

**BALLAD TRADITION IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY:  
THE AMERICAN OUTLAW BALLAD**

An Undergraduate Research Scholars Thesis

by

GRACE KELLY

Submitted to Honors and Undergraduate Research  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the designation as an

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH SCHOLAR

Approved by  
Research Advisor:

Dr. Jennifer Goodman Wollock

December 2014

Major: English

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT .....	1
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	2
CHAPTER	
I    INTRODUCTION .....	3
The Ballad: An Overview.....	6
Social Bandit Theory: An Overview.....	16
II   THE OUTLAW BALLAD TRADITION.....	21
Specific Names of Places Lived-In, Robbed, or Rumored to be Lurking In .....	21
Act of Stealing .....	23
Steal From Rich, Give to Poor.....	24
Good-Natured .....	25
The Presence of a Female.....	26
The Inadequate “Law” .....	28
Daring Attributes .....	29
Betrayal/Dramatic Capture.....	31
The Singer is Sympathetic to the Outlaw .....	34
Warning .....	36
The Outlaw Ballad Tradition: Conclusions.....	38
III  THE BAREFOOT BANDIT BALLADS .....	40
Colton Harris-Moore: The True Story .....	40
Specific Names of Places Lived-In, Robbed, or Rumored to be Lurking In .....	43
Act of Stealing .....	45
Steal From Rich, Give to Poor.....	47
Good-Natured .....	48
The Presence of a Female.....	49
The Inadequate “Law” .....	50
Daring Attributes .....	52
Betrayal/Dramatic Capture.....	53
The Singer is Sympathetic to the Outlaw .....	54
Warning .....	56
IV   CONCLUSIONS .....	57
WORKS CITED .....	61

## **ABSTRACT**

Ballad Tradition in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The American Outlaw Ballad. (December 2014)

Grace Kelly  
Department of English  
Texas A&M University

Research Advisor: Dr. Jennifer Goodman Wollock  
Department of English

We seem to believe that the internet and technology have destroyed the millennia-old oral traditions of our human history by replacing speech and song as primary sources of communication. But if ballads can still be written, performed and shared in celebration of a modern folk-hero from the twenty-first century (the Barefoot Bandit), does this not imply that the traditions still exist and are in need of redefinition? This paper will seek to define the natures of the modern ballad and the outlaw ballad traditions, first by examining their histories, and then by determining that the YouTube Barefoot Bandit ballads are the next evolutionary step of those traditions. In doing so wider conclusions may be drawn regarding the relationship between modern technology and traditional cultural practices.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Wollock, for the intensive introduction to this topic that led to this paper's creation. Without her expertise and encouragement these conclusions never would have revealed themselves to me. I would also like to thank the Melbern G. Glasscock Center for Humanities Research for facilitating the Glasscock Undergraduate Research Scholar Summer Program, where I was able to pursue this thesis project in wonderful facilities with countless valuable resources. Gratitude is also owed to Florence Davies and Lauren McAuliffe, Writing Consultants with the University Writing Center, who dedicated time each week to assist me in the development of my writing and research, and introduced me to the many benefits the University offered for scholars. I would also like to express appreciation for the Undergraduate Research Scholars program here at Texas A&M University. They greatly assisted me in formatting this thesis and worked to accommodate my early graduation date so that this project would see completion. Finally I would like to acknowledge my fellow scholars of the Glasscock summer program who provided an amazing support network throughout the stages of research.

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The ballad tradition has largely fallen off of the horizon of humanities research, and we really only have research in the humanities to blame. In the early twentieth century, ballad authorities such as Louise Pound and George Lyman Kittredge declared the tradition dead. They believed that due to the introduction of recording technology and the lack of suitable modern content, “ballad-making [was] a closed account.” (Pound, “Ballad-Making” 628-29) This belief was never disputed, but rather the elements of the ballads themselves (such as their methods of creation and transferal) became the sources of contention among scholars.

When the majority of people could not read or write, they communicated among themselves and those outside of their immediate local sphere with ballads. The ballads contained information about historical events, famous individuals, or cultural heritage, and spread not only across borders and oceans, but generations. As time passed, the common people became increasingly literate and the prominent need of ballads decreased with the inventions of mass produced newspapers and books.

But despite the declining necessity of the tradition, people still wrote, sang and passed ballads on. Ballad scholars of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, however, looked at the level and quality of their contemporary ballad production and increasingly agreed that the ballad tradition was no longer viable as a living cultural practice. The researchers of the early twentieth century

decided that the newest technology of their era was the final nail in the coffin for a tradition that had been dying since the first collectors started to put pen to paper. Instead of looking at the tradition's response and adaptation to these new cultural forms of expression, they put it to rest completely.

Similarly, the social bandit tradition was a convention that its own scholars believed impossible to be continued into our modern time. It was a tradition whose scholarship started with Eric Hobsbawm's book, *Bandits*, in 1969 and continues to this day with Casey R. Schmitt's 2012 article "The Barefoot Bandit, Outlaw Legend, and Modern American Folk Heroism." The tradition was defined at first by nine characteristics set forth by Hobsbawm, was later expanded by Richard E. Meyer in 1980 for the American outlaw folk type, and was defined once more by Graham Seal in 2009. The list of characteristics that made up the social bandit model was based heavily on the lyrics of the outlaw ballads concerning the infamous individuals. Effectively the two traditions, social banditry and balladry, were and are closely intertwined.

Just as ballad scholars believed the ballad tradition was no longer alive if it did not exist in the same exact form as it had for the last few thousand years, so did social bandit scholars believe that traditional social bandits could not exist within the modern contexts of our time. Casey R. Schmitt used the example of a modern folk-hero, Colton Harris-Moore (a.k.a. the Barefoot Bandit), to argue that the social bandit tradition could be continued into our time. Schmitt believed that the tradition had not died, but taken a new form in the face of technology, structured society, and the Internet. One aspect of this new form was that just as outlaw ballads

had been written about figures such as Robin Hood and Jesse James, so had ballads been written about the Barefoot Bandit (Schmitt 80). Only instead of these ballads taking the shape of strictly oral transmission or widely sold broadsides, they were YouTube videos uploaded for the whole world to see.

This paper will argue for the ballad tradition in a way similar to the approach Schmitt used to argue for the social bandit tradition. He held that the Barefoot Bandit was indeed a modern social bandit because the outlaw's folk-hero image, created and perpetrated through social media, filled all the social bandit model criteria. Using the lists of attributes that the social bandit scholars had established as the defining standards for social bandits, he showed that the Barefoot Bandit's folk-hero status had, in various ways, upheld the tradition.

This paper adopts this technique to argue that the ballad tradition has also continued into our present time. First I outline a list of characteristics that describe the outlaw ballad tradition. This is a list that pulls from the social bandit model and the lyrics of American outlaw ballads (e.g. *Jesse James, Sam Bass, Charlie Quantrell, etc...*). Then I take this list and argue that the YouTube ballads manufactured in celebration (or condemnation) of the Barefoot Bandit fit the list of characteristics. By demonstrating that the YouTube ballads are in every way traditional ballads just like their predecessors, I conclude that the American outlaw ballad tradition, and therefore ballad tradition itself, is alive and thriving.

As part of my conclusions I also argue that humanities research needs to look at the scholarly history of ballad and social bandit scholarship as a warning. We need to recognize that cultural traditions adapt to modern technology, rather than declare these traditions dead. If we consistently try to put an end to old social practices by asserting that modern manifestations are corrupt and therefore null and void, we will be left with decades of undocumented and unresearched steps of the tradition's evolution. We must be proactively preserving, celebrating, and investigating these new exciting forms of the ongoing tradition. Otherwise we run the risk of believing any social practice affected by technology is dead and we will erase entire portions of human cultural history. Arguing that the outlaw ballad tradition is as alive and well on the World Wide Web as it was in the dusty cowboy camps of yesterday opens a gateway for other scholars in the humanities to explore the stimulating new definitions of our society's methods of expression and communication. The humanities research of today must connect the dots and recognize that technological progression does not mean the regression of traditional cultural practices. I would like to start connecting some of those dots with this paper.

### **The Ballad** *An Overview*

The history of ballad scholarship is a complicated and multi-faceted string of battles and “agree-to-disagree” moments. Thus it is very difficult to attempt a condensed summary for those newly interested in ballads. If you are just dipping your toes into the water and want to first know the material, you may be told to read Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) and his *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1802-1803). Then you might be instructed to study the Child Ballads, or more formally *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1860), a collection of 305 numbered ballads edited by

Francis James Child (1825-1896), who died before he could write an introduction to the book. Other necessary ballad personalities include Bishop Thomas Percy (1729-1811) and his *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) and Joseph Ritson (1752-1803), with his book, *Ancient Songs and Ballads* (1829). All of this material would provide you with a basis of ballad knowledge and a broad understanding of what are considered “true ballads” from the “old world.”

In the early nineteenth century the biggest battle in ballad scholarship concerned how to best represent these oral ballads in written literature. Some scholars, such as Bishop Thomas Percy, thought it was part of the editor’s occupation to enhance the ballads by filling in their lyrical gaps and purifying the style. In Susan Stewart’s article “Scandals of the Ballad,” she talked about Percy’s perspective on ballad editing, “It was clear that throughout Percy’s literary endeavors authenticity is not a value in itself and is certainly not a consideration equal to that of aesthetic value or taste” (141). Joseph Ritson, however, believed that accuracy was crucial, and that collectors should not allow their personal preferences to skew the lyrics of ballads. In the advertisement to the former edition of his book, *Ancient Songs and Ballads* (1829), he wrote that “But, in whatever light they may exhibit the lyric powers of our ancient Bards, they will at least have the recommendation of evident and indisputable authenticity: the sources from which they have been derived will be faithfully referred to, and are, in general, public and accessible.” The question of the nineteenth century was that of representing ballads accurately as recorded oral verse versus presenting them in literature as literature.

Then, in the early twentieth century a new conflict emerged in scholarship, the issue of new world ballads (American) and their relationship to the old world ballads (English and Scottish). This is when collectors like John A. Lomax (1867-1948) and Cecil Sharp (1859-1924) were going around the American south recording ballads in cowboy camps and backwoods communities for American folk-song collections. They found in their respective spheres that there were many ballads with both old world ties as well as new world content. In a 1910 letter President Theodore Roosevelt wrote to John A. Lomax that was used in the introduction to Lomax's *Cowboy Songs* (1910), the President said that "There is something very curious in the reproduction here on this new continent – of essentially the conditions of ballad-growth which obtained in medieval England; including, by the way, sympathy for the outlaw, Jesse James, liking the place of Robin Hood" (ix).

Though this quote was not necessarily a catalyst for the debate, it certainly shows a clear perspective that many ballad scholars fought with: American ballads as either descendants of old world ballads or new manifestations of the tradition. Here is where numerous issues kept the pens of scholars furiously writing letters, articles and books as they tried to either reconcile or separate the ballads of the English and Scots and their American counterparts. These topics included disputes about classification, proper content, specific styles and forms, methods of oral transmission, and theories of ballad origins.

One of the most prominent ballad scholars of that time was Louise Pound (1872-1958). According to Kenneth S. Goldstein, who wrote the introduction to Pound's *American Ballads*

*and Songs*, Pound grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska where she received both her B.A. and M.A. from the University of Nebraska. She went on to receive a Ph. D at the University of Heidelberg in 1900, and became a full professor in 1912 back at the University of Nebraska. Her name is most associated with “the ballad war,” where she argued with other ballad scholars about the issues concerning the communal creation of folksong. She was a force within the world of folksong scholarship, and her beliefs about what make up traditional songs have stood the test of time since her book, *Poetic Origins and the Ballad*, which appeared in 1921 (xi).

Pound believed that a working description of folk-songs included a lack of textual anchor (and therefore a license to be forever transforming), survival skills (the ability to maintain its strength through time), and a complete absence of known authorship (Pound, “Sizing Our Ballads” 364) She spoke of how ballad singing used to be part of social gatherings and that advancements in recording technology (phonographs and radio) were impeding this form of transmission. When describing the act of performance, the singing of the ballad, she exclaimed “How much less there is of it now, and how much less there will be as time goes on!” She maintained doubts about the future of true folk-song, thinking that the tradition was weakened because “mechanical devices have lessened the oral handing on of texts” (365). Pound’s criteria for a traditional ballad have lasted for nearly a hundred years with little contestation, so in order to argue that the outlaw ballad tradition has continued into our time, we must address how the YouTube ballad videos relate to Pound’s ballad description.

First on the list is the lack of textual anchor. When listening to ballads via YouTube videos, the listener is seldom treated to a text from which to read along. The video is a captured live performance. In order for me to analyze the “Barefoot Bandit” ballads for the patterns present in the outlaw ballad tradition, I had to transcribe the lyrics for most of the videos line by line. This is the same method used by many of the first collectors (Sir Walter Scott, Bishop Thomas Percy, John Lomax, etc...), to record a ballad for a collection. I had a set of ears, a means of transcribing, and a performance to watch. The only perk was that instead of asking the singers to slow down and tell me each word as I scribbled with quill and parchment, I just paused and replayed, paused and replayed (to an almost maddening point) until I believed I had the words down correctly in my word document.

Sometimes the quality of the video’s audio was poor, or the accent of the singer(s) blurred the lyrics. As a result the transcription may vary from the singer’s actual words, but that only makes the modern ballad less “modern” and more “traditional,” for just as the listeners of past centuries often had no text from which to read along with the ballad singers, neither do those who listen to these ballads on YouTube. And certainly as these YouTube ballads are passed along via social media, not many will take the time to pass along a sheet of lyrics as well. Thus there is most often no textual anchor for these ballads of the present, just as there was no textual anchor for most of the ballads of the past.

Pound said the importance of this lack of textual anchor was that it allowed ballads to be forever transforming from singer to singer, generation to generation. If she were here now to see the ballad videos on YouTube, she might remark that they do not change because they are limited to

that one performance in that one video. However, our modern world does not interact with social media content as if it was a one-way street. People perform “covers” of songs they like, they comment on the videos with suggestions for lyrics and feedback for future versions, and the performers themselves adapt to their audience and their ongoing personal experiences. The textual anchor is called an anchor because it held back the transmission of the ballad. But YouTube videos are in the public domain, they can be shared anywhere at any time for anyone. Even if the ballad is limited to that one performance, that one performance shares the ballad to a worldwide audience and indefinitely leaves a footprint on our culture’s history.

The second criterion was the ballad’s ability to remain strong for long periods of time. At the time Pound was writing her arguments, the outlaw ballads within the ballad tradition were still contemporary to her period. It is understandable that she and her colleagues would consider those recent songs too young to be called proper ballads. In her 1913 article, “The Southwestern Cowboy Songs and the English and Scottish Popular Ballads,” Pound said that the cowboy songs were “crude and nearly formless, without literary quality or individual touch” (196). She thought that these songs dealt “with the life and the interests of the same class of people that originate them and sing them. And among this class, it is tempting to add, the pieces so composed are likely to die!” She did relax a little bit with outlaw ballads though, saying that “the better chance for life will be had by pieces like ‘Jesse James’...” She remarked that these ballads “have or had a sort of nation-wide interest,” but that their preservation was due to their rhyme, meter and symmetry (200). Pound and her colleagues did not have the benefit of a hundred more years and

the knowledge that comes from that: the outlaw ballads survived in spite of their “crude” forms. How did they do it?

Our generation does not engage in activities with ballad performances to the level that past generations did, and yet a general knowledge of ballads still prevails. The reason? YouTube. That is how this student saw her first ballad: a couple of searches on the video sharing site and a multitude of performers and versions were at my fingertips. I have never had the opportunity to listen to a ballad live from a family member, friend, or folk-band, but YouTube has given me the chance to still hear them. There are also the recordings of ballads available on services like Spotify and iTunes, from folk-festival tracks to some of the same phonographic recordings of the time the ballad scholars were writing. Some contemporary artists have even adapted ballads for their own albums, such as Bruce Springsteen’s version of the *Ballad of Jesse James*. Pound believed songs were ballads if they could last the test of time and place. We can firmly testify in 2014 that these ballads most certainly have, even if it was because of a website full of videos instead of grandma singing next to the fireplace at Christmas.

The third criterion is perhaps the most difficult to address when it comes to the YouTube ballad videos, as it dictates that a ballad must have a completely anonymous origin in order to be considered a true ballad. In the late nineteenth century a man could hear the *Ballad of Charlie Quantrell* sung by a cowboy at a camp fire and share it in his local bar, where a singer could learn it to add to her performance, the old man who heard it from her concert while visiting relatives would take it back east and sing it for friends at a party...and all those along the way who heard it again and again would more or less sing it to their children. It would pass through

smoky bars and family parlors as easily as public theatres and elementary school musical productions. Lyrics could be printed on a broadside or the oral fossils could be collected by ballad hunters like John Lomax for Library of Congress records. The issue of copyright hardly impeded a ballad's spread.<sup>1</sup>

But what does this mean for a YouTube ballad? Since ballads are now mainly created and performed by amateurs and shared via social media, does the fact that they cannot be passed on via traditional oral communication without potential legal complications mean they are no longer viable expressions of the tradition itself? This criterion seems impossible to meet when looking at the modern manifestations of ballad tradition because we are listening to them while watching their original authors perform them. However, instead of closing the book and saying these technological versions are not modern ballads, we must address the changing forms of the tradition with a changing idea of how ballads function in society.

Gordon H. Gerould (1877-1953), a target of Louise Pound regarding theories of ballad origins, believed that the questions of where and when each ballad was created were not the questions scholars should be asking in order to distinguish the ballad, but rather “whether traditional impulses and traditional aptitudes have acted upon it [the ballad].” Gerould argued that “as long as the impulses and aptitudes remain alive, new ballads will come into being.” At the same time however, he echoed the feelings of his contemporaries by saying:

---

<sup>1</sup> Note: The issue of copyright has come up with some of the western ballads. One famous example is “Home on the Range,” a ballad collected by John Lomax in 1908. William and Mary Goodwin of Tempe, Arizona filed a copyright suit for a half-million dollars in 1934, claiming they had written the song in 1904. [See United States. Library of Congress. "Home on the Range" Library of Congress, n.d. Web. 4 Nov. 2014. <<http://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200196571/>>.] My point is that no matter what legal disputes arise over who created this material, the material still spreads on its oral merits (whether or not it is copyrighted).

The new ballads, like most of the versions of old ballads collected in America, have few of the qualities that we prize in the verse of the folk who for so many centuries clung to their community life. The impulse to create is still present, but the power to create beautiful things has largely perished with the violent change of environment. The tradition was broken, and with the break has been lost the rare gift of storytelling in vivid and often poignantly lovely verse that once characterized the country people of England and Scotland. (Gerould 27)

Gordon H. Gerould then concluded that “the sun of balladry has indeed set.” George Lyman Kittredge (1860-1941), the protégé of Francis James Child, is quoted by many ballad scholars as saying that “ballad-making is a closed account” (Pound, *Ballad-Making* 629). Albert J. Friedman (1920-2006) wrote in the introduction to the book, *The Viking Book of Folk Ballads of the English-Speaking World* (1956), that “on its own proper level and as a living art, balladry has almost ceased to exist and could only be revived by setting the clock and civilization several hundred years” (xxxix-xxxv).

Pound however, also wrote in her book, *Poetic Origins and the Ballad*, that “whatever has commended itself to the folk-consciousness and has established currency for itself apart from written sources is genuine folk-literature” (Pound, *Poetic Origins* 202). She established a description of a true ballad, which has been addressed in regards to YouTube video ballads, but she also left room for the future of ballad-making by saying, “the mode in ballad-making has changed and will change...styles change in folk poetry as they do in book poetry...Folk poetry is not a fixed thing to rise and die but a shifting thing” (233). Despite her insistence that the modes may change and style may change, she also felt that her criteria set forth for ballads should be

followed. If we are to accept these YouTube video ballads as ballads, though, we have to partially dismiss the idea of anonymity and look to how ballads operate as products of our modern culture, in order to gain a modern description of the tradition.

D.K. Wilgus wrote in the introduction to his book, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898* (1959), that there is a “functional approach to folksong” that has not yet been developed (xviii-xix). Perhaps this is the best way to adapt the old definition of the ballad to the new forms the tradition is taking. The ballad is not characterized only by its forms, but also by its role in society and how the folk have used it as a means of expression. In looking at the Barefoot Bandit ballads on YouTube, we can see how the tradition has continued without sticking to the definition established by the ballad scholars of the previous century.

The ballad was a way in which common people (the “folk”) expressed their feelings about society and transmitted emotional and historical information to the world outside of their local sphere. In the past centuries these ballads were often concerned with the aristocracy (knights, princesses, kings, etc...), whom the folk considered interesting and wanted to sing about. Now in twenty-first century America, the folk may be interested in a teenaged outlaw. As people have grown more literate, the ballad has not died but taken on the new subject matter of the common people. In the case of this paper, it takes on the life and crimes of Colton-Harris Moore, a modern social bandit.

## **Social Bandit Theory** *An Overview*

In order to discuss the American outlaw ballad, the characteristics of the American outlaw himself must be identified and explained. This involves a brief review of social bandit theory as it began with Eric Hobsbawm in 1969 and was defended and adapted by Richard E. Meyer and Graham Seal, leading up to Schmitt's case study of the Barefoot Bandit in 2012.

In *Bandits*, Hobsbawm depicted the “noble robber” with nine established characteristics. He drew on examples from across the globe and used the ballads inspired by these examples as evidence to support the existence of those specific features. He asserted that the “noble robber” is always a man who starts his criminal livelihood as “a victim of injustice.” This “noble robber” is ascribed specific activities by the people who admire and fear him, including the acts of correcting injustices, taking from the rich to give to the poor, and only ever killing in defense of himself or in a feat of righteous vengeance. The common people respect him, bestowing admiration and aid, and if he outlasts his illicit lifestyle he returns to his locality as “an honourable citizen.” His life can end no other way than betrayal (47). While alive he is seemingly “invisible and invulnerable,” and though he is completely opposed to a specific local authority, he is most definitely not an enemy of the higher powers, “who [are] the fount of justice” (48).

In 1980 Richard E. Meyer adapted Hobsbawm's model to fit the American outlaw folk-type in his article "The Outlaw: A Distinctive American Folktype", creating his own list of twelve attributes he believed to be part of this specific social bandit mold for the United States. This list had a lot of similarity to Hobsbawm's, but Meyer added and modified several aspects. The American outlaw is similarly provoked into his first offense (99), and is celebrated as a "man of the people" (97) He too steals from the rich and gives to the poor in an effort to "right wrongs" (101). The American bandit is "good-natured" and "kind-hearted," and often described as being brave and courageous (105). He is also given support in various forms by the people throughout his time as an outlaw (107). Meyer's American outlaw is a trickster seemingly unable to be captured (106 & 108). He is betrayed unto death and this death brings about a collective lamentation by the people who loved him, who also bequeath legendary status (e.g. is he still out there?) to his persona (108-11). Meyer also points out that the American outlaw is not loved by everyone, and his reputation and demise can be used as a "moral warning" for others (110-11).

Further along, in 2009, Graham Seal defended Hobsbawm's model and used it to describe what he called "the Robin Hood principle" in his article, "The Robin Hood Principle: Folklore, History, and the Social Bandit." He described twelve attributes as well, and they align themselves nicely with Hobsbawm's established mold. The outlaw-hero is "forced to defy the law," given sympathy and support by the community, "rights wrongs," and only kills "in self-defense or justified retribution." This hero is kind-hearted and courteous, and follows the pattern of stealing from the rich and giving to the poor. He evades authorities attempting to capture him, and seemingly employs a form of magic that grants him super-human abilities. He is brave and either strong or given a set of skills that are useful to outlaw life. As always he is betrayed to

death and dies courageously, and as Meyer added in 1980, he is granted a sort of mythical prestige that makes people wonder if he is really dead (74-75).

For two years (2008-2010), a teenage boy with a quickly mounting criminal record and a knack for eluding all the resources of authority reigned as a modern day American folk-hero. He was loved and admired by tens of thousands of fans on Facebook and online discussion forums. Despite being wanted for over a hundred offenses, he had “stolen into our hearts,” as one YouTube ballad put it (atumcronico 1) due to his daring nature, friendly attitude, free spirit, and immunity to capture or bodily harm. He would steal anything from desserts at a convenience store to small twin-engine airplanes, before disappearing into the wilderness (where he lived as a fugitive) right under the noses of the authorities. Though he was a “thorn in the side of every Northwest lawman” (Streakin’ Healys 2), people celebrated and even encouraged his lifestyle, promoting him to the status of American outlaw as the notorious “Barefoot Bandit.” This infamous modern folk-hero by the name of Colton Harris-Moore was captured in July of 2010 after a high speed boat chase in the Bahamas, a long way from where his legend started in Camano Island, Washington.

In the years that have followed, scholars have tried to place him, and the folk-status the popular culture has ascribed to him, within the historical and social contexts of our time. Schmitt, in his essay published several months after Harris-Moore’s sentencing in 2012, argued that the Barefoot Bandit deserved a spot in the social bandit tradition outlined by Hobsbawm, Meyer, and Seal, with certain limitations (81). As part of his evidence, Schmitt provided examples of the

YouTube ballads inspired by the outlaw to show how people perceived and created the modern legend (80).

Schmitt argued that Harris-Moore squeezes into place “in a manner specifically suited to his place, society, and time” (75). Schmitt points out that Harris-Moore, regardless of the truth of his real nature, was deemed “noble and sympathetic” by the masses (77). Harris-Moore did not steal in order to give to the poor but he did leave a \$100 bill at a crime scene with a note asking that it be given to the local veterinary clinic. Harris-Moore was given support from the online community, who offered him encouragement and safe-houses. He was seemingly invulnerable, flying and crashing at least five different airplanes, walking away each time unscathed. He was uncatchable, and described as good-natured and kind, reportedly laughing as he ran away from law enforcement (78). Although Schmitt did not mention it, Harris-Moore as a social bandit fell into the mold set by Graham Seal that the bandit would not be taken without a fight. It took Bahamian authorities several bullets to the fuel tank of his boat after a high-speed chase before Harris-Moore surrendered.

Schmitt did address the issue that Harris-Moore did not, by Hobsbawm’s standards, challenge the social order on behalf of an oppressed people as a social bandit ought to do. However it did not matter if he did not do so in reality, for he was perceived to do so by a population who perceived themselves to be oppressed. He was seen as a “symbol of resistance for the ‘oppressed’ white, suburban class,” and became “a disillusioned young American’s outlaw hero” (79). Thus, Schmitt holds that the Barefoot Bandit is a “modern link in an ongoing outlaw-hero tradition” and that the boy “serves as a symbol, a rallying point of hope that Americans return to

some past, legendary era, more connected to nature and less motivated by material and possession –a world, in Hobsbawm’s words ‘as it should be’”(81).

Now that we have firmly established the almost fifty years of social bandit theory behind us, we can look at the ballad tradition that American outlaws have left behind and be able to better identify the shared themes and patterns prevailing within their lyrics. Just as these social bandit scholars were able to glean evidence from these oral records, so shall we excavate these archaeological sites for matching artifacts to illustrate the common threads. These common threads will help us later in determining that the ballads of the Barefoot Bandit are the next link in the chain of this tradition. These threads will be shown as a list of traits similar to the models of Hobsbawm, Meyer, and Seal but specific to the ballad of the American outlaw.

## CHAPTER II

### THE OUTLAW BALLAD TRADITION

#### **Specific Names of Places Lived-In, Robbed, or Rumored to be Lurking In**

The outlaw ballads of America always cite the specific cities, states, institutions, and counties that the outlaws either originated from or where they performed dirty deeds. This act of putting in such distinct locations serves as a rap sheet for the outlaw. For every crime he reportedly commits, he is given credit within the ballad. Even if historically he had been nowhere near that place at any point in his life, it does not matter because the ballad-writer has ascribed that to his outlaw-hero mythology.

Billy the Kid is placed “way out in New Mexico long, long ago,” and then later “in old Silver City” (Lomax, *American* 137-38). Jesse James did not just rob any train, he robbed the “Danville” and the “Glendale” trains. He and his brother also robbed the “Chicago bank,” and his origins were situated in “the county of Clay” (129-30). In another version of his ballad it is the “Gallatin bank” they robbed (Friedman 378).

Sam Bass was said to be from Indiana, and traveled to “old Texas,” where he got a job at “the Collins Ranch.” He took a herd of cattle to “the Black Hills” and sold them in “Custer City.” He robbed the “U.P. train” and went through “the town of Denton.” The traitor Jim Murphey who

caused Sam's death fled from Tyler to Terrill, and Sam met his doom at Round Rock (Lomax, *American* 127-28).

A guerilla fighter during the Civil War, Charles Quantrell was given a ballad where the main action was the act of burning the city of Lawrence (Lomax, *American* 132-33). In another ballad that does not detail the burning of Lawrence, it says "It was on the Kansas plains he commenced his wild career."<sup>2</sup> In the same ballad it mentions Quantrell meeting "the mayor of Casmeyer just outside of town." After escaping, Quantrell is later captured "at a little prairie the place they call Lamar" (Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* 145). It could be possible that the ballad-writers of the time recognized that since these outlaws were such celebrities, and the ballad could go far past the limits of their local sphere, inserting the names of specific places could bring attention to those places in the future.

Often there is a discrepancy between the ballad lyrics and the truth, but the truth is not part of this study of these ballads. We are not trying to establish the biography of these outlaws via a historical analysis. Just as the truth is not part of studying the Barefoot Bandit as a social bandit, because his folk-hero image does not represent what is real, but what is perceived and commonly agreed upon by the people perpetrating the bandit's legend. So despite whether or not these outlaws were really born here or performed crimes there, the insertion of locations and place-

---

<sup>2</sup>Note: This particular ballad of Charlie Quantrell is modeled after an Irish ballad entitled *Brennan on the Moor*, which dealt with an eighteenth-century Irish highwayman named Willie Brennan, who died on the gallows in 1804. The lyrics of this Charlie Quantrell ballad follow the lyrics of Brennan's ballad very closely (Friedman 372-74). This was a common occurrence in balladry, as the folk used the tunes and lyrics of older ballads to form newer ballads with different and more contemporary content. Ballads like this are what fueled many of the ballad scholars' arguments concerning whether or not American ballads were their own manifestations of the tradition, or just corrupted versions of old world ballads.

names by ballad-makers are vital to creating a sense of local authenticity to the ballad performance.

### **Act of Stealing**

The outlaw is skilled in a diverse set of crafts, spending time on many different activities (murder, destruction, gambling, drinking...) but ballads pay special attention to the crime of robbery. This act alone is symbolically the most defiant of the outlaw, for he is disobeying the rules and laws of society to gather wealth. Murder is more often vengeful, destruction is only temporary, gambling and drinking are just simple vices. The act of gathering wealth by means of force was the highlight of an outlaw's career. What he does with that wealth is a separate issue (which will be discussed next), but the deed of taking money from institutions such as banks and trains is a popular motif.

It is important to note also that the ballads do not just say that the outlaw "robbed." Mentioning the crime alone is not enough. The ballads always detail what kind of robbing he did, whether it was bank, train, or stage coach. Sam Bass "robbed the U.P. train," and while in Texas "three robberies he did do/ He robbed all the mail, passenger and express cars too" (Lomax, *American* 127). Billy the Kid "stole from many a stage," (137) and Jesse James "robbed the Danville train," "robbed the Chicago bank/ And stopped the Glendale train" (129).

While in Quantrell's ballad the lyrics do not specify a particular institution that he robbed, the singer says "Come all ye bold robbers and open your ears, / of Quantrell the lion-heart you

quickly shall hear” (132). One ballad claims that Quantrell burned Lawrence, but never specifically says he robbed it. Another ballad calls him “a fearless highwayman,” and states that “many wealthy gentlemen before him [Quantrell] stood with fear.” When he was in Casmeier he used a gun that “caused the mayor to tremble and [sic] robbed him of his gold” (Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* 145).

Robbery is a crime that is done with the threat of violence (an outlaw requests the contents of your pockets while pointing a gun at you), but it does not require violence. Social bandits are largely held in such high regard because they commit crimes like this without harming anyone. It is an illegal act that does not imply weakness on the part of the criminal, whereas an outlaw who gambles, drinks, rapes, destroys and physically harms others is considered to have no moral code or sense of honor. Robbery implies planning, guts, and discretion, a discretion that will be discussed in the next point.

### **Steal From Rich, Give to Poor**

As Kent Steckmesser puts it in his article “Robin Hood and the American Outlaw: A Note on History and Folklore,” “the tales and ballads which embody the outlaw traditions also tend to fall into a standard pattern, one feature of which is that the outlaw is a “friend to the poor” (350).

One of Quantrell’s ballads said “He’d take from the wealthy and give to the poor” (Lomax, *American* 133), and in another it says:

With a brace of loaded pistols, he carried both night and day,  
Though he never robbed a poor man while on the highway,

But what he taken from the rich, like tops and like best,  
He always did divide it with the widow in distress. (Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* 145)

Jesse James was described as “a friend to the poor” (Lomax, *American* 129) in one ballad, and in another “He stole from the rich and he gave to the poor” (Friedman 378). In another version, “he robbed from the rich and he gave to the poor” (Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* 157). In still another variant: “he robbed the rich of every stitch” (Friedman 379).

It is the quintessential “Robin Hood” trait of the outlaw, given to him without regard to its accuracy (whether or not he actually behaved this way). The American outlaw robbed to get rich, but he also upheld a version of honor that allowed the common people room to label him heroic. It should come as no surprise to anyone that this is included on a list of features about folk-hero ballads. The “folk” were mostly poor, lower class people with little education and a distaste for authority, so they liked to emphasize a famous outlaw’s discretion between the folk and the upper classes.

### **Good-Natured**

The characteristic of kindness prevails among the lyrics of the ballads alongside those verses detailing the American outlaw’s criminal deeds and tragic demise. In one ballad Sam Bass is characterized as “a kinder-hearted feller you’ll seldom ever see,” (Lomax, *American* 126). Jesse James was said to be “a friend to the poor, / He would never see a man suffer pain” (129). In another ballad it tells the story of how some people asked for his brother and his names, and they responded in good fun:

They rallied out West for to live upon the best,  
The Fletchers asked their names;  
They laughed and smiled as they made their reply,  
“We are Frank and Jesse James.” (Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* 154)

The American outlaw was represented as courteous, and many anecdotes of his kind treatment of children, widows, elderly, and the hard-working man were spread among the people. This coincides with the idea of giving to the poor. The poor were usually the ones writing these ballads and sharing them, so they will of course place emphasis on the outlaw’s partiality towards the lower class. It is only natural that the main crux of these images, his innate compassion, made its way into the writing of the ballads that celebrate him.

### **The Presence of a Female**

A regular character in the story told within the ballad is the female who loves the outlaw in spite of his criminality and wrong-doing. It humanizes the outlaw in such a way that encourages sympathy, even if it’s not directly towards him, but for those he loves who he has left behind. This female can take the form of his wife, mother, or just women who love him.

The wife of Jesse James, a woman who lost a child and had half her arm blown off in a botched attempt to assassinate her husband, is mentioned frequently throughout his ballads. The chorus sings out that he left “a wife to mourn for his life,” in one ballad, in another that “Jesse’s wife was a lady all her life,” (Lomax, *Cowboy* 154) and in one more “Jesse James’ little wife, was a moaner all her life...She earned her daily bread, by her need and her thread” (Pound, *American*

146). A different one shows her as responsible for James' ultimate demise by making him stay home and clean, "Jesse was at home de whole day long, / His wife has left him dere straightening up his home" (Lomax, *American* 131).

Quantrell's wife played a huge role in one of his ballads. When her husband is captured on the outskirts of town by the mayor, the ballad says she at first laments, and then hands him a gun hidden in her clothing:

Charlie's wife to town had gone provisions for to buy;  
When she saw her Charlie taken, she began to weep and cry;  
"Oh I wish I had a dollar," said he. No sooner had he spoke,  
Than she handed him a blunderbus from underneath her coat. (Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* 145-46)

When Quantrell is about to be executed, he speaks not only to his wife, but to his mother as well, who responds to him by saying it would have been better if he had died as a baby than hung for a life of crime:

Now farewell, dear wife and my little children three,  
And you, my aged father who sheds those tears for me,  
And likewise my dear old mother," who tore gray hair and cried,  
Saying "It were better, Charlie, in your cradle you had died." (146)

Billy the Kid does not have a mother or a wife to lament his passing, but the ballads mention the "fair Mexican maidens" who play guitars and sing "a song about Billy, their boy bandit king" (Lomax, *American* 138). Thus even if a woman does not have a relation to the bandit, American outlaw ballads always showcase women as sympathetic devotees to the outlaw hero. Perhaps it

is also the dichotomy of innocence and guilt, purity and dirtiness, that softens the image of the outlaw for an audience of ballad listeners.

### **The Inadequate “Law”**

The ballad-writers found it important to mention that these outlaw-heroes ran circles around the authorities set upon them by cities, states, and national governments. It may be an indication that the folk-heroes were bestowed some sort of divinity that made it impossible for them to be captured in any other way than betrayal. All of the outlaw heroes were known to evade capture time and time again, the law not having the same effect on them as it did on everyone else.

Sam Bass and his four companions were said to have “whipped the Texas rangers and ran the boys in blue” (Lomax, *American* 127). Another version of the same ballad in Charles J. Finger’s *Frontier Ballads* says that “More daring bolder outlaws the rangers never knew/They dodged the Texas rangers and beat them, too” (69). Billy the Kid was said to have “kept folks in hot water” (Lomax, *American* 137). In the last stanza of the Jesse James ballad, the singer leaves the listener with the same impression of James’ uncatchable quality:

This song was made by Billy Gashade,  
As soon as the news [Jesse James’ death] did arrive;  
He said there was no man with the law in his hand,  
Who could take Jesse James when alive. (130)

Quantrell is given the same attribute, one version of his ballad singing of how authorities tried to subdue him, and it took several attempts before he was finally captured:

Now Charlie being an outlaw, upon the mountain high,  
With both infantry and cavalry to take him they did try.  
But he hid among the brush that grew thick upon the field,  
And received nine wounds before he would yield (Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* 146)

The law was often viewed as a corrupt puppet of the government or railroad companies. It and its representatives were perceived as a local organization of ruthlessness, tied to everything the common people hated (e.g. the government). The fact also that these outlaws had long careers with multiple crimes testified to the incompetence of authorities, unable to put a stop to them. This testimony was given special attention in the ballad lyrics, both burnishing the image of the outlaw and tarnishing the reputation of authority.

### **Daring Attributes**

The social bandit scholars point out the courageous audacity that the folk ascribed to the outlaw-heroes they celebrated. The refrain from one Quantrell ballad says “Bold, gay, and daring stood old Charlie Quantrell-o” and that’s after starting off the song calling him a “fearless highwayman” (Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* 145). In another ballad he is described as a “lion-heart,” and in the last stanza, is commended for his boldness and bravery:

Oh, Quantrell’s a fighter, a bold-hearted boy,  
A brave man or woman he’ll never annoy,  
He’d take from the wealthy and give to the poor,  
For brave men there’s never a bolt to his door. (Lomax, *American* 133)

Jesse James was said to have “a hand and a heart and a brain,” and when he is about to be shot by Robert Ford, the ballad says he was “talking with his family brave” (Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* 154). A different version starts “Living in Missouri wuz a bold, bad man...” (Lomax, *American* 131). Another ballad says “you bet he was no coward” (Friedman 378). When talking about the time the brothers (Frank and Jesse) robbed the Glendale train, the ballad pays special attention to their audacity:

And that same midnight when the moon was shining bright,  
They stopped the Glendale train,  
They were bold hearts there and they did it without fear,  
It was planned by Jesse’s brain. (Finger 59)

Sam Bass is described over and over in the last stanzas of his ballads as “brave Sam,” and his group of compatriots is detailed as both “bold” and “daring.”

Sam had four companions –four bold and daring lads—  
They were Richardson, Jackson, Joe Collins, and Old Dad;  
Four more bold and daring cowboys the rangers never knew,  
They whipped the Texas rangers and ran the boys in blue. (Lomax, *American* 127)

This courage, boldness, and daring is important to the American outlaw persona. It paints his acts of robbery as feats of prowess and audacity. The ballad-writers used these adjectives because of the associations they had with the outlaw among the people, and because of their associations with the truth. Meyer’s fifth characteristic of the social bandit was that he was “characterized by the audacity, daring and sheer stupendousness of his exploits” (105). A man willing to risk life and limb in order to make a better life for himself, even at the expense of others, was at least due some lyrical credit for such actions.

## **Betrayal/Dramatic Capture**

Hobsbawm pointed betrayal out as the prototypical ending of the social bandit, “In practice as well as in theory bandits perish by treason, though the police may claim the credit... The ballads and tales are full of these execrated traitors, from the time of Robin Hood himself to the twentieth century...”(Hobsbawm 56). As Meyer put it, “Along with the Robin Hood theme, this element—which one might reasonably term the ‘Judas’ theme—is clearly one of the most universally present and heavily stressed motifs in the folklore of American outlawry, particularly in the songs and ballads” (Meyer 108). Seal agrees:

An outlaw hero tradition exists within a culture. A set of social, political, and economic circumstances involving conflict between one or more social groups develops - almost always over access to resources, wealth, and power - and combines with a charismatic individual perceived as being on the side of an oppressed group. Some usually trivial incident impels the charismatic individual from antagonism to armed defiance. When this occurs the tradition comes into action almost immediately, using the narrative framework and its embedded moral code to produce songs and stories about the outlaw hero and his (very rarely her) exploits (Hobsbawm 2000:Appendix) . These elements then play out in the form of an ostensive cultural script in which the outlaw hero almost invariably is betrayed and comes to a violent end. (Seal, “The Robin Hood Principle” 83)

Thus, almost every single ballad that tells the story of the American outlaw hero ends with the hero dying at the hand of a friend or former ally. It is the final deed that solidifies the hero’s folk-status, unable to be caught or killed like a normal criminal on the run, he finally dies when someone close to him gives him up.

Jesse James' ballads provide perhaps the best-known example of highlighting this treason, with "that dirty little coward that shot Mister Howard/Has laid poor Jesse in his grave" (Lomax, *American* 129). It describes the gutless method of betrayal, "Robert Ford came along like thief in the night/And laid poor Jesse in his grave," in different variations with the same sympathetic sentiment:

The people held their breath when they heard of Jesse's death,  
And wondered how he ever came to die;  
It was one of the gang called little Robert Ford,  
He shot poor Jesse on the sly. (Lomax, *American* 130)

Another version of the ballad sings: "But thet Smith an' Wesson ball knocked por Jesse from the wall" (Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* 156). Robert Ford received no mercy from any ballad-maker of the day:

Oh, Robert Ford was the man, he traveled through the land,  
He never robbed a train in his life;  
But he told the courts his aim was to kill Jesse James,  
And to live in peace with his wife.

Ten thousand dollars reward was given Robert Ford  
For killing Jesse James on the sly;  
Poor Jesse has gone to rest with his hands upon his breast,  
And I'll remember Jesse James till I die. (156-57)

Perhaps the most strongly worded ballad concerning Robert Ford is the one found in Friedman's *The Viking Book of Folk Ballads of the English-Speaking World*:

For Robert Ford, I pledge my word,  
Has marked you for his slaughter.

For robbing trains Bob had no brain,  
Unless Jess plainly showed him.  
Our governor for peace or war  
Explained this for to goad him.

So Robert Ford he scratched his gourt,  
And then he said "I'll go you,  
Give me a price that's something nice,  
And then, by gee, I'll show you!"

Then Governor C. he laughed with glee,  
And fixed a price to suit him,  
And Bob agreed, with ready speed,  
To find Jesse James and shoot him.

And then he did as he was bid  
And shot Jess in the back, sir,  
Then ran away on that same day,  
For cash he did not lack, sir. (Friedman 380)

However, Jesse James and Robert Ford were only one example of the Judas relationship present in the outlaw ballads. Sam Bass was yet another victim of betrayal by the actions of his friend

Jim Murphey:

Jim Murphey was arrested, and then released on bail;  
He jumped his bond at Tyler and then took the train for Terrill;  
But Mayo Jones had posted Jim and that was all a stall,  
'Twas only a plan to capture Sam before the coming fall.

.....

Jim had borrowed Sam's good gold, and didn't want to pay,  
The only shot he saw was to give poor Sam away.  
He sold out Sam and Barnes and left their friends to mourn—  
Oh, what a scorching Jim will get when Gabriel blows his horn! (Lomax,  
*American* 128)

Likewise, Billy the Kid was killed by a former ally named Pat Garrett:

Now this is how Billy the Kid met his fate:  
The bright moon was shining, the hour was late,  
Shot down by Pat Garrett, who once was his friend,  
The young outlaw's life had now come to its end. (Lomax, *American* 138)

Kent Steckmesser, though he focused on Robin Hood, also made comment on this particular theme in the stories of outlaw heroes, "The individual legends within the Robin Hood tradition are united also by the theme of betrayal. An informer or turncoat is as familiar in the persona of the outlaw narratives as are detectives and Merry Men. If a betrayer did not exist, folklore would invent him..." (353). Ballad-writers have carried this aspect of the folk-hero into their lyrics, and we see ample evidence to support it as a prominent feature of the outlaw ballad tradition.

### **The Singer is Sympathetic to the Outlaw**

This motif can be proven with just a survey of the ballad lyrics for one adjective: "poor." The ballad writers described the outlaws as good natured, just, brave, and daring, but they also expressed sympathy for their demise. The chorus to the most popular version of the Jesse James ballad invites the listeners to mourn for Jesse as well, by citing the wife and kids he left behind:

Poor Jesse had a wife to mourn for his life,  
Three children, they were brave.  
But that dirty little coward that slew Mister Howard,  
Has laid poor Jesse in his grave. (Lomax, *American* 129)

Another says that Robert Ford, “shot poor Jesse on the sly,” and then later “Poor Jesse has gone to rest with his hands upon his breast / And I’ll remember Jesse James till I die” (Lomax, *Cowboy* 157). One version really emphasizes the folk’s feelings about the assassination.

Then the sad, sad thing what we have to sing,  
When Jesse with his family in his shack,  
Was reading the Book when Robert Ford took  
A shot at poor Jesse in the back. (Finger 59)

Pound’s book of American ballads has a version that reads “Poor old Jesse, poor old Jesse James,” and then went on to sympathize with his wife:

Jesse James’ little wife,  
Was a moaner all her life,  
When they laid Jesse James in his grave. (Pound 146)

In the ballads of Sam Bass, they refer to him as “poor” after he was shot at Round Rock, “They pierced poor Sam with rifle ballads and emptied out his purse / Poor Sam he is a corpse and six feet under clay” (Lomax, *American* 128). In a different version of the ballad it calls Sam “poor” when describing Jim Murphy’s plan to betray him, “A put up job to catch poor Sam, before the coming fall.” Later the word is used again, “Poor Sam he is a dead lad, and six feet under clay” (Finger 70).

Billy the Kid was also referred to in the same way, “‘Twas on the same night when poor Billy died,” and then later in the last stanza, as it warns others about becoming an outlaw, it says “But just like poor Billy he wanders astray” (Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* 142). Of course not everyone

sympathizes with the outlaw hero, and in one Billy the Kid ballad the singer remarks, “And now he’s dead / And we ain’t none the sadder” (Lomax, *American* 137).

Charlie Quantrell was not called “poor”, but the ballad writers portray a dramatic and tearful scene, where the outlaw says his farewells to his family. They are all present for his execution (his wife, three kids, and parents), and lament his imminent demise.

“Now farewell, dear wife and my little children three,  
And you, my aged father who sheds those tears for me,  
And likewise my dear old mother,” who tore gray hair and cried,  
Saying “It were better, Charlie, in your cradle you had died.” (Lomax, *Cowboy Songs* 146)

It is clear in these examples that the ballad-singers of the time were sympathetic to the outlaw-heroes they portrayed, whether or not they referred to them as “poor” or painted a picture in which the hero was in a sad situation with his family. It seems to be the exception that these men were ever sung of as evil and undeserving of compassion, for the majority of these ballads bemoan the ends of their subjects.

## **Warning**

Meyer added to the list of Hobsbawm’s social bandit criteria the following standard: “The outlaw’s actions and deeds do not always provoke approval and admiration, but may upon occasion elicit everything from mildly stated criticisms and moral warnings to outright condemnation and refutation of any or all of the previous eleven elements” (Meyer 111). Like the many fables and proverbs we have been told, the American outlaw ballads also provide a

lesson for their listeners. Sometimes it is direct, as with the following end to a Billy the Kid ballad...

There's many a man with a face fine and fair  
Who starts out in life with a chance to be square,  
But just like poor Billy he wanders astray  
And loses his life in the very same way. (Lomax, *American* 138)

...and other times it is indirect, as with this ending of Jesse James:

Jesse went down to the City of Hell,  
Thinking for to do as he pleased;  
But when Jesse come down to the City of Hell,  
the Devil quickly had him on his knees. (130)

Sometimes it is inferred through the character himself in the act of bemoaning his own deeds. In the passage quoted earlier, Quantrell at the moment he was to be executed was saying goodbye to his family, and his mother remarked that it would have been better if he had never lived past infancy.

The warning in one version of the Jesse James ballad seemed directed towards potential traitors, as it outlined the demise of the coward Robert Ford after he had killed the outlaw:

He did his best to live out west,  
But no one was his friend there.  
"You've killed your cousin," they went buzzin',  
However free he'd spend there.

And then one day, the papers say,

Bob Ford got his rewarding:  
A cowboy drunk his heart did plunk.  
As you do you'll git according. (Friedman 380)

The people who heard these ballads ranged from small children to old grandmothers, and the presence of a warning brings the actions of the outlaw close to home. It makes it seem as though any wrong decision can bring you to the same bitter end as the outlaw himself, and encourages careful thought and religious piety, much like the ending of a sermon.

### **The Outlaw Ballad Traditions** *Conclusions*

In a manner copied from the social bandit theorists of the past I have established ten common features (elements, motifs, characteristics) of the American outlaw ballad tradition with examples from those ballads best-known and published by ballad collectors. This list is by no means comprehensive, though it does strive to be as thorough as it can. In effect it identifies the main ingredients necessary for the outlaw ballad, but there will always be those little additions or subtractions with each version of each ballad. These aspects are those most present in the ballads, recognized and illustrated with examples so that future outlaw ballads may be placed within or removed from the tradition.

In summary, the ballad tradition demands the following: specific names of places to add local authenticity, the act of stealing to showcase the outlaw's main purpose, the robbing of the rich and giving to the poor to continue celebrating the folk-hero's "noble robber" character, the good nature of the outlaw, the admittance of a female figure to encourage sympathy for the hero, the

inadequacy of the law to capture the outlaw and the daring characteristics that give him prestige above common thieves, the betrayal of the hero by a former friend or ally, the sympathy of the singer for the outlaw's death, and finally, a warning for others. These are the ten threads that weave together the American western outlaw ballad tradition, and this essay will strive to argue that new modern outlaw ballads have used these same threads to weave new songs in the tradition.

## CHAPTER III

### THE BAREFOOT BANDIT BALLADS

#### Colton Harris-Moore *The True Story*

Bob Friel is native to the area where Colton Harris-Moore prowled (Orcas Island, Washington), and is used as a consummate source for information on the teenaged outlaw. He was featured on CBS's 48 Hours "Chasing the Barefoot Bandit" and even wrote the book: *The Barefoot Bandit: The True Tale of Colton Harris-Moore, New American Outlaw* (Bob Friel, "Publication of The Barefoot Bandit").

While Harris-Moore was still on the run in December 2009, Friel wrote an article in *Outsiders Magazine* that detailed Harris-Moore's life, using court documents and speaking to the eyewitnesses his community provided (including Harris-Moore's own mother). He described Harris-Moore's childhood as troubled; from toddler to teenager the boy was subject to a broken home filled with drugs and squalor, with no father figure to speak of. He was first suspected of stealing at age ten, and was in and out of juvenile detention centers until 2008. That was when, at the age of seventeen, he fled a half-way house and began his notorious two years as "the Barefoot Bandit" (Friel, "The Ballad of Colton Harris-Moore").

At the time Friel wrote the article, Harris-Moore was wanted by no less than five counties in Washington, the state of Idaho, the Royal Mounties of Canada, and the FBI. He was charged with all sorts of theft and burglary; stolen items included food, blankets, electronics (he ordered a \$6,500 pair of night vision goggles online with a filched credit card), bikes, cars, light aircraft (including a radio celebrity's \$150,000 Cessna) and speedboats, (like the one he was finally captured in while attempting to flee authorities in the Bahamas in July 2010). Harris-Moore was extradited from the Bahamas to the United States and sentenced to six and a half years in state prison in January 2012 (McCartney & Melia, "Barefoot Bandit Caught").

Graham Seal mentioned the Barefoot Bandit briefly in his book *Outlaw Heroes in Myth and History* (2011). Seal says that this modern outlaw "developed many of the essential elements of the outlaw hero persona" but "he is not a Robin Hood" (149). What he says here can be brought over to balladry as well, "Colt's story is a very recent permutation of the outlaw mythology and so provides some guidelines as to the future of the tradition."

This year Jayson Beaster-Jones wrote an article entitled, "Beyond Musical Exceptionalism: Music, Value, and Ethnomusicology," in which he describes the characteristics of music as "something to be experienced...having values that transcend its commodity status... [having] an affective quality that...can move or mobilize people through performance and embodied experience" (337). Using Jacques Attali and his contention that music can be used as a field of exploration in identifying future social trends, Beaster-Jones argues that by studying music we can "make predictions about future social life." He claims that "by looking at the world in and

through music and musicking” ethnomusicologists (some students of the ballad may be able squeeze their way into that group) are able to form strong expectations about the future of music itself (339). In our case, we can establish the future of the tradition of ballad-making by looking at the ballads created and spread today.

Just as Beaster-Jones remarked that scholars could look at modern music to determine the course of future music, so does Seal maintain that looking at the Barefoot Bandit may determine the future of social banditry.

And, as their [social bandits’]stories show, they are indeed characters in a cultural script that they and others have perceived and appropriated for their own needs. The means by which the script is invoked and motivated may alter with new technology and social change, but the narrative beneath remains essentially the same. It is a story of heroes who are also villains –or are they? The answer depends upon the perspective from which they are viewed. But the fact that such characters continue to arise suggests the cultural imperatives which have produced outlaw heroes for at least two thousand yeas will sing on well into the foreseeable future. (Seal, *Outlaw Heroes* 150)

Seal may not have intended it this way but in the world of ballad studies we may interpret his use of the word “sing” within that last sentence in the literal sense. Just as the methods of cultural production have continued to create figures that fit the outlaw folk status, so will ballads of those figures be created, performed, and passed on. The future of the tradition of social bandits and the future of the oral tradition of outlaw ballads (and ballads in and of themselves) are intertwined, as long as one survives, so will the other.

Thus since the future of outlaw ballads, and by extension, ballad-making itself, can be determined through an examination of what is going on today, the Barefoot Bandit ballads must be explored to see if they fit within the outlaw ballad tradition. The way to do that is to take the ballad tradition's aspects, which I have outlined in the previous section, and apply them to the Barefoot Bandit ballads. If the new ballads can be significantly aligned within the tradition, then the future of ballads can be guaranteed within our new technological era – for now.<sup>3</sup>

### **Specific Names of Places Lived-In, Robbed, or Rumored to be Lurking In**

Colton Harris-Moore was from an island in Washington, but his crimes were spread over multiple cities, counties, states, and countries. He was given credit for burglarizing specific stores or places, and the ballad-writers took care to localize his reputation. One ballad says “He stole right into Washington” (atumcronico 1) while another begins:

Washington State to Oregon  
Canada, Idaho and back again  
Crashing a plane on a reservation  
The wreckage left by his walking let his feet do the talking (Louisville 3)

In another ballad it says:

---

<sup>3</sup> Note: Since citation methods for YouTube videos vary, each reference to a YouTube video will have a parenthetical citation with the username of the person who uploaded the video, as well as a number. This number will be associated with that video's full citation in the Works Cited. I inserted my own punctuation, capitalizations, stanzas, and line breaks on the lyrics for YouTube video ballads that I personally transcribed. If the videos had any accompanying written lyrics, they are represented here as they were presented online.

Colton stole a car and drove out to Ohio  
There he boosted a plane and headed south for Rio  
Though he made as far as some little island in the Bahamas (Streakin' Healys 2)

In another version it says "Camano Island Washington crime was all he ever knew," and that he "ran across the states, Canada too," before "down in the Bahamas, cops found a plane" (wklitz1 4). A ballad written by a native of the area Harris-Moore was from begins "living way out on the island down by the airstrip" (MrWater8land 5).

One ballad performed in the Bahamas while the authorities were looking for the bandit mentioned all the local areas where he could be hiding, "They say he's in Abaco, he's become a cocky joe," "he could be in the Light House or up on Walker's Cay, they say he's in Marsh Harbor, prowling through the night" (ncadmiral25 6). After the bandit was captured, a ballad sung "you're sittin' in the big house, Washington" (Nature5000 7). A ballad written by a local band to the area he was originally terrorizing specifies that he robbed a local store, and that he was "scaring the whole South End" (SouthEnd 8).

In keeping with the characteristics of the American outlaw ballad tradition before, these citations of specific countries, states, islands, stores, and locally known areas are all stamps of regional authenticity to the ballads. They make the ballad content more indigenous to the areas that produced it, and give a realistic flair to the lyrics. These simple mentions of place-names are what make the folk ballad truly "folk," by showcasing the locations that are familiar to the folk culture producing the ballad.

## Act of Stealing

Just as Jesse James, Sam Bass, Billy the Kid and Charlie Quantrell's specific acts of robbery were recorded in the lyrics of their ballads, so were the unique acts of the Barefoot Bandit and his places of wrong-doing. And just as their kind of stealing was limited to institutions like banks, trains and stagecoaches, so was the Barefoot Bandit limited to homes, cars, boats, and planes. He never stole from people directly. He did not mug locals at their cars or hold up convenience stores with a gun. He was stealthy and silent. The mentioning of certain stores is, again, the stamp of local authenticity. A stamp that gives the ballads the same feeling of reality and immediacy that accompanied all the outlaw ballads that came before. The Streakin' Healy's described the acts of Harris-Moore in detail:

Well Colton knew he had to make his own way  
So oh he never much was for hard earned pay  
So he started stealing to support his needs  
Here a sirloin steak and there a bowl of ice cream  
He helped himself to any car, a laptop computer and a DVDR,  
Eight million dollar yachts and some single engine planes  
It don't matter to Harris-Moore, it's all the same  
Yeah some night vision goggles and a can of bear mace,  
You know, for the bears...

MrWater&Land's ballad details Harris-Moore's graduation from smaller to larger items:

Started breaking into houses while no one was around  
Just looking for a nicer place to stay  
Then looking through the drawers, he even stole a car  
And finally he moved up to fancy planes

It repeats throughout the end of the ballad that Harris-Moore will get away completely, and implies that he will do so with some sort of super-natural knowledge of what people are hiding in their homes, “Disappear while we wonder just how much Colton knows, what’s hiding in the drawer under our clothes.”

Wklitz1 included the act of stealing as well, “Steal all he could, time and time again, never once thought about the law, back when.” Nature5000 sings that Harris-Moore was “Burglarizin’ homes, stealin’ cars,” and that he “stole that airplane and flew it okay.” Then later, “he stole that airplane and crashed that thing.”

The SouthEndStringBand, natives of the area in which he began his crime spree, mention specific stores that he stole from by saying, “He stole from the [sic] store,” and “It was on a Friday night when the moon was shining bright / That he robbed the [sic] store.” They reiterate, “Well they caught Colton Moore just south of the [sic] store,” and then remark that “So Colton’s back here now he’s working on the prowl, scaring the whole South End.”

The songs of the American outlaw ballad tradition always contain the specifics of the outlaw’s record, sort of like a rap sheet of the crimes he is known or rumored to have committed during his stint. The Barefoot Bandit ballads follow the description of the American outlaw ballad tradition by including the specific things and places the bandit encountered. The ballads credit him with certain offenses to specific places and of certain items while always making mention of the same type of stealing.

## **Steal From Rich, Give to Poor**

The Barefoot Bandit was prone to stealing things that only wealthy people could afford, such as private planes, private boats, luxury cars, and credit card information for high-dollar items (like the \$6500 night-vision binoculars). He burglarized unoccupied vacation homes rather than local residences, and came from a very impoverished background. At one crime scene he left a hundred dollar bill and a hand-written note, signed with his name and sobriquet, giving instructions for it to be donated to a veterinary clinic. These facts were strewn across the news, and when these ballad-writers created their lyrics, they included the old motif whether it was in criticism or praise.

The unsympathetic Jude KC Thomas-Crown wrote his ballad to counter the popular beliefs that the bandit was a modern Robin Hood.

Well you leave \$100 for doggies that's fine  
Like you're balancing karma while juggling crime  
Can't take a lot of solace in stupid it hurts this time, [losing] fight  
And don't say Robin of Sherwood's hood would surely find some pride  
In the stupid misguided illegal acts of the shoeless juvenile (Jude KC 9)

The chorus of the Streakin' Healy's ballad, mentions the "taking from the rich for the poor" in satire, "This here is the ballad for Colton Harris-Moore, Steal from the rich and steal from the poor."

Though the Barefoot Bandit was not someone who stole in order to give to the poor, as the Robin Hood legends demand, he was a poor teenager, from a terrible home, who mainly targeted people who could afford to be stolen from. This was not the same as Jesse James being a friend to the poor while he stole from trains and banks, or Quantrell who was said to be directly stealing from the rich to give to the poor, but it was similar enough for the American people to be sympathetic towards him. The ballads include the theme, if only in some cases to argue against its applicability.

### **Good-Natured**

The ballads take care to characterize the Barefoot Bandit as at least “not evil.” He may be committing plenty of crime and be unrepentant of the fact, but he is not wicked or overly malicious. He never physically harmed any person the whole time he was on the run, and he reportedly laughed as he ran from local cops. These jovial traits are reflected in the ballad lyrics.

Atumcronico sang that, “he never hurt a fly / and he never killed a man,” and claims that “he stole into our hearts.” The ballad goes on to say that “Now Barefoot he was fair / and Barefoot he was just / a better man couldn’t be found.” The Streakin’ Healy’s said that he was “cheatin’ and stealin’ and havin’ lots of fun.” Wklitz1 repeated in his ballad that, “time after time he just had himself lots of fun.” Nature5000 continued the trend of the bandit’s preoccupation with “fun,” by mentioning the “funny note” he left the cops at a crime scene.

Despite his criminality, and the fact that not everyone believed him to be genuinely good-natured, the ballads created in celebration of his antics still reproduced those same singing words used to describe the likes of Jesse James and Sam Bass. Just as Jesse James was friendly to the poor, and laughed with his brother when he told some innocent folks their names, so Harris-Moore was said to never harm anyone. Sam Bass was described as a “better-hearted fellow you scarce could hope to see” (Finger 66) just as a ballad described Harris-Moore with “a better man couldn’t be found” (atumcronico 1). The parallels are there, and whether or not Harris-Moore and Sam Bass were really the compassionate people the ballads made them out to be, the ballads ascribed those attributes to them in keeping with the outlaw ballad tradition.

### **The Presence of a Female**

The American outlaw ballads often bring up a female character, be it a mother or lover or wife, and the Barefoot Bandit ballads follow suit. Specifically, however, these ballads bring up only one person: Colton Harris-Moore’s mother. In atumcronico’s ballad it ends “So Colton, keep on running, your mother sends her love.” The Streakin’ Healys lyrics contain “Yeah his momma didn’t do much to bring him up right/Or whatever she’d done Colton just put up a fight.” They even give her a line of dialogue like in other outlaw ballads, “Well they asked his momma how her son went so awry, And she said “I’m damn proud of that boy, fly, Colton fly!”

Wklitz1’s ballad sang that Harris-Moore was “raised by his mommy, he stole like his daddy done.” In another ballad, it sympathizes with his mother, saying: “There was a little boy, momma tried to buy him toys/She always seemed to come a little shy” (MrWater8land 5) In the chorus of

a ballad sung to the tune of Jesse James, the band says that, “Colton had a mom who claimed he was wronged by all our society’s neglect, she said it’s not her fault when he robbed her personal vault, but it gives her boy back his self-respect.” Further on it says that “His mom says you outta be his friend” (SouthEnd 8).

The ballads of the American outlaw ballad tradition often showcased the sympathetic, caring female figures of the outlaw-heroes life. This addition of such a character serves to humanize the outlaw-hero, to remind the listening audience that this person was loved by someone in spite of his criminal deeds and misconduct. It brings the hero down to the level of the folk, granting him sympathy in light of the unconditional affection of his mother, wife, lover, or children. Harris-Moore may have been a juvenile delinquent, but his mother was still portrayed to love him just like the ballad depictions of Charlie Quantrell’s mother and Jesse James’ wife.

### **The Inadequate “Law”**

Harris-Moore was on the run for two years before he was finally caught, and he had multiple local, state, and national law enforcement agencies on his tail all the time. He was *almost* caught on multiple occasions, and police officers remarked he was very athletic and could outrun them in the wilderness. In Bob Friel’s online *Outside Magazine* article he wrote that, “During his [Harris-Moore’s] many close calls, the cops claim Colt [sic] ‘vaporized,’ ‘vanished,’ and ‘ran like lightning.’” The ballads take care to mention this fact in varying ways, some praising his abilities, others criticizing the law’s lack thereof. In the ballad by atumcronico the lyrics are:

Colton he was sly  
And Colton he was fast  
They could never pin him down  
.....  
So remember Mr. Lawman  
And remember Mr. Crook  
Watch close as he slips on by  
For every step you take  
Old Barefoot's takin' two  
So fly on, Colton fly!

The ballad by The Streakin' Healys says he was “a thorn in the side of every northwest lawman,” and “Yeah hidin in plain sight, one step ahead of the law.” Wklitz1 sang that Harris-Moore “ran across the states, Canada too, wherever he went he just passed right on through.”

MrWater8land's ballad says “he'll turn twenty-one out on the run, the cops keeping in tow. But he'll slide on out from under all our noses, all our noses!”

Nature5000's ballad references a store where Harris-Moore left chalk-outlines of his feet, “Cartoon outlines of his bare feet / Left them for the coppers at the crime scene.” And then “Runnin' from the law in a stolen boat/ Messin' with their minds leavin' funny notes.” The ballad by the SouthEndStringBand seems to critique their local law by saying, “They sent him [Harris-Moore] to reform school, and the folks there we know, they just simply let him go, made us all look like stupid fools.”

The ballad of Quantrell sang that it took cavalry, infantry and nine bullets to bring the outlaw down. One of the Jesse James ballads famously ends that “there was never a man with the law in the hand that could take Jesse James when alive” (Lomax, *American* 130). It only follows suit that the ballads of the Barefoot Bandit made mention of the fruitless attempts to capture the

outlaw. The inability of the authorities to put a quick end to the folk-hero adds to his status as someone different than all other criminals. The folk culture lifts him above the common thief and gives him rare prestige.

### **Daring Attributes**

The Barefoot Bandit was not only on the run from the authorities for two years, he did so while living in the wilderness. He also went from stealing food to taking planes, teaching himself how to fly twin-engine Cessna's from manuals and flight simulator software. He ended up taking at least five planes, crash landing all of them, and walking away. The ballads focus on these events prominently, as his folk legend grew. Friel remarked that when "a ballad about Colt showed up on YouTube, [sic] T-shirt sales [with] FLY, COLTON, FLY! and MOMMA TRIED soared" (Friel, *Outside*).

The ballad of atumcronico says "But his fingers work so fast/ He stole three planes and crashed," and then "he always stuck to his guns." In the first stanza of the ballad by The Actors Theatre of Louisville, it says "crashing a plane on a reservation, the wreckage left by his walking let his feet do the talking." The Streakin' Healy's sang "he's just a little wild," calling him "a genuine outlaw like you don't find no more." Another said "Taught himself how to do it [fly airplanes], no one can deny/ We'd love to see him fly, Colton, fly!" (MrWater8land 5) Nature 5000's lyrics sing "Stole that airplane and flew it okay/ No pilot's license, lands okay" and then remarks "Colton Harris-Moore is an outlaw star."

The fact that Harris-Moore stole airplanes is an incredible testament to his audacity. He was an eighteen year old kid with no training, nothing but a manual and a computer game, and he managed to steal at least five different private planes. One of which he flew from Ohio to the Bahamas. Not only that, he crash-landed all of them and walked away unscathed. That in itself is an intrepid feat. Thus though the ballads about him did not specifically call him brave or daring as did the previous ballads of the outlaw tradition, they did point out the feats he performed as generally acknowledged acts of boldness.

### **Betrayal or Dramatic Capture**

The career of the Barefoot Bandit came to an end in a high speed boat chase in the waters of the Bahama Islands. Law enforcement shot out his fuel tanks on the boat, and he came to a petering stop. He chunked his laptop into the ocean and put a gun to his head, threatening to commit suicide. The officials talked him down, arrested him, and the infamous outlaw's career came to an end in a series of photos showing him being led away in handcuffs – barefoot (McCartney & Melia, “Barefoot Bandit Caught”). The ballads of the Barefoot Bandit online were mainly written while he was on the run, but several have been made after the arrest. The Streakin Healys account for his capture:

But now our boy Colton was a full on wanted man  
With his name and face known all across this land  
Yeah the fix was in, his number come up,  
That barefoot bandit done ran out of luck  
That boy sure had one hell of a run,  
They finally caught him on a stolen boat with a stolen gun

The ballad by wklitz1 mentions his apprehension as well:

Down in the Bahamas, cops found a plane  
Right off the bat you know they said Colton was to blame  
One summer's day, in the heat of July,  
Colton got caught and this time he couldn't fly.

Though he was not betrayed, as is the popular motif among the outlaw ballads, his career came to an end in a big finale that paralleled the drama of his crime spree. He only surrendered after bullets had taken out his get-away boat, and even then had shown a willingness to kill himself rather than be taken prisoner and held accountable for his crimes.

### **The Singer is Sympathetic to the Outlaw**

The sympathy towards the outlaw in the outlaw ballads is occasionally interrupted by the ballads that could care less about the outlaw, such as with Billy the Kid's ballad where the last stanza goes "And now he's dead, / And we ain't none the sadder" (Lomax, *American* 137). This is true with the Barefoot Bandit ballads as well, some of them are very sympathetic, others not so much.

Atumcronico's ballad says, "I never knew a boy with a head in the clouds so far he flew away [sic] I know he'll make it out someday" and it repeats the popular slogan, "Fly on Colton, fly!" It even warns the outlaw as if Harris-Moore is the modern Jesse James, "So Colton, keep on running, remember how old Jesse went, so Barefoot Colton watch your back, and fly on Colton, fly!"

The Streakin' Healys sing "Ain't nothing wrong with him, he's just a little wild," and then later on, "The barefoot bandit –he's a hero for us all." The lyrics call him, "our boy Colton," and tell the listener, "now you all remember the name and don't misspell it, it's Colton Harris-Moore." The ending of the ballad by wklitz1 says, "Colton I'd like to see you, hope they set you free/ Someday I hope I see you flyin' across that sea." MrWater8land's ballad says something similar, "We'd love to see him fly, Colton fly!" Nature5000's lyrics express the same sentiment, "I hope he'll straighten up and fly right, and start his own business, Barefoot Airlines."

However, the Jude KC Thomas ballad is most certainly unsympathetic to the bandit, saying Robin Hood would be embarrassed of Harris-Moore's deeds and that the teenager will be "wearing shackle bracelets in the blink – blink of an eye." The SouthEndStringBand feels the same way:

You might think its fate, but it's still not too late  
To turn this dang wreck around  
All you've done so far is steal some planes and a car  
Don't end it six feet underground

Despite these few exceptions, on the majority the ballad writers portrayed Harris-Moore as a sympathetic hero, either by warning him, defending him, or by mentioning his impoverished upbringing. Harris-Moore's background as the son of an absent father and poor mother contributes greatly to the feelings the folk had for him. The listener is encouraged to commiserate with the outlaw through the lyrics, even if they disagree with his illegal activity, just like all the "poor Jesse's," "poor Sam's," and "poor Billy's" that came before.

## Warning

The SouthEndStringBand's ballad lyrics just mentioned in the previous feature contain an explicit warning within their sympathetic language. They tell the Barefoot Bandit that it is not too late to stop, alluding that if he does not quit he will end up "six feet underground." The outlaw ballad tradition is plastered with warnings to those who think following in the footsteps of an outlaw-hero is possible, but these warnings are mainly directly towards young men. In the case of the Barefoot Bandit many of the ballads hold warnings, but they are made towards the bandit himself.

Atumcronico's ballad's last stanza reads "Remember how old Jesse went / So Barefoot Colton watch your back / And fly on, Colton, fly!" It makes direct reference to the betrayal of Jesse James, and warns the bandit to keep an eye out. When the Streakin' Healys are rounding up the end of their ballad with the capture of Harris-Moore they remark, "Like all things good and bad, right or wrong/ They gotta reach their end, just like this damned old song." So though the ballads of the Barefoot Bandit did not have warnings like Billy the Kid's or Jesse Jame's or Quantrell that were directed at future outlaw-types, they did contain warnings for the bandit himself.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSIONS

At one point in time the ballad was the traditional form of communication among the masses. It was a form of human expression that catalogued events, celebrated heroes, and disseminated information through the act of singing. The common people, those who could not read or write, shared these ballads to entertain each other and spread knowledge over a large area. Ballads were the very first roots of our modern Internet age, indeed the origins of social media. Just think of the late nineteenth century *Ballad of Jesse James* in the context of today: a YouTube video that went viral.

Some of the most prominent ballad scholars of the twentieth century believed that since the modern ballad had lost its “purity” (a purity defined by a ballad’s ability to transcend generations by only oral means) it could not survive the age of recording technology. Instead of looking for ways to “save” the tradition by redefining what new forms it was taking, they closed the book on it. Instead of looking at how these new technologies and means of communication assisted in the spread of ballads, they declared such mediums corrupt. The scholars of social bandit theory preformed the same feat. They talked about social bandits as figures of the past. They argued that the technological and societal structures of the present era render the existence of such amazing individuals impossible. They did not believe such folk-hero forms could evolve into our modern climate of social media.

Casey R. Schmitt did an excellent job placing the folk-status of Colton Harris-Moore within the context of our current cultural environment. He took the list of aspects that Hobsbawm, Meyer and Seal ascribed to the social bandit and applied them to the folk-hero image the Barefoot Bandit left behind. Just as the images of the social bandits of the past were formed and supported by the ballads sung about them, so did Schmitt argue that the YouTube ballads created and strengthened the image of our modern day folk-hero, Colton Harris-Moore. Schmitt's point was that the social bandit tradition had not died. It had only changed into a new form.

That is where this paper picks up. Schmitt argued that the social bandit tradition adjusted to new climates, and so I argue that the outlaw ballad tradition adapted to new climates as well. Instead of ballad singers composing and sharing ballads among their limited local community sphere, we have ballad singers composing and sharing ballads for, literally, the entire world. Just because these ballads may now be passed on via a few clicks of the keyboard instead of tireless memorization and recitation does not mean they are no longer part of the ballad tradition. The YouTube ballads of Colton Harris-Moore follow in the footsteps of the outlaw ballads that came before, and this paper has striven to make that point.

The attributes I have established for the outlaw ballad tradition are summarized as follows: the constant appearance of local place names to give the ballad and the bandit a sense of authenticity, the act of stealing as the main activity of an outlaw's life, the old Robin Hood motif of stealing from the rich to give to the poor, the description of the outlaw with his good-natured

attitude and kind personality, the consistent presence of a female character to allow listeners room to feel compassionate, a relentless emphasis on the authority's inability to contain the actions of the outlaw or to capture him, the outlaw's audacity whether in word or deed, the betrayal or dramatic capture that leads to the outlaw's ultimate downfall, the sympathetic attitude of the singer towards either the outlaw or the situation in which he had found himself at the end of his life/career, and a warning for future potential outlaws or the outlaw himself. These ten characteristics amply provide a standard by which the American outlaw ballad tradition may be defined, and in applying that standard to the outlaw ballads produced concerning the Barefoot Bandit, it can be asserted that these ballads (regardless of their modern forms) are true exhibitions of the old tradition.

By defining the outlaw ballad tradition in a list of easily identifiable features we can apply a standard to the modern manifestations of the same tradition. If it walks like a duck, sounds like a duck, and looks like a duck, it is a duck. If it is performed like an outlaw ballad, sounds like an outlaw ballad, and is written like an outlaw ballad, it is an outlaw ballad. Despite the setting of a ballad's reception changing from smoky barrooms to the laptop on your café table, despite the content changing from outlaws that rode horses and held up stagecoaches to a young teenager stealing boats and airplanes, the ballad tradition has remained strong.

We need to stop looking at technology as a killer of millennia-old human traditions and instead look at it as the prompt for these traditions' next step in their evolutionary chain. Just as humans have modified themselves to accommodate new climates, new forms of government, and new

societal situations, so has the ballad modified itself for video cameras and streaming software. If we truly believe that new forms of communication make old forms obsolete, then why are we still talking to each other after the invention of writing? Why are we still singing after the invention of the gramophone? Civilization does not come to an end every time a new environmental stress is thrust upon it, it adjusts. The ballad has not died but adapted, and we need to adapt as well, otherwise it is not the tradition that dies, but our appreciation for it.

## WORKS CITED

- Beaster-Jones, Jayson. "Beyond Musical Exceptionalism: Music, Value, and Ethnomusicology." *Ethnomusicology* 58.2 (Spring/Summer 2014): 334-40. JSTOR. Web. 12 June 2014. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/ethnomusicology.58.2.0334>>.
- Bob Friel. "Hyperion Books Announces Publication of The Barefoot Bandit." Bob Friel. Bob Friel, 2012. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://bobfriel.com/hyperion-books-announces-publication-of-the-barefoot-bandit/>>.
- Finger, Charles J., *Frontier Ballads*, New York: Double Day Page and Company, 1927. Print.
- Friedman, Albert B. Introduction. *The Viking Book of Folk Ballads of the English-Speaking World*. New York: Viking, 1956. Ix-Xxxv. Print. pp. xxxix – xxxv
- Friel, Bob. "The Ballad of Colton Harris-Moore." Outside Online. *Outside Magazine*, 29 Dec. 2009. Web. 26 June 2014. <<http://www.outsideonline.com/2Foutdoor-adventure/2FThe-Ballad-of-Colton-Harris-Moore.htmlsearching%20for%20it.>>.
- Gerould, Gordon H. "The Making of Ballads." *Modern Philology* Aug. 21.1 (1923): 15-28. JSTOR. Web. 15 July 2014. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/433419>>.
- Goldstein, Kenneth S. "Foreward." Foreword. *American Ballads and Songs*. By Louise Pound. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922. Vii-xii. Print.
- Hobsbawm, E. J. *Bandits*. New York: New : Distributed by W.W. Norton, 2000. Print.
- Lomax, John A. and Alan Lomax, *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*. New York: Macmillan, 1938. Print.
- . *American Ballads and Folk Songs*. New York: Macmillan, 1934. Print.
- McCartney, Juan and Melia, Mike. "Barefoot Bandit Caught: Bahamas Police Arrest Colton Harris-Moore (PHOTO)." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 11 July 2010. Web. 14 July 2014. <[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/07/11/barefoot-bandit-arrested-bahamas\\_n\\_642114.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/07/11/barefoot-bandit-arrested-bahamas_n_642114.html)>.
- Meyer, Richard E. "The Outlaw: A Distinctive American Folktype." *Journal of the Folklore Institute Special Double Issue: The American Theme in American Folklore* 17.2/3 (May - Dec., 1980): 94-124. Jstor. Web. 26 June 2014. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3813890>>.
- Schmitt, Casey R. "The Barefoot Bandit, Outlaw Legend, and Modern American Folk Heroism." *Folklore* 123.1 (2012): 74-83. JSTOR. Web. 26 June 2014. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.2012.642987>
- Seal, Graham. *Outlaw Heroes in Myth and History*. London: Anthem, 2011. Print.

Seal, Graham. "The Robin Hood Principle: Folklore, History, and the Social Bandit." *Journal of Folklore Research* 46.1 (Jan. – Apr., 2009): 67-89. Jstor. Web. 26 June 2014. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/40206940>>.

Steckmesser, Kent L. "Robin Hood and the American Outlaw: A Note on History and Folklore." *The Journal of American Folklore*. 79.312 (1996): 348-55. JSTOR. Web. 3 June 2014. <[www.jstor.org/stable/538043](http://www.jstor.org/stable/538043)>.

Stewart, Susan. "Scandals of the Ballad." *Representations* 32 (Autumn, 1990): 134-56. JSTOR. Web. 13 June 2014. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2928798>>.

Pound, Louise. *American Ballads and Songs*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1922. Print.

---. "A Recent Theory of Ballad-Making." *PMLA* 44.2 (June., 1929): 622-30. JSTOR. Web. 15 June 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/457484>

---. *Poetic Origins and the Ballad*, New York: Macmillan, 1921. Print.

---. "Sizing Our Ballads." *The American Scholar* 5.3 (Summer 1936): 360-66. JSTOR. Web. 15 June 2014. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/41204225>>

---. "The Southwestern Cowboy Songs and the English and Scottish Popular Ballads." *Modern Philology* 11.2 (Oct., 1913): 195-207. JSTOR. Web. 4 June 2014. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/432821>>.

Ritson, Joseph. *Ancient Songs and Ballads from the Reign of King Henry the Second to the Revolution*. London: Payne and Foss, 1829. Internet Archive. University of California California Digital Library, 17 Mar. 2010. Web. 3 Nov. 2014. <https://archive.org/stream/ancientsongsball01ritsrch#page/n9/mode/2up>.

Wilgus, D.K. Introduction. *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1959. Xi-xx. Print.

[1] "YouTube—The Ballad of Barefoot Harris." YouTube.com, 12 October 2009 [accessed 14 July 2014]. Available from <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=66hgV9KSEk>; INTERNET. [atumcronico]

[2] "YouTube—The Streakin' Healys – Ballad of Colton Harris-Moore." YouTube.com, 2 Nov 2011 [accessed 14 Jul 2014]. Available from [https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=QDzpw\\_3WypU](https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=QDzpw_3WypU); INTERNET. [The Streakin' Healys]

[3] "YouTube—The Ballad of the Barefoot Bandit." YouTube.com 24 September 2010 [accessed 14 July 2014] Available from [https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=lqXa\\_vgu7CE](https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=lqXa_vgu7CE); INTERNET. [Actors Theature of Louisville]

[4] "YouTube – Drew Kelly-The Ballad of Colton Harris-Moore." YouTube.com, 8 January 2012 [accessed 14 July 2014]. Available from [https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=rpruh5a\\_jlk](https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=rpruh5a_jlk); INTERNET. [wklitz1]

- [5] “YouTube – Colon harris moore song.MPG.” YouTube.com 12 July 2010 [accessed 14 July 2014]. Available from <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=JSHWPw8tKcA>; INTERNET. [MrWater8land]
- [6] “YouTube – Barefoot Man singing the Barefoot Bandit Song at Nippers 2010.” YouTube.com, 19 August 2010 [accessed 14 July 2014]. Available from <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=7QYUijb6wEg>; INTERNET. [ncadmiral25]
- [7] “YouTube – Barefoot Bandit Folk Theme Song.” YouTube.com, 18 December 2012 [accessed 14 July 2014]. Available from [https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=TCTB\\_og3IbI](https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=TCTB_og3IbI); INTERNET. [Nature5000]
- [8] “YouTube – The Sad Saga of Colton Harris-Moore.” YouTube.com, 21 January 2010 [accessed 14 July 2014]. Available from [https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=m\\_mZfwV3D5g](https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=m_mZfwV3D5g); INTERNET. [SouthEndStringBand]
- [9] “YouTube—Colton Harris Moore Ballad of the BareFoot Bandit (short version).” YouTube.com, 11 July 2010 [accessed 14 July 2014]. Available from <https://www.YouTube.com/watch?v=Bpp9f93rJZk>; INTERNET. [Jude KC Thomas-Crown]