media. She released videos of a historical performance. One of them went viral, with 4.3 million views and 93,000 shares of a cowboy poet named Sunny Hancock, performing in 1994.

Teresa: Hey now! Nice!

Travis: But she also made strides to make sure the festival reflected every cowboy voice, saying, quote, "When we curate each year's shows, we want performers that reflect the Gathering's roots, but also those who can chart a course for the future by bringing in new voices." End quote.

So, the festival has now kind of broadened the definition of what counts as cowboy poetry, which I think is great. The Gathering makes sure to include poetry traditions of cowboy cultures worldwide, including gauchos of Argentina, nomads of Mongolia, the camargue horsemen of southern France. Quote, "It doesn't matter what language you speak," the cowboy poet and rancher, Gail Steiger said. "If you make your living on a horse, we've got a lot more in common than things that separate us."

Last year, the gathering honored the black cowboy, which many agreed was long overdue, given the crucial role of African Americans in the history of the west. Y'know, historians, like you said earlier – historians estimate one quarter of all cowboys were black. But we—

Teresa: And that's something that was buried, kind of, in the nostalgia of the spaghetti western.

Travis: Oh, absolutely.

Teresa: There were—there was, I would say, there was a lot of um… of Latin America in the spaghetti western, but not very much African American.

Travis: And even then, the Latin American representation was very, uh, like, stereotypical, and very like… what's the word I'm looking for? Harmful stereotypes, y'know.

Teresa: Sure, yeah. They most often were the bad guys.

Travis: Right. The bad guys, or like, so over-accented, or had terrible habits, or whatever. And y'know, actually, the Home on the Range that we talked about earlier was based on someone's field recordings in 1908 of a retired black cowboy who had once ridden the Chisholm Trail. The Lone Ranger, one of the most iconic cowboys of all times, was based on Bass Reeves, who was the first African American to become a US marshal.

Teresa: Wow!

Travis: And like, both of these things have been very much whitewashed.

Teresa: Well, of course.

Travis: Yeah. And those are just two out of a million. Right? So, Dom Flemons, a folk singer whose album "Black Cowboys"… he explains, quote, "There are two kinds of West – the literal West, and the West of the imagination. If movies, songs, and poems about ranching continue to go out into the world, it will bring people in. It may take time to manifest into workers, but there's already a big back-to-the-land movement in the African-American community, especially in the south."

Teresa: That's great! That's a really—I think that's what I was trying to articulate, that there's this—these two wests. The real western land, and the job. And then there's like, the western fantasy that a lot of people have.

Travis: And so, there's one other kind of really important thing here, um, that calls back to that like… "it's dying out" kind of thing. Which is, this is interesting, right? Because we can both look at it as like, a kind of like, cultural historical art form. But there are also lots of people still making a living as ranchers and cowboys, and still writing new cowboy poetry.

And so, if you go—

Teresa: There must be. I mean, there's a convention. [laughs]

Travis: So, um, one of the show's organizers, Justin Reichert, who is a fifth-generation cowboy from Kansas, he says that the art form, it needs to be loved, both as a historical thing, but also as like, here and now. He says, quote, "You go into those shows now and the folklorists stand around watching the cowboys like they're Jane Goodall observing a bunch of chimpanzees. While they're reciting 100-year-old poems, we're here talking about the real issues facing cowboys today. Like the number of cowboys who commit suicide or drink themselves to death. Or those who serve in the military and come home so scarred from PTSD they burn their uniforms. Or how difficult it is to find a wife willing to live with you in the middle of nowhere."

Y'know what I mean? So, it's—I think, once again, it's easy to think about the romantic, idealized like, "Oh, out there… " It's hard, y'know? And it's still hard. It's still hard today.

So, when asked about the steady death of this way of life, Reichert says that, while the romantic ideal helps sell tickets, treating cowboys like some sort of dying breed is a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Teresa: Oh, yeah. That makes complete sense.

Travis: He says, "If we keep portraying cowboys as a dying breed, pretty soon we will be. A lot of people already think the cowboy is a myth. When I go to town dressed the way I do, they think I'm a reenactor wearing a costume. I have to tell them, 'No, I live on a ranch. I'm just here buying my groceries.'"

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: So, let's keep cowboy poetry alive. Um, you can attend that thing. I also have some, uh, cowboy poetry… oh! We already have hope for the future of cowboy poetry, 'cause last year, Marinna Mori, a ten-year-old cowgirl from Nevada, performed her own cowboy poetry song for the opening of the festival, and it was a sold out audience. And she got a standing O. Standing ovation. So good for you.

Teresa: Very cool!

Travis: And I have written a poem, myself.

Teresa: Okay!

Travis: It is, uh—I attempted to do a cowboy poem in my own way. It is a love poem that I wrote for you.

Teresa: Aww.

Travis: "Though others may shine
with the city's false light,
You, my sweet love,
outshine the moon at night.

The saccharine sweet whispers
on my deaf ears fall.
Compared to your voice,
They are a donkey's call.

The wide-open plains
stretch before me.
Only by your side
am I truly free."

Teresa: Aww, that's very sweet, darling.

Travis: You're welcome, I love you. Okay! So, let's talk about some etiquette.

Teresa: Alright! I'm into it!

Travis: Okay. So, respect. Obvs.

Teresa: Obviously.

Travis: Uh, and go there to like, learn, y'know what I mean? You're opening yourself up to an experience. You're seeing what is, essentially, a different culture. I mean, really. And a different way of life.

Teresa: A microcosm, if you will.

Travis: Yeah. So, go with an idea of what you're going to do. Y'know, be ready. Be ready to appreciate what you're going in for. If you research it, and you're like, "I don't think this is my jam." Don't go! [laughs]

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Um, if you're watching the poetry, watching a cowboy poem… Alex has written here, "Audience rules are basically church rules." And for those of you who don't get that, that means that, y'know, occasionally, there may be a hoop and or a holler, or murmur of agreement or applause. But no talking during it. Respectful.

Teresa: Right.

Travis: If you're a poet at the festival, you should attend as many of the other shows as you can. See what the old timers are doing, for example. It's a show of respect, plus, it's a good way to hone your own craft. Go in with an open mind. This isn't going to be all John Wayne enthusiasts and chaps and stuff like that. You're probably gonna learn something that's gonna be pretty cool.

You don’t have to be a cowboy to write poetry. I just did some, I don't know, mediocre poetry myself.

Teresa: It was quite enjoyable.

Travis: Thank you. You can easily learn the meter and figure out, y'know, the kind of things that appeal to you, and write your own cowboy poetry! Uh, have fun. It sounds silly, but I think it would be easy for people to go in with it as, y'know, the dying art form, and it being like, a somber, like… a farewell to the cowboy way. But no, it’s a fun thing! Go have fun. And if you want to wear boots and a ten-gallon hat, do so. I think, uh—

Teresa: It’s been a while since you've dusted off your old cowboy boots.

Travis: Well, I haven't left the house in about ten months. [laughs]

Teresa: Oh, that’s right.

Travis: So, that’s a big part of it.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: Um, so yeah! So, I think it’s a fascinating art form that’s like… I think, far more common than we think of, but I think it’s one of those things that is so ingrained into the culture of the American west, that we don’t even think about it anymore as its own thing, right?

Teresa: Right.

Travis: It’s just like, oh, those are just songs we know. It’s like, yeah, buuut…

Teresa: I was saying, like, those are songs that we sing to the kids. Like…

Travis: Absolutely.

Teresa: We sing Oh My Darling Clementine to her all the time. [laughs]

Travis: Um, so, that's cowboy poetry. And that's that! So that's gonna do it for us! We wanna thank Alex, of course.

Teresa: Of course.

Travis: Without Alex, we wouldn't be able to make the show. Alex helps us research, as well as going through all the topic suggestions that you email to us, all the idiom suggestions that you email to us. ShmannersCast@gmail.com.

Teresa: Yes. Please keep emailing those idioms. We've done, what, five shows so far?

Travis: Yeah. We're gonna do more, too. They're my favorite.

Teresa: And we're gonna do more! We love it, and it's a great way to hear from y'all. And topic suggestions are always welcome.

Travis: Uh, also, our Twitter is @ShmannersCast. Whenever we have a topic that requires some audience questions, we'll put up the call for questions there, so make sure you follow us so you don't miss your chance to be a part of that.

Thank you to Max Fun, our podcast home. Go to MaximumFun.org to check out all the other amazing shows there. Uh, what else, Teresa?

Teresa: We always thank Brent "Brental Floss" Black for writing our theme music, which is available as a ringtone where those are found. Also, thank you to Kayla M. Wasil for our Twitter thumbnail art. Once again, @ShmannersCast.

Thank you to Bruja Betty Pinup Photography for our cover banner of the fan-run Facebook group, Shmanners Fanners. If you love to give and get excellent advice from other fans of Shmanners, join that group today!

Travis: Also, we've got a podcasting book coming out called Everybody Has a Podcast (Except You), primarily written by me and my brothers, but don't worry – there's a chapter written by Teresa and Rachel and Sydnee, and it's the best chapter in the book, 'cause they are much smarter than we are.

Teresa: [laughs]

Travis: And we have a free event happening on January 26th at nine PM eastern time to celebrate the launch of the book. It's a free virtual event, so you can attend it from anywhere for zero dollars! We've partnered with six independent bookstores. If you preorder from them, you'll get an exclusively designed book plate, signed by one of the McElroy brothers, while supplies last.

Just go to bit.ly/McElroyPodcastBookEvent, and you'll get the bookstore links and the event info. It's very good. The book is very good. You're gonna like it.

Um, also, make sure you check out all the great merch we have over at McElroyMerch.com, including a Cerberus pin of the month that benefits the NARAL, designed by Zachary Sterling. And y'know, if you're a fan of The Adventure Zone, you can preorder The Adventure Zone: Crystal Kingdom, which is the next graphic novel in our graphic novel series, over at TheAdventureZoneComic.com.

And that's gonna do it for us. Join us again next week.

Teresa: No RSVP required.

Travis: You've been listening to Shmanners.

Teresa: Manners, Shmanners. Get it!

[theme music plays]

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