

Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie (also known as *The Dying Cowboy* and *Cowboy's Lament*) is one of the oldest cowboy songs recorded and is the first song in John Lomax' well-known book *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads, with Music*, published in 1910. *Lone Prairie* is an instrumental derived from the song. To appreciate the old-time instrumental one should know the song, too.

Here are the first verses from the sea ballad *The Ocean Burial, or Burial at Sea*, written by American poet Edwin Hubbell Chapin (1814–1880) and put to music by American composer George N. Allen (1812-1877) (who wrote the melody to the hymn *Precious Lord, Take My Hand*):

“O! bury me not in the deep, deep sea”
The words came low and mournfully,
From the pallid lips of a youth, who lay,
On his cabin couch at the close of day.

Compare this to:

“O bury me not on the lone prairie.”
These words came slow and mournfully
From the pallid lips of the youth who lay
On his dying bed at the close of day.

The cowboy song was already written before 1900, by whom we don't know, evidenced by an 1898 article mentioning the title with others as it promoted the need back then for song preservation. The first recordings were in 1926 by Carl T. Sprague and four years later by Vernon Dalhart. A popular movie by the name *Stagecoach* came out in 1941 and the song was played throughout. *Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie* was covered by the likes of Sons of the Pioneers, Roy Rodgers, Tex Ritter, Johnny Cash, Burl Ives, and Hedy West (who accompanied herself with a banjo).

There are different melodic portrayals, both in the sung version and the instrumental. In the 1910 Lomax book (now in the public domain), the notation is much like the classic melody in the Carl T. Sprague 1926 recording, and is also similar in the 1930 Vernon Dalhart song. The Sons of the Pioneers had more major chords, especially at the end. When Roy Rodgers sang, he used the title *Bury Me Out in the Lone Prairie*, with changed lyrics to portray burial on the prairie as a desirable final resting place, as opposed to the dying cowboy's lament to be returned to the family home town. Roy's is more cheerful and used fewer minor chords. (When I mention chords, I'm referring to the melody notes. You can hear the difference between a major and minor overall “sound” – its emotional portrayal. The sadder sentiment goes with minor chords.)

Both *Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie* and *Lone Prairie* are odd in not having 8 or 16 measures, but somewhere in-between. I tabbed several versions to come to this conclusion. The sea ballad poem from which the song was taken had regular meter, as did its music (using a different melody), but in the singing of the cowboy song the meter is irregular. I can't explain why, other

than that they don't hold their phrase endings. When John Lomax had the song notated in his 1910 publication, the timing was in 3/4 and in a later publication was in 6/8. When I attempt that in clawhammer tab the look is not what I'm used to and would probably confuse the tab reader as to where to use index/middle and thumb, so I stuck with 4/4 timing in the tab.

The first fiddled instrumental of *Lone Prairie* I can find was in 1961 by Wade Ward (1892 – 1971), known more for his banjo. It's usually fiddled in reel-time, not slowly and dramatically as the sad ballad most of us know. I arranged it for clawhammer banjo in sawmill tuning. It has eleven measures and, if sung, feels like I'm not giving the last word enough time before singing the next word. If I sing along in my own way, I get 16 measures because I'm "holding the word" at the end of a line.

Another fiddler to record was Harvey "Pappy" Taylor (1894 – 1987), included in the Dear Old Illinois collection. This version carries the melody of the classic song of the 1920's. It has eleven full measures, like Wade Ward's. If you sing along, the space held after a line of words is less than what I'd want to be singing, which is how the song and tune come to have fewer than the normal 16 measures. Just an oddity about this song, in my opinion.

This video link of [Jon Bekoff and Nate Paine on twin fiddles](#) stands out as uniquely special and got me started on this TOTW. Jon (1959 - 2015) was a multi-instrumentalist and middle school math teacher with a penchant for music as prolific as John Hartford. It's said that you could be listening to Jon's music collection for weeks. Because Jon enjoyed exploring a tune and its possibilities, fiddle tunes at his jams were played for a minimum of ten minutes and up to an hour if the other players could handle it. Jon was interested in rhythmic variety and studied African, Caribbean, and Cajun music. It's his rhythm in *Lone Prairie* that captivated me, with melody closest to Wade Ward's. The Old Time Central was graced with his contributions for a long while and this [article with his story and music](#) is quite interesting. Jon's fiddling is honored with an entire page on [Slippery Hill](#).

On a personal note, *Oh Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie* was used by my friend who wrote songs by changing lyrics of popular songs for the annual performance of the Rough and Ready Secession Days play called "The Saga of Rough and Ready". The play ran for over 50 years straight, till shelter-in-place forced us to take a break. I've played its music on banjo since 2004, so this TOTW has personal connections. In the story, based on true facts of the Gold Rush era in California, a miner is "bushwacked" at his gold claim by greedy miners. The death scene is actually comical in the play, as was most everything. The lyrics are:

Oh, bury him not on the lone prairie,
But close to town, for us all to see
An epitaph, 'bout his love of pies
Will bring us all, some teary eyes

Although *Oh Bury Me Not on the Lone Prairie* is included in the top 100 cowboy tunes of all time, it has also been picked up in our old-time music world. Bruce Molsky did an incredible job of bringing cowboy and old-time together. BHO member Mike Iverson (bluesage) did another

wonderful job singing and playing banjo, as did members Debbie Lee, based on Hedy West's. Chris Mahoney based his instrumental on Reed Martin's, which I can't find on-line. If you have it, please share. My mp3 combines five versions: Sprague, Taylor, Molsky, Ward, and Bekoff. The tab pdf below also includes Sons of the Pioneers. I hope you enjoy this TOTW journey.

Links to music and articles:

[Carl T. Sprague, 1926](#)

[Vernon Dalhart, 1930](#)

[Johnny Cash](#)

[Hedy West](#)

[Wade Ward](#)

[Harvey "Pappy" Taylor, Dear Old Illinois, #192](#)

[Jon Bekoff and Nate Paine](#)

[Bruce Molsky](#)

[Mike Iverson](#)

[Debbie Lee](#)

[Chris Mahoney](#)

[Banjo Mitch](#)

[Janet B](#)

[Wikipedia article](#)