

Prefaces

There is no darker place than at the edge of the spotlight.

I wrote these words on a flight returning from Los Angeles in 1986. The words came out of frustration after an unsuccessful journey trying to find traces of Bruce Kiskaddon's life. If I had been attempting to find just anybody it might have been understandable but it was the poet who best articulated the cowboy life I was looking for. And the irony of being in Los Angeles in the midst of the Hollywood mythos made it all the more vexing. After all, if I had been looking for a cowboy film star or even some minor player in the celluloid cowboy Camelot it would have been a different story.

I had visited the hotels where he worked as a bellman. I drove past the stucco homes where he lived. I even knocked at doors to be greeted by dumb faces when I asked his name. And this was just one of several trips that spanned 1984 to 1986. I traveled to Frank King's home country in central New Mexico where I met Katherine Field's husband, John Guerro on the southernmost Navajo reservation. I traveled to Colorado to visit the country where Kiskaddon cowboied. And I went to Denver to see Dick Crow at Western Livestock Journal. This was all before the Internet, and research was a different story then. What I learned on these journeys was mostly anecdotal. In the end all I garnered were a few addresses, a death certificate, and a handful of stories. What I realized, increasingly, was that it was Kiskaddon reflected in his poems, which was most important.

Kiskaddon became a hero to me gradually. The elements that won me over are distinct in my memory:

- Waddie Mitchell reciting *When They've Finished Shipping Cattle in the Fall*, over and over and my never tiring of it.
- Seeing Kiskaddon's calendar poems pasted in ranch family scrapbooks next to family photos of young boys going off to first days of schools, eight inches of Levi cuff to anticipate growth.
- Listening to *That Little Blue Roan* recited by a cowboy on the Bell Ranch in New Mexico and realizing how deep, subtle and timeless were Kiskaddon's parables.
- And last, when I put the music to *I'm Hittin' the Trail Tonite* I finally understood the joy of singing aloud his words.

When I published a slim collection of Kiskaddon with Gibbs Smith Publishers in 1987 my introduction was full of conjecture. In fact, I'm surprised, now that we know so much more about the man, how much we got right but also how romantic my notions were. One of the main reasons I worked to get cowboy poetry published in the eighties was to make it available once again to people who had no access to the old publications or to an active oral recitation tradition. Also, along with my friend and publisher, Gibbs Smith, we were interested in seeing the poetry of cowboys being recognized as part of the canon of American literature, which to that point had not been the case. Depending on the stodginess factor, I'm not sure we ever succeeded in that regard.

You might imagine my excitement, twenty years later beholding Bill Siems' careful study of Kiskaddon, the man obscured by the spotlight, now out of the shadows. And gratefully his poems are in one place, in this volume.

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