Folklife Today
May 2021: Colorado Morton’s Ride

Announcer:
From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

Music clip:
[00:26]

John Fenn:
Welcome to a bonus episode of the Folklife Today Podcast, Colorado Morton’s Ride.

Steve Winick:
In our last episode, for April 2021, National poetry month, we talked about finding this poem in our collections and figuring out some of its history, so now we can tell you that the poem was written by Pulitzer Prize Winner Leonard Bacon and Montana Cowboy Rivers Swinton Browne. It was published in the 1920s and the copyright was never renewed. This spoken version was recorded by Charles Todd and Robert Sonkin in 1941, and the reciter is Frederick Soule, a public information officer for the Farm Security Administration.

John Fenn:
This is a great, colorful example of cowboy poetry, and we hope you enjoy it!
[1:15]

Fred Soule:
COLORADO Morton’s riding far.
He won’t be back with the Circle-Bar.
The Boss he sent him in to town
To ship the last of the longhorns down,
Although he hadn’t no business head.
And it was the turn of me or Red.
So Colorado Morton run them brutes,
Down the Dead Horse from the Coyot’ Buttes
And three days later delivered them steers
To the Boss’s agent, which his name was Beers.
And he was a shiftless no-count clerk
That didn’t have nothing to do but shirk.
He says to Colorado, he says: “Old pard,
Here’s a wire for you. You sign the card.
You pen your cattle, and sit on your tail,
For the West-bound limited’s jumped the rail.”
Colorado Morton he read his wire.
Which would make a better man than him perspire.
It wouldn’t give no pleasure to you and me.
It come from his sister up in B. C.:
“My husband’s hanging, and it should be you
And God forgive you. Sister Lou.”
And she told him where the hanging was at.
Day after tomorrow at Medicine Hat.
Colorado Morton hadn’t meant no harm.
There was a shindy up at Broken Arm.
Him and his brother-in-law Jim Graeme
Were sitting in at a poker-game,
And a dirty Swede of a lumber-jack
Dealt himself three aces from under the pack.
I never held with the blame Canucks
They sure are a bunch of ornery bucks.
And one thing’s certain as Hell. They ain’t
Got no respect for a sinner or a saint.
If any killing you happen to have done,
By God they’ll hang you, sure as a gun,
Unless you can put it in evidence
The aforesaid killing was in self-defense.
And self-defense is a damn poor name
For a row that started in a poker-game.
Jim Graeme was there you bet your tooting.
But Colorado Morton done the shooting.
Burk Hyne of the mounted police butts in
And the boys skinned out and rode like sin,
And cutting the corners mighty fine,
They just got over the Idaho line.
Jim Graeme fer a month or so he played
Around with the boys till the dust had laid.
But Mort, as soon as he got across,
Settled down punching steers for the Boss.
He done his job like a puncher should.
But the valves in his heart weren’t never no good.
And he used to pant in the mountain air.
And he used to cuss, and he used to swear.
And whenever his pony would buck or jump.
His heart would hammer, and his heart would thump.
But just the same old Mort was a star.
And the best horse-wrangler in the Circle-Bar.
Now Mort when he read that telegram through.
He sure was a puzzled buckaroo.
He says to Beers: “You son of a gun
Why didn’t you send it to me on the run?
You send me a wire to Medicine Hat,
And tell ’em I ‘m coming and that is that.”
And Beers he answers: “The wires is down,
And ye can’t get a telegram out of town.”
My God,” says Morton, “They’ll hang poor Jim.
If he is Lou’s husband, I’m fond of him.
I do not savvy a job of this style,
And it’s every inch of two hundred mile.”
And Beers he says: “It’s one Hell of a ride.
You’ll never make it, and you’ll hang beside.”
But Colorado Morton he says: “Good night!
All I care is are the cinches tight.”
And away he gallops up the yaller hill,
While his heart it hammered and his heart stood still.
That doggone cayuse was a good mustang.
And he must have figured that his boss would hang
But anyhow he ate up the flat.
Stretching away for Medicine Hat.
That doggone cayuse was doggone tired
When they hit the border beyond Fort Bayard.
The sweat was running on every hair.
And it didn’t do Mort no good to swear.
Men will keep going on their nerve or their head.
But you cannot ride a horse when he’s dead.
And Colorado Morton couldn’t ride
That doggone cayuse after it died.
And there he was on the edge of the snow,
With a hundred and twenty miles to go.
But he looks and he sees a camp-fire shine
A thousand feet below timber-line.
And he says: “I’ll hump it down and see,
If those blighters will lend a horse to me.
If they haven’t a pony, I guess I’m stung
And poor Jim Graeme is due to get hung.
Which upon my honor he never should
With me alive and the hanging so good.”
And down he come while the night was falling,
Down the side of the cañon, slipping and crawling.
And he seed a red jacket hanging on the pole,
And it was the mounted police patrol,
And he seed the yaller chevron shine.
It was Mr. Mounted Policeman Hyne.
And “Hyne,” says Morton, “Jimmy Graeme
is going to swing for that poker game.
You come in late, and you never seed
That I was the guy that shot the Swede.
My doggone cayuse’s tire’s gone flat.
“And I got to get to Medicine Hat.
I got to get there tomorrer by one,
Or he’ll hang at two as sure as a gun.”
And Hyne he says: “Well I’ll be shot.
You sure must like Jim Graeme a lot.
Climb on my buckskin and hit the trail
And my very best wishes when you get to jail.”
And Mort,” he says, “By the Perkins Slough
There’s a horse-herd will be some use to you.
There’s a salt-lick there, and my buck’s no count.
And if he plays out you can catch a mount.
I ’ll give you supper here, if you like.
But if you don't, then for God's sake hike."
That yaller buckskin he played up fine.
He wasn't no count in spite of Hyne.
He slid down the hill as smooth as a tile.
And over the flat for sixty mile.
But sixty mile is the end of power.
When a horse goes eighteen miles an hour.
And when he come to the Perkins Slough,
Mort picked up a horse-trail spandy-new.
And all alone 'neath the morning-star
The best horse-wrangler of the Circle-Bar
Caught the bunch in a cotton-wood tangle,
And wrangled the last horse he'd ever wrangle.
I seen the brute later, and I've heard tell
His sire was a stud-horse in the teams of Hell–
A four-year old stallion built like a crane,
Thin as a spit of the Bad Lands rain.
His bones stuck out all over his ribs.
That horse wan't nothing but hocks and ribs.
But I know horses, and I'll tell you this:
A thin devil's worse than a fat devil is.
He wouldn't do nothing but stand on his ear,
And buck and sidewind, and pitch, and rear.
Colorado Mort got pretty well plastered.
But somehow or other he beat that bastard.
Now I seen Vampa doing his dance,
But Vampa to him wan't a circumstance.
He was young, and friendly, and tender, and true
Beside that beast in the Perkins Slough.
Colorado Mort was hard to pile.
It was one long sidewind for sixty mile.
It was hammer and slam, and crash and pound,
And a buck at every hole in the ground.
And the big jack-rabbits streaked over the level,
As they seed a man come riding the Devil,
Riding the Devil, and standing pat
All the way into Medicine Hat.
Colorado Morton stuck to that tramp.
Like an extra-special-delivery stamp.
And at quarter to twelve, as bold as brass,
Sidewound in “The City of Natural Gas.”
And he come to the Judge, and “Judge,” says he
“About this Broken Arm shiveree.
Them witnesses is a lousy breed,
For I was the guy that shot the Swede.”
The judge looks up in a casual way:
“You say you shot him? The Hell you say!”
“Yes,” says Mort, “If it’s all the same,
“You’d better hang me instead of Jim Graeme”
And his heart it hammered, and his heart it hopped,
And he said, “I got here,” and his blame heart stopped.
That judge was always a square old porpoise.
He issued a writ of Habeas Corpus,
Which wasn’t no good, because Jim Graeme
Got shot next week in a poker-game.
And everyone said it was tough on Lou
To lose her brother and her husband too.
The mounted police thought Mort was a sport,
And they all chipped in for a stone for Mort.
And they cut this epitaph on the stone:
“He travels the farthest who travels alone.”
Alone he travelled, and he travelled far.
He won’t be back with the Circle-Bar.

[11:33]
Announcer:
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