Vaudeville and the Last Encore

By Marlene Mitchell
February, 1992

William Mitchell, his wife Pearl Mitchell, and John Mitchell

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Vaudeville was a favorite pastime for individuals seeking clean entertainment during the early part of the 20th century. The era of vaudeville was relatively short because of the creation of new technology. Vaudeville began around 1881 and began to fade in the early 1930s.[1] The term vaudeville originated in France.[2] It is thought that the term vaudeville was from "Old French vaudevire, short for chanson du Vaux de Vire, which meant popular satirical songs that were composed and presented during the 15th century in the valleys or vaux near the French town of Vire in the province of Normandy."[3] How did vaudeville begin? What was vaudeville's purpose and what caused its eventual collapse? This paper addresses the phenomenon of vaudeville — its rise, its stable but short lifetime, and its demise.

Vaudeville was an outgrowth of the Industrial Revolution, which provided jobs for people and put money in their pockets.[4] Because of increased incomes, individuals began to desire and seek clean, family entertainment.[5] This desire was first satisfied by Tony Pastor, who is known as the "father of vaudeville."[6] In 1881 Pastor opened "Tony Pastor's New Fourteenth Street Theatre" and began offering what he called variety entertainment.[7] Later B. F. Keith, who is called the "founder of vaudeville," opened a theater in Boston and expanded on Pastor's original variety concept.[8] Keith was the first to use the term "vaudeville" when he opened his theater in Boston in 1894.[9] Keith later joined with E. F. Albee in expanding his business.[10] The perceptiveness to realize what type of entertainment the populace wanted enabled these early innovators to gain enormous popularity, respect, and wealth. They began and quickly amassed an enormous "theatrical empire" and were known all over to be "shrewd businessmen. "[11] "By the end of the 19th century the era of the vaudeville chain, a group of houses controlled by a single manager, was firmly established. "[12] Because of these innovative men, vaudeville became an American institution, delivering to the wishes of the people.[13]

The term vaudeville has sometimes been used synonymously with the term variety. Pastor continued to call his theater on 14th Street a variety theater, although he was scorned for doing so.[14] Variety is defined as "Intermixture or succession of different things," while vaudeville is defined as "a light, gay, or topical song, a short drama with songs."[15] If a precursor to vaudeville existed, it would be that of the novelty entertainment industry.

With the passage of time, vaudeville has been erroneously paralleled with frivolous entertainment or burlesque, but vaudeville suggested neither.[16] In contrast, variety entertainment usually flourished in beer halls or concert saloons." (Stein 3) If one were to make any comparison they could make it between vaudeville and musical entertainment.[17]

These men, Pastor, Keith, and Albee, were innovative and exclusive; however, new entrepreneurs appeared on the scene and opened both small and large theaters and became fierce competition for the old order. As a result, by 1924 Keith and Orpheum were the two most successful vaudeville enterprises.[18] "The Orpheum theatres extended from Chicago to the Pacific Coast, and were founded by Meyerfeld." [19] New York's Palace Theater, opened in 1913 by Albee, was a spot which every ambitious, rising actor dreamed to play in one day.[20]

Vaudeville houses may or may not have offered printed programs. If a program was not

published in the local newspaper, an "A" sign would be displayed on the outside of the theater indicating what acts were to play that week.[21] A typical printed program might appear as shown in Table 1.[22]

One of the reasons for vaudeville's enormous popularity was due to the type of clean entertainment that was provided daily, also illustrated in Table 1. Keith committed himself to two policies.

> Two things I determined at the outset, should prevail in the new scheme. One was that my fixed policy of cleanliness and order should be continued, and the other that the stage show must be free from vulgarisms and coarseness of any kind, so that the house and entertainment would directly appeal to the support of ladies and children. [23]

Table 1.—— Program of the Palace Theatre, Dallas, Texas; September 23, 1923

PALACE
A $10,000 Performance NOW
This week's Palace bill is the largest since the opening of the theater.

- "THE MARRIAGE MAKER" A Paramount Picture
- Mitchell Brothers, The Banjo Boys
- Edward Creamer playing "ZIGEUNDERWEISEN"
- "THE GLOWWORM" with Zeva DeVoe
- "MARCHETA" by Emil Velaco with Hazel Sparks
- PALACE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA DON ALBERT, Director

Source: Palace Theater Program, Dallas, 23 September, 1923.

To show support for the entire family, many vaudeville houses offered a place where children could play while they waited on the performance to begin.[24] Another reason for vaudeville's enormous popularity was the set of strict rules and regulations established by the "Vaudeville Manager's Association, under the discretion of B.F. Keith and E.F. Albee."[25] Rules and regulations governed the performers and their actions while on stage. In a notice to performers, words such as "liar, slob, son—of—a—gun, devil, sucker, and damn" were all prohibited from being spoken or made hint of in any performance.[26]

Originally performances were generally short and held once a day. However, Keith, in the late 1880s was the first to begin continuous shows designed to run 12 hours. Typically there

were 8 performances in each program that would repeat throughout the day. An entertainer could expect to perform his or her act three or four times a day.[27] Table 2, a program from the Rivoli Theater in Baltimore for the week of October 13, 1924, shows this pattern.[28]

Table 2.--Rivoli Theater Program for October 13, 1924

RIVOLI

The Best in Pictures and the Best in Music

No.1 Organ Solo
"Prelude in G Minor" — — Rachmaninoff
(At 12:10)

No.2 Overture
"Bohemian Girl" - - Balfe
(At 2:00 — 4:00 — 7:40 — 9:43)

No.3 Rivoli News Events
(At 12:15 — 2:09 — 4:09 — 5:57 — 7:49 — 9:52)

No.4 Specialty
Mitchell Brothers - - The Southern Singing Banjoists
(At 2:17 — 4:17 — 7:57 — 10:00)

No.5 Feature
"In Every Woman's Life"
(At 12:23 — 2:25 — 4:25 — 6:05 — 8:05 — 10:08)

No.6 Comedy
Mack Sennett's "His New Mamma"
(At 1:35 — 3:37 — 5:37 — 9:20)

Source: Rivoli Theater Program, Baltimore, 13 October, 1924.

This program also illustrates the fact that vaudeville offered something for everyone; an individual would be hard pressed not to like some portion of a performance. The cost to attended a show could range from less than seventeen cents in the small—time neighborhood theaters to three dollars or more for a big-time show.[29]

A performance was typically judged by the applause it received after the act. Therefore, artists used various means to arouse the audience.[30] Patriotism was a commonly used method to elicit applause. This became known as "employing the old sure-fire flag-waving finish."[31] This method was disallowed in many theaters, and well known artists chose not to use this device.[32] Other methods of generating applause were "an innocently inquiring expression as though ask-

ing the audience, 'Do you really want another song from modest little me?' Changing hats or coats for each bow, thus stringing them out till the actor had exhausted his wardrobe."[33] These examples name a few of the more obvious methods to arouse applause. A good finish pleased an audience; a great finish surprised and amazed an audience. The closing of an act or the finish of an act fell within five types, "the dancing finish, the singing finish, the effect finish, the surprise finish and the trick finish."[34] Ground rules were developed to stipulate and regulate a proper finish. Later, guidelines were adopted to set a limit on the number of bows a performer could take before he delivered his "thanks speech."[35]

Before 1893 vaudeville programs were not reviewed. However, in that year quite by accident, Epes W. Sargent, pseudonym "Chicot," became a popular vaudeville critic.[36] Chicot's reviews began one day when there was a shortage of news material to run in the Metropolitan Magazine and Daily Mercury. Chicot's desk was rummaged for worthy news material and by accident many vaudeville reviews, which he had futilely submitted several times for publication, were gathered up and printed.[37] These reviews were widely accepted and appreciated. Not only were the audiences more informed about the acts, but the performers were made aware of the consequences of a bad review.[38] The following review from the Dallas Journal, September 24, 1923, illustrates a typically conservative Midwestern review.

> Sylvani, with the form of the FAUN of Praxiteles, a nearly nude youth, whose chief marks of difference from a human being are the sharp pointed ears, comes uot [sic] of an Italian garden into the world and signifies the elemental and the joy of living in the human life in the picture, "The Marriage Maker," at the Palace this week. It is taken from Edward Knoblock's story, "The Faun," successfully played on the legitimate stage by William Favershain. The allegorical and bizarre character of Prince Sylvani is wonderfully well done by Charles de Roche, who recently played the character of the Hindoo in "The Cheat" and the gypsy in "Law of the Fowlers."
>
> Lord Stonbury, a typical English gentlemen, is played by Jack Holt and Lady Alexandra, with whom he is in love, is acted by Agnes Ayres. Gertrude Astro plays the part of the title-seeking mother.
>
> Sunday afternoon the Mitchell Brothers, banjoists, and the concert given by Don Albert and the Palace orchestra at 4 o'clock were the features of a well rounded program. Original songs and banjo numbers were presented by the Mitchell Brothers, who are from the Rivoli Theater in New York City. Enthusiastic applause followed each of their numbers.[39]

Amore jocular, urban reviewing style can be seen in the New York STAR review column The Bright Side of Life by Billie Taylor.

> Mitchell Brothers, fourth. These two babies ambled out with a coupla chairs and a coupla banjos. They sat down and started to play and sing in harmony. In between times they smiled at the bunch out front as if to say "Ain't we got fun?" The banjos, the singing, and the smiles proved a combination that walloped Mr. and Mrs. Franklin for a row of ash—cans. They gathered in as much applause as I've heard given any act at this [Franklin Theater] house. And they delivered every bit of it, too. The Mitchell boys

> are not going to be strangers around this neck of the woods, and it's my opinion that they can pitch their tent in the alley back of the Palace.[40]

By 1924 there were over twenty thousand vaudeville performers and at least seven hundred vaudeville theaters offering five or more vaudeville acts at each performance.[41] However, if you include Canadian theaters and smaller theaters in the United States playing two or three vaudeville acts with picture shows, the number of theaters exceeds a thousand.[42] Theater sizes varied greatly, but a typical Keith theater would have from 1200 to 1600 seats and sell out 30 performances in a week at sixty-five percent capacity.[43] These figures would imply over 27,000 tickets were sold per week for the average Keith theater. Allen arrives at an average weekly national attendance for 1896 of 1,000,000 as "not being very far off the mark."[44] This attendance represents a sizeable proportion of the nation's 76,000,000 total population.[45]

The vaudeville booking system was necessarily intricate for an enterprise of the magnitude of vaudeville.[46] Acts were categorized as being either big-time or small-time. This categorization did not determine whether an act would perform in a large or small theater, but it was merely a mechanism to differentiate performers and to compute compensation. For example, the Loew circuit, started by Marcus Loew in 1905, specialized in neighborhood theaters offering shows for as little as five cents. By 1918, Loew operated 112 such cut-rate theaters and proved that cheap tickets did not preclude large profits. "In contrast to big- time Keith houses, which promised the stars, [small-time] Loew theaters featured less—famous acts for a less expensive price."[47] However, the big-time stressed their ability to book big-time stars with national reputations in their newspaper advertisements to justify their higher prices and maintain their dominance over small-time. "The Keith—Albee seal of approval became a passport to success, and the booking office became a metropolitan arbiter of taste."[48]

There were a number of intermediaries between the performer and the fan. "The booking system involves four sets of people --the performer; his agent; the circuit booking man; and the manager of the theater at which the act will ultimately appear."[49] Most of the performers were forbidden to participate in the negotiation process, which took place during the booking between the agent and the circuit booking man.[50] This arrangement is illustrated by the following notice published in Variety.

> BOOKED FOR 3 YEARS: The Mitchell Bros., banjo and singing turn, played the Franklin, Bronx, last Thursday (Nov. 20), and were booked for three years by the Keith Special Contract Department, following the "showing."
>
> The act took the booking, acting on the advice of their agent, Fred Mack, of the Alf Wilton office.
>
> It is the first time on record an act has received such a long-term booking after a professional tryout appearance, although several acts have been routed this season following "showings" of that nature.[51]

"As vaudeville approached the twentieth century, not only the types of audiences were changing, but the geographical variation became pronounced."[52] Acts that received a warm welcome in small towns could not always count on receiving a warm welcome when they played in a large city. The people were as diverse as their geographic location. Adding to the performers' uneasiness of new audiences was the invasion of foreign artists.[53] These European performers added a new dimension to vaudeville. Their acts were sophisticated and full of satire. "As early as 1915 Bill Morris predicted vaudeville's doom." The preferences of potential

vaudeville goers changed so quickly that unfortunately the men who had started vaudeville, men such as Albee, did not adjust to the changing demand.[54] However, successful big-time acts as late as 1925 would dispute satire and sophistication as the keys to success.

> Explaining the ways and wherefores of song writing, [the Mitchell Brothers] say that essential ingredients for a song success are, at present, a catchy but very simple tune, and some well known bit of slang. Put these to together and the newsboys and schoolboys and everyone else will hum the concoction.[55]

The fate of vaudeville hinged not upon the merits of simplicity versus sophistication or of slang versus sophistication but upon the new technology that produced the talking picture. "In 1896 [silent] motion pictures were introduced into vaudeville shows as added attractions and to clear the house between shows."[56] Motion pictures gradually absorbed more and more performing time until, after the arrival of the "talkies" about 1927, the customary bill featured a full-length motion picture with 'added acts' of vaudeville. "[57]

Many of the entertainers were absorbed by radio in the 1930s. And later "when radio was replaced by television in the early 1950s, substantial remnants of vaudeville still survived in comedy and variety shows like Milton Berle's Texaco Star Theatre and the Ed Sullivan Show."[58]

"Vaudeville was America's most popular form of entertainment from the 1890s' to the late 1920's and early 1930s."~~ Originally stemming from variety shows, "vaudeville featured continuous performances of songs, comedy skits, acrobatics, and playlets." Its demise occurred at the hands of both the talkies, talking pictures, and the unit—type shows. Today's comments of one old ex--vaudevillian must have been echoed by many. "I was going big and then the vaudeville crashed. ... See. Then there was no more hope. "[60]

Many people have only a vague notion of vaudeville —— of what vibrant, dramatic, humorous, highly talented actors provided for large audiences around the United States and Canada. This is primarily due to the lack of any visual record such as film. "Between 1910 and 1930 motion pictures infused the stage shows in popular patronage that after 1930 vaudeville lost a calling."61 However, many contemporary periodicals such as the Saturday Evening Post survive in libraries and some may have access to scrapbooks and family memorabilia of vaudeville participants. These sources help to remind and teach us of the phenomenon of vaudeville. Further, many performers such as Fanny Brice, Gracie Allen, W.C. Fields, Bob Hope, Al Jolson, the Marx Brothers, Red Skelton, and George Burns continued in the film and television entertainment business and have, therefore, left a lasting record f or society."[62]

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Carson Robison
— and —
His Pioneers
In England — Summer 1932

London Daily Mirror

April 14, 1932

Hillbilly Songs

Carson Robison, who arrives in London tomorrow, is the Kansas-born author and composer of numerous "hillbilly" songs, which he has sung to his own guitar accompaniment from nearly every wireless station in the States.

The songs best known in England are "Barnacle Bill the Sailor," "Woman Down in Memphis," "Open Up Dem Pearly Gates," "Hello, Young Lady," and several others.

London Tatler

May 25, 1932

Carson Robison and his Pioneers

The man who made the "Hill Billy" songs famous is due with his Pioneers at the Cabaret at the Berkley Restaurant from May 30 onwards. A "Hill Billy" is a first cousin of a Hick and a Hayseed. The other members of his company are William and James [sic] Mitchell and Pearl Pickens.

London Evening News

June 29, 1932
Where are the Top o' the Bill Acts
by A. J. La Bern

Cowboy Songs

This week at the Victoria Palace is an American act appearing in British variety for the first time. It is Carson Robison and his Pioneers. Carson Robison is the "hill-billy" king from Kansas, and his father was once champion cowboy fiddler out there. Robison was born in the little cowboy town of Shetopa. His assistants are three charming young people from Tennessee, two brothers, John and Bill Mitchell, and pretty Pearl Pickens, who is the wife of one of the brothers.

"Hill Billies" are actually the folk songs of America, songs which tell the simple but epic stories of the lonely lives of the cowpunchers and their ponies. Some of the song are tragic, some of them are comic; but all of them tell a story.

London Daily Mail

June 8, 1932

THE DUCHESS AT CABARET BRILLIANT CHARITY FUNCTION

The Duke and Duchess of York heard a 20-minute cabaret arranged by Mrs. James Corrigan last night at a ball at Londonderry House, Park-Lane, W., organized by Lady Plunket in aid of the Marie Curie Hospital for Cancer.

The cabaret was contributed to by Mr. Carson Robison and his group of Pioneer singers, who soon had the whole ballroom joining in the choruses of America's spirituals known as "hillbillies."

In addition, there were banjo duets and a humorous dance.

Lord Londonderry was among the guests at the ball, which was attended to by several hundred well-known people.

The Duchess of York wore a georgette gown of cyclamen pink, with shoulder epaulettes of golden sequins. A triple row of pearls fell onto the front of the corsage, and the Duchess also wore a number of diamond bracelets set with beautiful emeralds.

She danced several times with the Duke and members of his party.

Hull Daily Mail

June 13, 1932

A DOUBLE WHISTLE

An extraordinary man is Carson Robinson, the hill-billy singer, whom I met at the weekend. Carson, who, with his hill-billy choristers, has been appearing at the Berkerley [sic] Hotel cabaret, has a curious accomplishment – he can whistle two tunes simultaneously. In other words he can whistle a tune in thirds or fifths. He has no idea how he does it.

The hill-billy songs of America are particularly attractive, as seems demonstrated by the fact that twenty million of Robison's records have been sold, this figure including two million bought by English gramophonists since his recent arrival.

Bournemouth Daily Echo

July 23, 1932

HILL-BILLY SONGS

Carson Robison and his Pioneer Hill-Billy Singers, John and Bill Mitchell and Pearl Pickens, are a novel programme item for National listeners on August 3. Hill-billy songs are the folk tunes of the American backwoods. Many of them will be familiar to listeners, for they originated in this country and the first settlers from England carried their folk songs with them as they trekked across America in their old cattle-wagons and the tunes have been handed down from father to son. Carson Robison has rediscovered these songs and has created an enormous vogue for them in America; and in the short

time the singers have been over here they have become very popular in London. The two essentials of a Hill-Billy song are a moral and a good, catchy tune.

Gramophone

August, 1932

Hill-Billies and Yodelers

We are still reaping the benefit of Carson Robison's visit to this country, and this month he and his Pioneers are in various moods on various companies. [sic] All I can

do is tell you which my choice would be and to enumerate the records in order of personal preference. *The Back Porch* (Zono 6160, 1s, 6d.); *Ain't ya coming out tonight?* and *Swanee Kitchen Door* (Broadcast 3214, 1s, 6d.); *Going back to Texas* and *Why did I get married?* (Sterno 994, 1s, 3d.); *Open up dem pearly gates* and *Meet me tonight in the valley* (Regal MR600, 1s, 6d.); *Steamboat keep rocking* and the old favorite *The Runaway Train* (Sterno 995); and lastly, the sad story of *Stack o' Lees* (Decca F3026, 1s, 6d.).

THE ERA

Aug. 17, 1932

HILLIBILLIES
Carson Robison at the "Bush"

A well-balanced bill in which several artists of established reputation appear, is to be found at Shepard's Bush Empire this week.

Carson Robison and His Pioneers give a pleasing act of songs and banjo playing, in which suburban audiences are initiated into the latest style of vocal entertainment, namely "Hillibillies." The warm welcome they receive is evident of their success.

London Daily Mail

Aug. 18. 1932

Hill-Billies Again

Little groups of people went across to the Berkeley Restaurant in Piccadilly after the play to hear the Hill-Billies sung by Mr. Carson Robison and his Pioneers, who are there again.

"Frankie and Johnny" is still the favorite number in their repertoire of folk-songs from the South American States, and they were in such good form that the occupants of supper tables refused to let them go until they had sung more than a dozen times.

Bystander

August 31, 1932

An impression of Carson Robison and his Pioneers, who have gone back to the Berkeley to sing their "hillbillies"; they are four of the most popular people in London, Carson Robison is the top one, then come John and Bill Mitchell, who play banjos like angels; and then Pearl Pickens, who sings most charmingly.

London Daily Sketch

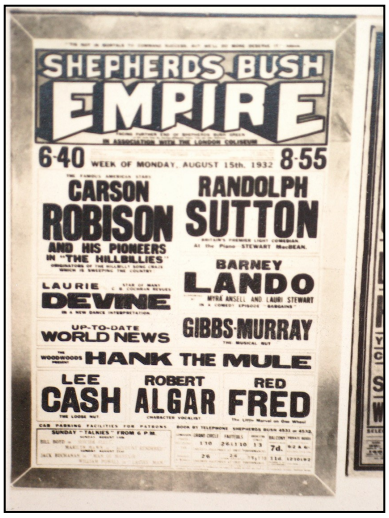
April 16, 1932

Hillybillies in Town
Cowboy singer who "Can Range from Doh to Doh"

"Hillybilly" songs, the latest craze in America, are to be heard here soon on the wireless and in the halls.

Their singer, Carson Robison, a cowboy from Kansas is now in London with his assistants, Pioneers John and Bell [sic] Mitchell and Bell's wife, Pearl. Also his guitar.

"Hillybilly" is Americanese for country bumpkin. The songs are best described as the "spirituals" of the lumber jacks, ranchers or



Southern States hillmen.

"My recipe is simplicity and sweetness," Mr. Robison told the *Daily Sketch* yesterday. "My range is from doh to doh. I can't go over the octave, or I'd break my neck."

Glasgow Evening Times

Aug. 9, 1932

Pavilion – Carson Robison and Variety

Carson Robison and his Pioneers – two gents and a lady- are like the bulk of the entertainers from the same quarter, simply irresistible. They have the American "something," difficult to define, which only a few of our British stars possess, and at the Pavilion last night they took deep root. Dressed in cowboy fashion, and with the aid of guitar and banjo, allied to a very natural talent, they croon the songs of the prairie grave and gay.

Robison in addition is an extraordinary whistler, and his male companions do things with the banjo that I don't suppose have been done before – in Glasgow at any rate. They vary variety and no mistake.

London Daily Sketch

June 27, 1932

[Photo]

Pearl Pickens, one of the Cow-Girl singers at the Victoria Palace.

THE ERA

June 15, 1932

FOLKS SONGS OF THE PRAIRIE

BY HUGH GRAY

Few of us, in our day, were not fascinated by stories of cowboys, of dark and determined seekers after gold in the Klondyke, or of the fantastic adventures of railroad hobos. In those days it did not mean much to us that these men had their moments of emotion and longing. So long as they kept on supplying us with thrills that was all we cared.

Nevertheless, they did have their need of expression in others spheres than that of action. They found their outlet in song. These compositions are the folklore of the people of the great vast West. Over there they called them "Hill Billy" songs. In them are recounted, as in a story, the daily life of the lone cowboys, with its loves or its tragedy of swift death in a stampede.

In them the pioneers of the railroad – at the outposts of civilization – tell of their adventures. These songs, to, have their humour and their satire.

There is in London at the moment a small group of people who know both the letter and the spirit of the "Hill Billy." They have already made them popular on the gramophone, and are now here in person.

At their head is Carson Robinson [sic], the son of a cowboy from Kansas, whose father was once champion cowboy fiddler of that State.

Carson was born in the little township of Shetopa and the "Hill Billy" is in his blood. When you talk with this tall, vital, alert and charming man you feel the spirit of the pioneers of the West.

With him are the two Mitchells, John and Bill, and Pearl Pickens, the wife of one of the brothers.

They are from Tennessee, whence spread the West-going stream of pioneers in the days gone by, and in their blood the true tradition of the "Hill Billy."

"Unless you are in that tradition," says Carson Robison, "you cannot sing the 'Hill Billy.'"

Carson Robison whistled his way to New York from the West.

Wendell Hall, the famous author of "It Ain't Gonna Rain No More" heard him whistling with his little band at a hotel in Kansas City. He had determined by hook or by crook to win through in a career of music – and through this stroke of good fortune the big chance came.

In 1924, the people of America began to wake up to the "Hill Billy," when the first records were made. The sophisticated townsmen have still to be completely convinced. But the country folk, whose own "Hill Billy" is, are now able to take back to their lonely homesteads records of their own music. For Carson Robison and other enthusiasts have spared no

pains to collect, record, and broadcast hundreds of the old traditional songs.

There is the story, for example, of the famous Jessie James, the Claud Duval of the West, daring bandit, the idle of the people, who

robbed the rich to give to the poor. That is but one of many.

The origin of most of them is unknown, witness that most typical of them, "Hand Me Down My Walking Cane," with its refrain, so reminiscent of a negro spiritual, "'Cos all my sins have been taken away."

Hand me down my walking cane.
Hand me down my walking cane.
I'm leaving on that midnight train.
'Cos all my sins are taken away.

The song goes on to tell of the unfortunate adventures of the man who got drunk and landed in jail and called for his mother to bail him out.

And every stanza ends with the unexplained, "'Cos all my sins are taken away."

Again there is the bridal song, "She'll be comin round the mountain," in itself a little cameo of western customs.

Among the sadder songs is the haunting "Dying Cowboy," and for a touch of half cynical philosophy, the songs of the "Railroad Boomers."

The music of these songs is simple, a lilting air, often like a waltz based on the tonic sol-fa.

In common with other and enduring songs, they achieve their charm from the simple use of the scale.

Carson Robison has himself composed many and he and his western troubadours are keeping alive an old tradition.

To one who has the flair all that is necessary is some everyday occurrence of comedy or tragedy in human life. The formula is to recount the story and end with some little moral by way of reflection.

It sounds easy, but not everyone is a Carson Robison.

Some day a complete history "Hill Billy" will be written. It will make a fine human document.

London Daily Mail

June 1, 1932

Hill-Billy Melodies

If you hear a lilting air being sung or whistled and cannot place it among the modern syncopated tunes you may be pretty certain it is one of the new "hill-billies."

These are cowboy spirituals which Mr. Carson Robison and his Pioneers have brought to London from the Southern States, and, judging by the way they were received at the Berkeley Monday night, they are likely to be popular for some time to come.

Keeping Time

People who were having supper, and keeping time to the hill-billies with tapping feet, remarked on their resemblance to old English folk songs.

Lady Traverton who was there with her husband and his party looked most attractive in a blue gown with a little cape, seemed to enjoy them immensely.

The Lady Ursala Filn??? Sankey – the Duke of Westminster's older daughter—also with her husband, and Captain Richard Norton, as well as Lady Mainwaring, Lord Robert Crichton-Stuart and Mr. and Mrs. A. R. Wendell were others who were following the tunes with great interest.

Bristol Evening World

August 10, 1932

FOLK SONGS OF AMERICA

By CARSON ROBINSON [sic]

Mr. Carson Robinson has recently introduced to England hill-billy songs. They are the folk tunes of America – The primitive songs of the wild cowboys, the lonely mountaineers and the rugged lumber-jacks.

English folk songs are known all over the world. From a primitive root, they have grown and spread until they are familiar to millions of men and women who have never even visited the country districts which gave these tunes birth.

"Hill-billy" songs – the folk tunes of the Far West – have as yet achieved no fame. No great musician has orchestrated them; no diva has sung them to vast audiences.

Many of them have never been heard outside the limited circle of the light of lonely camp-fires, or beyond the doors of log huts.

Must Have A Moral

A hill-billy song needs only two qualifications; a good catchy tune, and a moral. Although, in certain cases, the uncouth humor may offend the ears of a drawing room audience, these songs are never guilty of the innuendoes and vulgarity of many modern popular airs.

When cow-punching reached its greatest prosperity during the '70's and '80's some of the ranchers needed large forces of cowboys to deal with their thousands of cattle. These men had necessarily to depend upon themselves for their entertainment, and in such an environment it was natural that songs should be born.

Epics of Real Life

Any song that came from such a group of men would, therefore, be a joint product of a number of them telling perhaps the story of some stampede they had all fought in turn, some crime in which they had all shared equally, or some comrade's tragic death which they had all witnessed.

Some of the songs were used to rouse up lagging cattle; others, during the long watches of the night, were improvised as cattle lullabies to prevent a stampede and sooth the animals to sleep.

These songs although never scored have been handed down from father to son in camps and on lonely ranches to the present day.

Kansas Folk Music and Dance Resource Center

www.sunflower.com

Carson J. Robison: Kansan and Music Pioneer

by Gloria Throne

With over 300 copyrighted songs, European tours, recording, and script-writing and performance for network radio to his credit, Carson J. Robison deserves much more than the mere mention the histories of country music give him. Robison was born in Oswego, KS in 1890. His family soon moved to nearby Chetopa. His father was a cowboy and a stock buyer. His mother played the melodeon, and his father and uncles played fiddle at square dances and social gatherings. By the time Robison was 15, he was earning money playing music.

My interest in Carson Robison began in 1979. I was living in Washington, DC and frequently attended the open-mic night at the now-defunct Red Fox Inn. Eddie Nesbitt, country music historian and singer/songwriter, was a regular at these Monday night sessions. Nesbitt learned I was from Kansas and began to include Robison songs in his song selections for the evening.

Since that time, I have had in mind to devote some time to poking around in southeast Kansas to see what I could find out about this incredible writer of songs like “Way Out West in Kansas," "Carry Me Back to the Lone Prairie," and “Life Gits Tee-jus, Don't It?"

This July I went to Baxter Springs, Oswego and Chetopa and wound up sitting in the living room of 87 year-old W.A. O'Connell, who knows everything about the history down here." O'Connell happened to know that Robison's son, Bob, had moved back to the area. He called him right up and our first interview was set up for 7 a.m. July 14. I asked Bob about the tours his dad did in Europe:

Well he was over there three times. He performed in England, Wales, Scotland, I think that's probably about it; but he did a command performance for the king and queen. I'll tell ya one story about him that's a knock-out.

Everybody, you know, you mention royalty, somebody important, and oh, everybody gets nervous! My dad wasn't that way. He always said whether it was a president or a bum, we all put our pants on one leg at a time. “He's no better than I am!" They were over there and I don't know if it was a command performance for the king and queen or what it was. All of a sudden, they were in the dressing room in the back and the stage manager or somebody came running in and said, “My God, they're comin’ back here. They’re comin’ to the dressing room!”

Everybody got excited, you know, flying around there, and it didn't faze Dad in the least. They walked in with the king and queen and the whole entourage.

The queen was a very gracious lady, and the king, he was kind of a stuffed shirt; but she walked right up to my father and, of course, the British accent that my father could imitate so good, “We just loved your delightful music!" and so on and so forth. He said, “I'm sure glad you liked it.” And she said, “But I particularly like your costumes, particularly your footwear.” And he said, “Oh, you liked the cowboy boots, huh?” She said, “Yes, I do.

They're lovely!”

Well, of course, Dad had all the outfits bought for the group and of course there was Pearl Mitchell, the girl in the group. My father asked the queen, ”Would you like to have a pair? Would you like to have a pair of boots like that for your own?” She says, “Well, I certainly would!” And he asked her, “What size shoe do you wear?" And everybody went, “AAAHHHH!” You know terrible faux pas!

And she kinda looked at him with a twinkle in her eye and told him what size. He went over and picked up a pair of boots and asked her, “Do you like them!” She said, “I think they're magnificent!” Dad said, “I'll give them to you on one condition--as a gift from me to you. You take one boot by the strap in each hand like this (he stretched out his arms) and walk out through the lobby with 'em.“ She looked at him and grinned. “And I’ll do it!” she said. The king said, “You can't.” She said, "I can, and I will!" And she did.

During Robison's first trip to Europe in 1932 he was featured or mentioned in numerous magazine and newspaper articles which referred to him as “a Westerner and a natural musician who can only read music in the tonic sol fa, the High Priest of this (hillbilly) type of music, the song king from Kansas" and many such colorful epitaphs. One reporter for the Evening News in London said if it were possible he would take room 66 at the Savoy Hotel, "for next door this genius and his three companions ooze the music of the West, the rich velvety dialect, and the gorgeous tunes which come right down the traditional years from the cowboy, from the hobo, from the mountaineer."

The writer continues, “They can't help it, they were born on ranges. The songs they sing they've known from childhood, and the rest Carson has written himself. This man has sold in America twenty million records of these wonderful tunes, resurrected from the past, rescued from anywhere but all authentic.”

CARSON ROBISON

AND

HIS OXYDOL PIONEERS

Bill Wheeler Pearl Butcher John Mitchell

Carson Robison

ROBBINS MUSIC CORPORATION

799, Seventh Avenue, New York

English Distributors and Agents:

FRANCIS, DAY & HUNTER LTD

138-140, Charing Cross Rd. London, W.C.2.

Oregon Journal, January 12, 1958

They're Sophisticated Hillbillies of Show Business

Ex-Radio Singers Enjoy Quiet Life in Portland

By Doug Baker

Journal Staff Writer

Some people just don't run to type. The Mitchells are that kind of people.

The first hint of this came when we parked outside their charming home in Washington county. No wagon wheels at the gate. No hitching post, No branding irons.

WHEN Bill Mitchell opened the door to us we were even more surprised. Could this graying, friendly man with the black velvet smoking jacket be the cowboy banjoist who pioneered American radio before Eddie Peabody? He looked more like a stock-broker.

Inside, we were confronted by another enigma. A gracious woman in blue, wearing white necklace and earrings, looking for all the world like a successful clubwoman. Could this be Pearl Pickins, one-time "Sweetheart of Luxembourg," erstwhile songbird for the Gene Autry show? Could this picture of dignity be the hillbilly singer in white chaps and 10-gallon hat who once charmed Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Duchess of York with her Western ballads?

True enough, these were the Mitchells. Exactly half of Carson Robison's f a m e d Buckeroos who once enter-tained National Broadcasting company audiences with "Carry Me Back to the Lone Prairie," the "Prisoner's Song," and "Birmingham Jail." The same people who gave Burl Ives his first radio spot. Peo-ple who worked daily with radio personalities such as Bud Collyer, Bert Parks, Harry Von Zell, Milton Cross and the late Graham McNamee.

ROBISON'S Buckeroos were disbanded with the coming of World War II in 1941. The Mitchells came to Portland in 1946 and entered the lumber business. Today, Bill Mitchell is president of the Midway Lumber Supply company, a wholesale and retail specialty firm which deals in redwood, pine and cedar.

For Pearl and Bill Mitchell the days of show business are a part of the past. Their talents belonged to the great period of radio-the radio that existed before television. The world of radio that once belonged to the entertainers but now ruled by disc jockeys.

None of the original four Buckeroos remains in show business. Robison died last spring in Poughkeepsie, N. Y., still writing the cowboy songs that brought him a measure of fame. The fourth Buckeroo, Bill's brother, John, is in the insurance business in Tennessee.

THE MITCHELLS of 6500 SW Hamilton street, just over the Multnomah county line, are still making music. But only for their own pleasure and for a few friends. Some years ago they did volunteer to sing at the Veterans hospital but their offer was rejected. They could never understand why.

What is it like to leave a busy life in show business for the comparative quiet of the lumber business and suburban living? The Mitchells said they are completely happy in their new roles.

"I've always liked business," said Bill Mitchell. "And I'm crazy about the Northwest. Unless you're a top star in show business, you realize you have to leave it some day.

MRS. MITCHELL, too, is happy with her relatively quiet life, although she confesses to a fondness for reminiscing about the "good old days" with her closer friends. she keeps busy these days with her music, antiques, club activities and bridge.

The Mitchells have no children, but share their home with Kim, a huge Boxer. The dog gets a special horse meat stew, prepared by Mrs. Mitchell every day.

Mitchell and his brother started in show business as the Mitchell Brothers a good few years back. One of

their earliest recordings was "Give Me a Ukulele and a Ukulele Baby" for Victor. "We were in New York four years ahead of Eddie Peabody," says Mitchell. But he adds, with a don't-give-a-darn-if-I-arn-over--40 grin, "Of course, I was sort of a child prodigy."

MRS. MITCHELL a Kansas girl, started her musical career as a real-gone longhair. She studied opera, training her contralto voice first at Julliard in New York and then in Germany. But in 1930 she met up with her banjo-plunking husband. It wasn't long before he converted her rich voice to "hillbilly."

"We never looked down our noses at hillbilly music," said Pearl Mitchell. "We always sang it authentically and we always tried to sing it prettily."

Bill Mitchell agreed that too many modern entertainers try to make a joke of the songs which are America's folk music heritage, be they cowboy ballads, railroad songs, mountain tunes or just plain hillbilly ditties.

WHAT does he think of Elvis Presley and rock-'n-roll?" we asked Mitchell. "I just don't understand it," said the entertainer turned lumberman and we left it at that.

The Buckeroos made hundreds of recordings during the years 1932-1941 and traveled three times to England where they' were topliners at the Savoy, at Claridges and in vaudeville theatres.

Many of the anecdotes which the Mitchells tell of these years rich in experiences come from England where they found themselves celebrities, whisked off to the "stately homes," tucked under ermine lap robes in Rolls Royce's.

PEARL MITCHELL tells of a celebrated faux-pas which involved the Buckeroos at Lord Londonderry's home. The cowboy foursome made its farewells and trouped down the marble stairway' spurs clanking. Later they read in The Tatler that they had unknowingly slighted the duke and duchess of York, soon to be King George VI and Queen Mary. In England, they learned to their horror, guests at a party never leave until after royalty has de-parted.

Bill remembers giving a pair of his cowboy boots to Beatrice Eden, first wife of Sir Anthony who later became prime minister. Mrs. Eden was thrilled with the gift and wore them riding to the hounds. (Possessed of biggish feet, Mrs. Eden couldn't get into Pearl's dainty boots.)

Pearl remembers the troupe's 1936 tour of England best. History was in the making and the couple's friends regaled them nightly with the latest word on Edward VIII's affair with Mrs. Simpson. When the king abdicated, said Pearl, it was impossible to get service in the London hotels. The employees were all too upset.

INTERESTINGLY enough, it was a letter from an English fan of the Mitchells to Mayor Terry D. Schrunk which brought the couple to public notice recently. A man in Sussex wrote the mayor for the address of the Mitchells, pointing out

that he was an avid collector of recordings made by the Pioneers (the name by which the Buckaroos were always known in England).

The Mitchells, who don't get fan mail these days, were pleased to know that they had not been forgotten by t h e i r English fans, but they have no plans to return to show business. Often asked to appear on television programs, they invariably refuse such invitations.

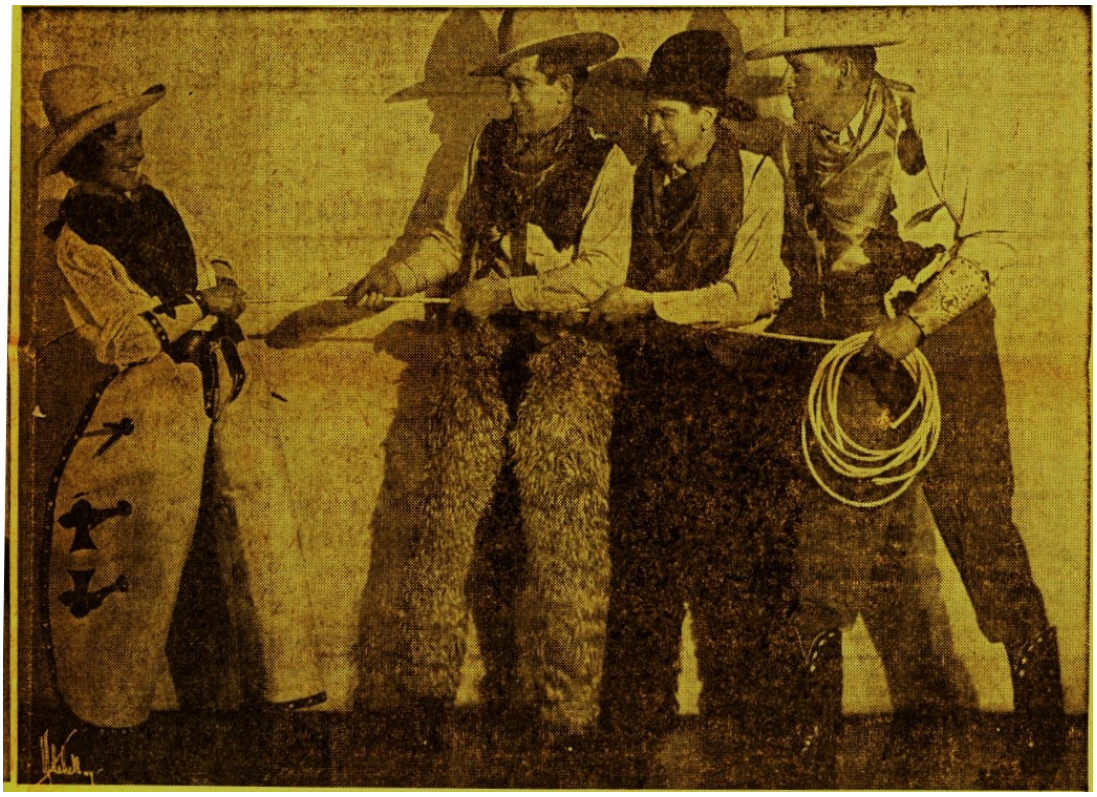
From the time when they made half-hour shows on NBC for Barbasol to their last appearance at Hyde Park for Pres. Roosevelt ("Home On the Range," they agree, was FDR's favorite song), the Mitchells enjoyed every minute of their professional careers.

ASKED TO name the high point, they can't agree. Mrs. Mitchell got a thrill out of teaching James Melton the words and music for "Carry Me Back to the Lone Prairie," but an even greater experience was acting as female vocalist for Gene Autry's radio show.

Meanwhile, the Mitchells aren't sitting around on their hands. Last January they and five other Portland couples took the 12 berths on a banana boat and spent 28 days sailing to Cristobal, Panama, and playing golf in the jungles of Costa Rica.

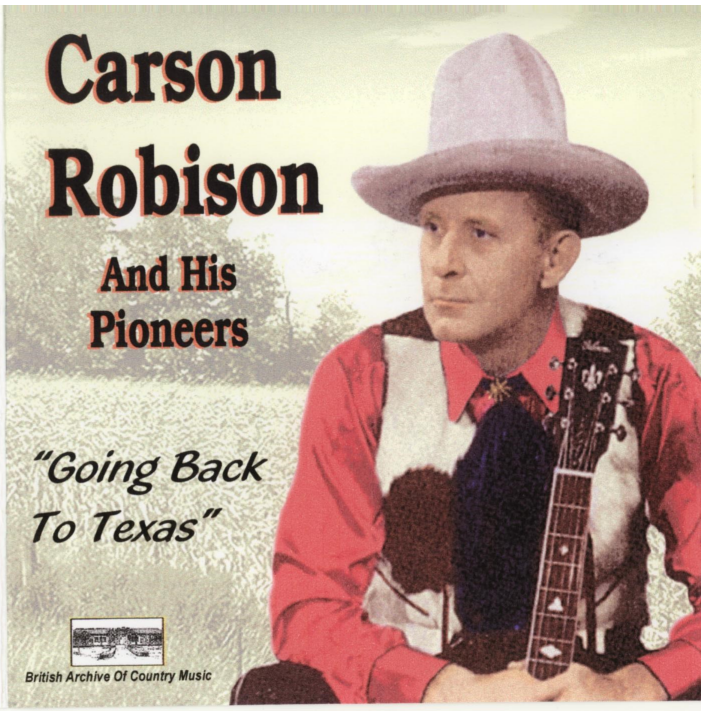
"Maybe one of these days we'll make another trip to England," said Bill Mitchell. "Or perhaps we'll go the other way, out to the islands." Whatever the Mitchells decide to do, you can bet they'll have fun doing it. Hillbilly singers are a happy kind of people.

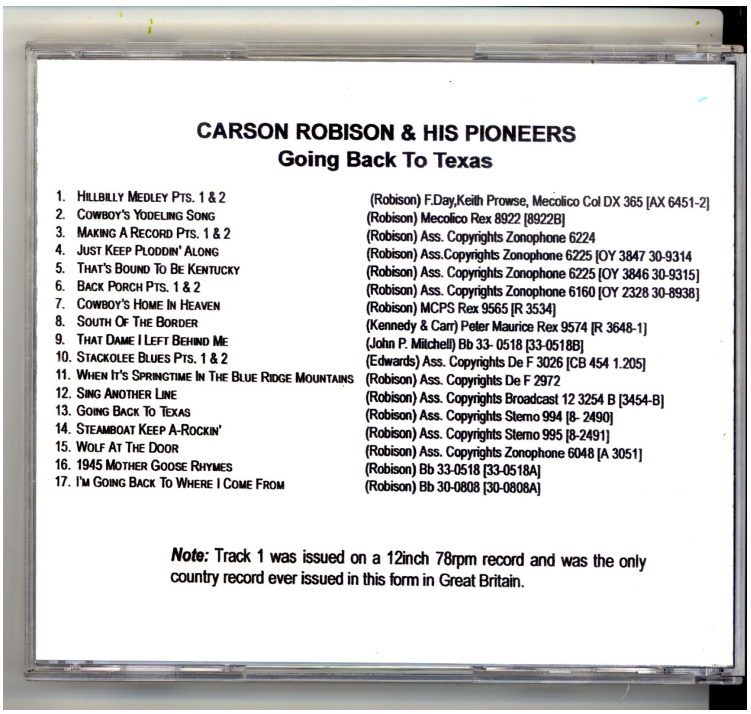
THESE WERE Buckaroos, known as Pioneers in England where this picture was made early in 1930's. Wooly chaps were mandatory for male members of quartet during big performances abroad. Englishmen just didn't believe in American cowboys without them, says Mrs. Bill Mitchell, left, now of 6500 SW Hamilton street. Bill Mitchell is



hombre - in black hat. To left is brother John and, on right, the late Carson Robison, leader of group and ballad composer.

British Archive of Country Music
2007 release of Pioneers CD





CARSON ROBISON & HIS PIONEERS
Going Back To Texas

1.	Hillbilly Medley Pts. 1 & 2	(Robison) F.Day,Keith Prowse, Mecolico Col DX 365 [AX 6451-2]
2.	Cowboy's Yodeling Song	(Robison) Mecolico Rex 8922 [8922B]
3.	Making A Record Pts. 1 & 2	(Robison) Ass. Copyrights Zonophone 6224
4.	Just Keep Plodding' Along	(Robison) Ass.Copyrights Zonophone 6225 [OY 3847 30-9314
5.	That's Bound To Be Kentucky	(Robison) Ass. Copyrights Zonophone 6225 [OY 3846 30-9315]
6.	Back Porch Pts. 1 & 2	(Robison) Ass. Copyrights Zonophone 6160 [OY 2328 30-8938]
7.	Cowboy's Home In Heaven	(Robison) MCPS Rex 9565 [R 3534]
8.	South Of The Border	(Kennedy & Carr) Peter Maurice Rex 9574 [R 3648-1]
9.	That Dame I Left Behind Me	(John P. Mitchell) Bb 33- 0518 [33-0518B]
10.	Stackolee Blues Pts. 1 & 2	(Edwards) Ass. Copyrights De F 3026 [CB 454 1.205]
11.	When It's Springtime In The Blue Ridge Mountains	(Robison) Ass. Copyrights De F 2972
12.	Sing Another Line	(Robison) Ass. Copyrights Broadcast 12 3254 B [3454-B]
13.	Going Back To Texas	(Robison) Ass. Copyrights Sterno 994 [8- 2490]
14.	Steamboat Keep A-Rockin'	(Robison) Ass. Copyrights Sterno 995 [8-2491]
15.	Wolf At The Door	(Robison) Ass. Copyrights Zonophone 6048 [A 3051]
16.	1945 Mother Goose Rhymes	(Robison) Bb 33-0518 [33-0518A]
17.	I'm Going Back To Where I Come From	(Robison) Bb 30-0808 [30-0808A]

Note: Track 1 was issued on a 12inch 78rpm record and was the only country record ever issued in this form in Great Britain.

THE TENNESSEAN

East, West, Home's Best

So says John Mitchell, whose banjo strumming carried him through two decades of vaudeville and is now settled back in his native Columbia.

By Edward D. Burrow
Nashville Tennessean Magazine, Sunday, Feb. 20, 1949

"To me, getting back to Tennessee is the best thing I have done yet." The speaker, John Mitchell, a short-statured graying vaudevillian of the Roaring Twenties, is substantial proof of the old theory that people look like what they are. For 15 years he acted in many of the well-known radio dramas, including playing the part of a wizened gold prospector in Death Valley Days, and before that he twanged the banjo in some of the nation's foremost vaudeville houses.

From 1923 until 1929, John and his brother Bill Mitchell were recognized as the foremost banjo artists in America. During the period they appeared five times in the old Palace Theater in New York, the Westminster Abbey of vaudeville fame.

John Mitchell is one of those naturals who never required many formal lessons in music. He sort of picked it up for himself. He was born in Columbia, Tenn., April 27, 1899, and showed musical talent when he was only five years old. By the time he was nine, he learned to play the cornet, with the markings of the amateur, he admits, but with lots of nerve and gusto.

The brassy sound of the cornet never really suited his taste (nor that of the neighbors, most likely), and about the time he was in the sixth grade at grammar school he discarded the cornet for the ringing, mellow tone of a banjo.

John had finished grade school in Columbia and spent two years at Columbia Military Academy before his father decided to move to Spokane, Washington. So in 1915, with his father and mother, his two brothers Bill and Baker, and his sister, Margaret, John moved to the West and entered Lewis and Clark High school.

There one of the big moments in his life occurred when he unexpectedly won the school declamation contest which he had entered only because his sister had derided his public speaking ability.

By the time John finished Lewis and Clark and he and his brother Bill enrolled in the University of Washington at Seattle and began playing for dances and house parties to help pay their college expense, John's playing had taken on a professional touch. He and Bill be-came popular on the campus and joined the Glee club. Seattle at the time harbored many small music halls, and it was not long before the managers of some of these heard about the Mitchell's and their banjo playing and hired the brothers for their weekend programs.

Toward the end of their second year at the university, the manager of one the vaudeville houses in Seattle called them in and offered them a chance to give six performances.

John was so bucked up that be went out and bought a "new" banjo out of a hock shop for $10. They gave the six shows, proving that they had stamina even if their act did lack polish.

The warmth of the footlights left its mark upon them. Without much debate they decided to forsake the pursuit of higher learning and go into vaudeville full time. They landed a job on a small-time circuit and left Seattle and the university behind. For a year they toured the Middle West doing split weeks, all the while improving and polishing their act.

At St. Louis they left the small-time circuit and headed for the home of big-time, New York. There they joined the Keith circuit and were booked at the Palace, Alhambra, Hippodrome and other large houses. None the worse for their year out of college, they resumed their college education by registering at Columbia University. John admits that it was a busy schedule, and one that he would not like to undertake now—playing both matinee and eveing shows and attending classes—but they

Mitchell is mild and modest and would not use glowing adjectives to describe the act he and Bill had while on the big-time circuit in New York. He simply admits, with some reluctance, that it was "pretty good."

Actually, the Mitchell brothers' number was described by the New York press as a show stopper. John

explains the routine of the act this way. “The opening number would be a fast instrumental one, such as Paul Whiteman’s arrangement of ‘Song of India.’ Then we’d slow the tempo and play a melodic song. After that we’d sing a blues song, followed by a comic one, and we always closed with a fast banjo medley. We always served our best medley for the encore, playing it faster and more furiously than anything, so that it left the audience calling for more.

“We never went back for a second encore. If the customers became too noisy I’d go back on the stage and make a little speech, something like this: ‘When I was a boy courting down in Tennessee my father always told me that after you take a girl home and kiss her good night, don’t lean on the bell or hang on the gate post. Come on home. Then she will be glad to see you next time. We want you to be glad to see us next year. So if you will excuse us, we’ll say thank you and good night.”

IN 1932 the handwriting on the wall of the vaudeville theaters was getting more and more legible. Then Bill and John organized a troupe called the Buckaroos and took off for London, where vaudeville was still going strong. There were the two of them, Bill’s wife Pearl, and Carson Robison, a well-known musician and song writer, whose latest hit tune, “Life Gits Tegious” is already getting tedious on juke boxes all over the country.

They played mostly western and folk songs, appearing in the leading music halls, theaters and hotels in London. They played at the Berkeley hotel in London for 23 weeks, a run which set a record for a single act. The troupe made another trip to England in 1935-36, playing in London, in the provinces, and in Dublin.

With a well-established name, the Buckaroos returned to the United States to find vaudeville gone but opportunities for radio work abundant and they played over various. networks until the outbreak of the war in 1941. Then John became a radio actor; Robison retired from active showmanship to write songs; Bill became a bombsight expert with the Norden company; and the Buckaroos were no more.

JOHN then went to work with an agency in New York producing radio shows, and there, collaborating with an independent producer, he devised the show known as Break the Bank. The high part in his radio career, however, John says, was producing the Stradivari orchestra. It was a novel program - an orchestra composed of eight genuine Stradivarius violins, accompanied by two cellos, four violas, a double bass and piano.

John remained with the producing agency until last December, when he returned to Columbia after 35 years (his wife is the former Miss Louise Sparrow of Columbia) to take over the management of an automobile agency. Bill, after the war, entered the hardware business in Portland, Ore.

Relaxed in a swivel chair after telling about his career, John summed things up this way recently:

“Sitting here looking back over my life re-minds me of something I heard a cowboy out in Wyoming say once. Out there the ranches have what they call the big circle. It is a trail which winds all over the range, and it sometimes takes a cowboy five days to make the big circle. I heard a cowboy say that he had ridden all over the big circle gathering stray calves, but he was back home. That’s what I have done, I suppose. I have ridden the “big circle,” but now I’m back again in the home bunk house.”

Here are the links to the Mitchell videos made in England in 1932 – 1934 with Carson.

http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=9535

http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=53289

http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=10765

http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=28029