

***Mister You Got Yourself a Horse.* Roger L. WELSCH, (ed.)  
(Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1981. Pp. 205, \$6.95  
(paper))**

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Volume 9, numéro 1-2, 1987

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081439ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081439ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Dulany Carter, S. (1987). Compte rendu de [*Mister You Got Yourself a Horse.* Roger L. WELSCH, (ed.) (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1981. Pp. 205, \$6.95 (paper))]. *Ethnologies*, 9(1-2), 117–118. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081439ar>

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# Mister You Got Yourself a Horse

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This selection of tales about horse trading was collected in the thirties by fieldworkers for the Nebraska Federal Writers Project. Lost in a file in the State Archives for years, the tales were found by Roger Welsch by accident. Fortunately for us, he has taken the time to edit and provide an introduction to these old-time horse traders' stories.

Trading of all kinds was much more important in the 19th century than it is today. Welsch writes in his introduction, "European visitors commented in their journals on two distinctive and ubiquitous American habits: spitting and trading." Swapping and barter were well honed skills in rural America. Horses, the cars and tractors of their day, were a crucial possession of farmers and townspeople alike. People prided themselves on their well matched teams for driving, and valued a willing work horse. Without horses, farming was impossible. In this world, the travelling horse trader was a well known figure.

In his introduction, Welsch expands upon the similarities between yesterday's horse trader and today's used-car salesman. Both occupations have produced a wide range of stories, motifs and vocabulary concentrating on the tradesman as a wily fox and the buyer as a hayseed sucker. As Welsch puts it, there remains to this day "the shallow pretensions of honesty and the underlying baserock of deception." This might make a few traders and buyers unhappy, but it certainly produced a number of riotous stories.

The thirty-five stories included are divided into four sections: The Traders, Horses, Some Traders and Racers. Each story has an introduction which indicates who the storyteller and collector were, as well as pointing out thematic structures and similarities between the tales. The collection is drawn from the repertoire of about a dozen traders, most of whom were in their seventies or eighties when interviewed. Traveling the back roads these traders or "roaders" were on

the lookout for anyone who might be convinced that the horses they had were not as good as those the traders had to offer. The lists of equine faults and diseases which were temporarily covered up during the deals, swaps and trades are truly staggering; blind horses were passed off as having normal vision, skinny horses were injected with air under their skin, lame horses were given cocaine and excitable horses were routinely drugged into a safe stupor. *Bull-windies, roarsers, skates, snags, and stump suckers* were just some of the terms for horses with serious problems.

A horse with a hidden flaw could be the smart horse trader's most valuable animal. Often traders were arranged with a "boot"—an extra bit of money, booze or valuable item which was included in the trade. After trading his worthless horse to a farmer, the trader would leave long enough for the dupe to discover his error. Returning later, the trader would offer to take the horse back but would keep the boot—thereby gaining something for nothing. This was called a back-trade. Traders frequently traded with each other and some of the most entertaining tales are the battle of wits and words between two experienced horse traders.

The best traders were masters of psychological insight, they could sum up a man's weaknesses from the state of his barn yard, or his opening remarks to a stranger. Welsch writes: "The talent of the horse trader was not simply knowing animals but, even more, knowing people—how to develop and hold their interest, how to manipulate words and situations subtly, how to relieve tension with humor, how to live by one's wits." No wonder they made good storytellers.

This book does not attempt to do more than provide a good solid collection—a blessing for folklore publications where too often theories and excess verbiage are plastered to interesting but basic material and presented as earth-shaking developments. Welsch's book is an example of what has remained a strength in folklore from the beginning: an attention to detail and an appreciation of skilled oral communication. Horse fanciers, folklorists, historians and con-men should thoroughly enjoy this collection.

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