

Introduction – the Poetry and Life of Bruce Kiskaddon

While a flood of cowboy fantasy swept over American popular culture from the 1920s through the 1940s, a Los Angeles bellhop who had been a real cowboy, quietly and persistently wrote poetry. The eager consumers of Western entertainment would have found the elements of these poems familiar – booted men on horseback, cattle and horse herds, desert sun and rock, shadow-dappled canyons and windswept high country. But, chancing upon one of the poems, an urban Western dreamer might have been puzzled by its close focus on detail, disappointed by its apparent lack of drama, and might well have missed its point altogether. However, the audience of the popular media was unlikely to encounter these poems in the first place, for they were placed in cattlemen's publications where they would be seen by those whose nostalgia for a less modernized West cut closer to the bone. At the highbrow end of the cultural scale, a professional appreciator of poetry from that era, encountering one of the bellhop's compositions, would probably have consigned it to the doggerel heap with barely a glance – written in Western vernacular, insistent in its rhythm and rhyme, more humor than angst in its atmosphere, and generally maintaining a respectful distance from the ultimate mysteries that would have preoccupied a serious poet of the day.

Bruce Kiskaddon wrote of the mundane and the momentous in the lives of ranchers and the animals they raised and rode, and created hundreds of examples of what writer and scholar Scott Preston has called “some of the most defiantly demystifying, unromantic poems of the cowboy experience.”¹ Now that the mid-century tide of Western romance has receded, beached remnants of that era can seem quaint, even silly, depending upon the strength of their art. But Kiskaddon's poetry stands up well, just as our national love of the West seems to have survived the romance. And academic and literary professionals are more kindly disposed than they once were to the humbler manifestations of culture – roots music is generally conceded to be musical, and folk poetry to be truly poetic. Perhaps it is time for a broader audience to appreciate a man considered by many ranchers of his and of the present day “the best cowboy poet who ever wrote a cowboy poem.”²

Although Kiskaddon wrote and published few poems until the early 1920s, when he was in his mid-forties and most open range had been fenced, his poetry is strongly connected back to his young manhood in the decades straddling 1900. He holds a position with respect to the open range era of the Southwest much like Andy Adams does in relation to the trail driving days – a *bona fide* participant who created high quality literature painting a realistic portrait of his era. Frank Dobie once said of Adams' *Log of a Cowboy*, “If all other books on trail driving were destroyed, a reader could still get a just and authentic conception of trail men, trail work, range cattle, cow horses, and the cow country in general...” from the book.³ Substitute “open range” for “trail driving,” and the statement could be justifiably applied to Kiskaddon and his poetry. As a record of bedrock experience, as unpretentious art, and as history, the poetry retains its relevance as we try again to understand and maintain our connections to the earth.

The first purpose of this collection is to preserve and make more available the totality of Kiskaddon's scattered poetic output. Kiskaddon published four books in his lifetime – *Rhymes of the Ranges*, *Just as Is*, *Western Poems*, and *Rhymes of the Ranges and Other Poems*. The latter two books are quite scarce, and the first two are rare. Besides the 217 poems contained in the four published books, about 250 others appeared originally only on monthly advertising calendars issued by the Los Angeles Union Stock Yards and in the pages of *Western Livestock Journal*, a cattlemen's weekly newspaper. In recent years two anthologies of Kiskaddon's poetry have appeared, *Rhymes of the Ranges: a New Collection of the Poems of Bruce Kiskaddon* (Gibbs Smith, 1987, Hal Cannon, ed., 68 poems) and *Cowboy Poetry: Classic Rhymes by Bruce Kiskaddon* (Cowboy Miner, 1998, Mason and Janice Coggin, eds., 108 poems). Even combining the two anthologies with the four published books, there remain about 225 poems