In this age when it is the rage to portray everything that has to do with cowboy lore, in the movies, on the television screen, on the radio, and in many magazines, and we are busied with the building of a Cowboy Hall of Fame as a national monument to the services rendered by this particular group of early day citizens, it is but natural that we here in Oklahoma recall something of our own history that was born of the cowboy tradition.

This is the story of the rise and development and of the passing, also, of an early day musical organization that contributed a great deal to the enjoyment of citizens, not only here in Oklahoma, but all over the nation. It is the story of "Billy McGinty's Cowboy Band" which came into being in the very early days of the radio. Along with the development of the radio there was a demand for entertainers who could broadcast suitable programs. So this band very naturally fell into place as a radio broadcasting group. The group was first formed as a purely local dance band, but in the course of events became an organization that assumed much more than local fame.

At first, according to the local newspaper, the Ripley Record, the group was known as "The Old Time Fiddlers," but as one of its original members told the writer, the boys changed the name to the "Ripley Cowboy Band." It was composed of local musicians who liked to play old time tunes. This same member recalls how the boys got together as early as the year 1921 and formed the musical group. And from this beginning a more pretentious band grew and became known beyond the small village of Ripley.¹

One of the interested business men of Ripley, George Youngblood, saw in this group the possibilities of a fine musical organization specializing in cowboy music as its main attraction. As the radio was coming into use he saw this band as a group that should have a more pretentious name than "The Old Time Fiddlers," or simply a "Ripley Cowboy Band." Youngblood was a town-promoter of no mean ability and talked with the group and came up with

¹All of the newspaper references in this article were taken from the files of the Newspaper Department in the Oklahoma Historical Society.
the idea of calling the band "The Billy McGinty Cowboy Band." This was a very natural conclusion since Billy McGinty was known nation-wide as one of the very early cowboys of Oklahoma, Texas and Arizona. At first Billy was not so sure he wanted that kind of publicity, but after being told by the aggressive Mr. Youngblood and by the boys themselves that it would be a very fine thing for Ripley to have his name, he acquiesced and thus in early 1925, March 19, to be exact, we find this item in the local newspaper: "G. G. Youngblood and Frank Sherrill motored to Bristow last Tuesday. It is said that the 'Old Time Fiddlers' from Ripley will put on a program on the air from KFRU there in about two weeks."

A few days before this, the Ripley High School had visited Bristow and put on a program of varied selections, as we read in the Record of March 12, 1925: "A fine program of the Ripley High School was broadcasted from KFRU, 'The Voice of Oklahoma,' at Bristow today. . . . . . It is said that Ripley will again appear at Bristow some evening soon at which time the old time fiddlers will take a part."

So with the birth of the radio station at Bristow, one of the first in the state, talent was needed and was obtained from the colleges, high schools, and from the few dance bands available for such purposes. It will be noticed that the radio was in its infancy and not many people afforded one in their homes. At one time the newspaper proudly stated that there were at least twenty-five or thirty radios in Ripley homes and asserted that there would soon be many more installed by progressive citizens. A report of this High School broadcast was given by the Record, a whole column, giving the numbers used, the performers, and the names to whom these numbers were dedicated, a very important part of an early day broadcast. Some of the report in the Ripley School Notes read: "The program broadcasted by the Ripley Hi School over Radio from Bristow last Thursday was considered a fine program and was enjoyed by all. The school children all gathered in the auditorium to hear the Radio—at school."

As early as January of 1925, reports of programs on the Bristow station occupied places in the news columns of the papers. The Record states that "Many have enjoyed the fine programs given by the new broadcasting station at Bristow during the past week." Another item informed the public that "The Cushing Junior Chamber of Commerce will
broadcast a program from station KFRU at Bristow Monday night, Feb. 9th.'

We now begin to hear of "Billy McGinty's Cowboy Band" in the headlines. The Ripley paper states:

"Program Broadcasted From KFRU, Bristow, Oklahoma.

"Personnel—Bill McGinty, Roosevelt Rough Rider; Col. Frank Sherrill, First Fidler; U. E. Moore, Bass; Paul Harrison, Guitar; Guy Messecar, Mandolin; H. C. Hackney, Banjo; Mrs. Marie Mitchell, Pianist; and Ernest Bevins, Harmonica."

We pause to note that this was the original group of Ripley players and that they were with the band when it disbanded a year or so later. We continue with the write-up of the first broadcast:

Bill McGinty's Cowboys playing the old time tune, "Roaring River." This was dedicated to Col. Sherrill's mother, wife and family. It is interesting to note some of the titles of pieces rendered at this broadcast: "Durango Hornpipe," "Ride 'em Cowboy," "Over The Waves Waltz," dedicated to the town of Ripley; "Hell Among The Yearlings," "Who Stuck The Gum In Grandpa's Whiskers?" "Casey Jones." "Breakdown in F," "Lost Indian," "Turkey In The Straw," "Arkansas Traveler," "Irish Washerwoman." A guitar duet by U. E. Moore and Col. Frank Sherrill was a feature of the program. U. E. Moore now lives in Oklahoma City where he is the proprietor of a barber shop, and Frank Sherrill, a retired farmer, lives a few miles north of Ripley on his old home place.

"Ernest Bevins, aged thirteen, played the following selections on the Harmonica: 'Irish Washerwoman,' 'Red Wing,' and 'Casey Jones,' each being dedicated to some of his friends in regular radio procedure.

The article finished with these words: "Many telegrams and telephone messages were received during the concert, not only from all over Oklahoma, but from points in Texas, Missouri, Arkansas, Kansas and other states, congratulating the players."

Thus the first Cowboy Band began to assume importance in music circles of the day. Some time during this program, George Youngblood, who seemed to be sponsor and first "daddy" of the group, made these radio remarks.

Facts About Ripley:—Ripley is a town on the Santa Fe leading to Shawnee. It is in Payne County and has all the branches of business claimed by the small towns of Oklahoma. The town was named for President Ripley of the Santa Fe Railroad.

It has a population of about 500, and its five churches and extra fine school building testify as to its religious and educational advantages. The town is situated on the Cimarron River. . . . Ripley cannot as yet boast of its many oil refineries and factories, but if you will take a look at the oil and gas wells around the town you will see that they are sure to come.
Bill McGinty and his Rough Rider Fiddling Cowboys’ Band are located at Ripley and we are proud of them. Since they are here representing the town and will play for you, perhaps it is in order to tell how and why the Cowboy Band came into existence.

William McGinty

In introducing Bill McGinty and his Cowboy Band of old time fiddlers, I will state that Wm. McGinty was a real cowboy at the age of 14. He had a backbone of steel and the courage of any locoed bull that roamed the wild and wooly plains, and at this young and tender age there was no horse or steer that he could not ride. . . . .

At this point the speaker told of Billy’s personal history in the Spanish American War and in Buffalo Bill’s Circus, and how he won medals with his riding feats, and then the speaker continues: “Bill is now a few years older than he was when he was World’s Champion Rider. He often dreams of the times had in the dangerous profession, and to while away the time, he, like Old King Cole, has ‘his fiddlers three, and is as happy as can be’ eating pie and listening to their jokes and music.” Here the speaker’s flair for oratory and his enthusiasm carries him away as he continues:

I wish to say of this bunch of cowboys that they are not only good fiddlers, but can ride or rope anything that has horns, hide or hair. This is emphasized in Col. Sherrill, who will demonstrate the fact if you will furnish the animal you want ridden. He plays first fiddle and we leave it to you whether he can fiddle or not after he plays for you.

But to return to Bill McGinty. He has friends in every state in the Union, and in Mexico and Canada, who will know his voice whether they heard it in Heaven or elsewhere. I want him to say now just a word to his old-time friends who may be listening in at this time. I now introduce to you Bill McGinty.—Youngblood.

Bill, however, had slipped out and didn’t reappear until speech-making was over. He never pretended to be able to ‘rope’ a crowd by talking. He, however, has been hearing from many old friends everywhere by telegraph, mail and telephone.

Those who know Billy are not surprised that when the speech-making came he disappeared. He will never, even to this day, try to make a speech. He will answer questions gladly pertaining to his life and riding experiences, but he shuns a speech as, it is sometimes reported, the devil shuns holy water.

According to the newspapers this first performance was the curtain-raiser to added appearances on the Bristow radio station. Reports of their accomplishments were attracting
many outsiders, some of whom visited the station at broadcast hours. Two musicians of the old time variety were attracted from neighboring Drumright and after several visits joined the band. They were Dave Cutrell and Johnny Bennett. Dave had the nickname of 'Pistol Pete,' and was a real radio character. He had coal black handle-bars mustache, one piercing black eye and two very prominent front teeth. All of this with his ability to sing made him outstanding. His special song which was called for everytime he appeared on any program was entitled 'The Midnight Special.' One of the boys recalls how Dave got his monicker of 'Pistol Pete.' The band all dressed in their cowboy outfits were in Bristow to give a program. Cutrell encountered the hotel porter on the way to the wash-room and jokingly asked him where he could get a bottle of liquor. The porter, who did not know Cutrell, protested strongly, saying: 'Nothin' like that around here, boss. We don't handle anything like that. Suspecting that Cutrell was a detective the negro added: 'No, suh, you look like a pistol Pete, a sure 'nuff law man.'

After the program the negro approached 'Pistol Pete' and quietly said: 'Boss, I can get you that bottle now.'

After that incident the boys called Cutrell 'Pistol Pete.' There are some who think that the later famed 'Pistol Pete' of Perkins took that handle from the Cowboy Band member.

The Band had dates to fill long before they were on radio, however, as on Thanksgiving night, 1922, they played for a dance in Pawhuska. In 1925 they played a broadcast appearance on station KFJF, Oklahoma City, from 9 to 12 at night, and they filled a week's engagement at the Liberty Theater in Oklahoma City. Ulys Moore tells of going to Tulsa with Billy to play at the Mayo Hotel for Pawnee Bill's Indian Show. They could not muster all of the regular group, so they substituted Ernest Bevins, the harmonica player and Leonard Fullwider. And they must have been good substitutes for the station manager told Ulys after the broadcast that they had 'the smoothest string band he had ever heard.'

Always with the Band's performances there seemed to be in the background some of Billy's former experiences coming to light. The local paper at this time tells of the time Will Rogers was to be in Oklahoma City and people from all over the state went down to greet him. Billy went with others, but as was his custom, he loitered in the background. As Will stepped from the train he was met by some hundred business men and remarked:

'Where you-all going?'
"We've come to meet you," said Mayor Cargill.

"Oh," said Rogers, "I thought you were leaving town."

Then spying a brown shirt in the background, Rogers hastened through the notables to grasp Billy’s hand and exclaim: "Folks, meet Billy McGinty, my friend. You know McGinty here was Roosevelt's personal friend in the Rough Riders. He was with him all the time. One day Roosevelt got on 'im because he couldn't keep step. McGinty just smiled and told Roosevelt, 'I joined this here army to ride a horse, and you'd better bring me one in a hurry.'"

After copying this article from the Oklahoma News, the Ripley paper, in introducing another announcement of the Band's activities, carried this heading: "Billy Was Colonel Teddy's Pal. At the battle of San Juan Hill in the Spanish American War, he carried coffee and sustaining food to the boys on the field. Diminutive Billy McGinty of Ripley, Oklahoma, who with his famous Cowboy String Band put on a unique entertainment at KFRU today...."

This notice was taken from the Bristow Daily Record and copied in the local Ripley paper of May 28, 1925.

Then in the same issue we read: "McGinty's Cowboy Band went today to broadcast a program. The program was one of the best ever put on the air by this popular band and was well received. Upon their return they were entertained at Cushing, where a large audience greeted them and applauded their efforts."

Another account of this broadcast appeared in a later issue. It read:

Billy McGinty's celebrated Cowboy Band, accompanied by a number of ladies and gentlemen from this place, went to Bristow last Thursday, and broadcast a fine program from KFRU station at that place. The members of the band were dressed in regular cowboy style, including broadbrimmed hats, high-heel boots, "chaps," and spurs, etc. They played at the noon hour and from 3 to 5 p.m., produced a fine program of old time string tunes, selections on the piano, singing, etc., and the concert was well received by hundreds of listeners .... Mr. McGinty was prevailed upon to make a short talk. His experience as a Rough Rider, broncho buster and cowboy is enshrined in the memory of thousands who know him personally.

Some of the messages received were published. They were from Stillwater, Cushing, Ponca City, Cleveland, Oilton, Chandler, Haynesville, La., Fort Smith, Ark., and many other places. One message was from the Osage-Pawnee Council of the Boy Scouts of America.

The band was also welcomed and entertained in private homes. One account in their home town paper tells of them being the guests of Mr. and Mrs. Charlie Williamson along
with other friends. The item goes on to mention "pink and white ice cream and cocoanut cake." It was a common item to read of the band going out to fill a date. One item read:

McGinty's Cowboy Band will go to Bristow today . . . . . The notice was not received until a day or so ago. The program was varied with mandolin, guitar and banjo solos and duets that were played by U. E. Moore, Guy Messecar, Paul Harrison and H. C. Hackney. Col. Sherrill, the first fiddler, is also a fine guitar player. Many selections were dedicated to persons throughout the state . . . . .

Mr. McGinty, while there, was met by a gentleman who had come from Chicago to hear the band, and was asked to consider a tour of the band for several weeks. It is not likely, however, that the band, which is composed of business men from here, would wish to make such a tour, especially in the warm summer months.

So the fame of the Band had reached Chicago and the nation was inviting these "Old Time Fiddlers" to entertain in further reaching broadcasts and personal appearances. In the August issue of the Ripley Record we read: "McGinty's Cowboy Band, of this place, has been offered the job of playing for the Ellis County Fair at Arnett. Mr. McGinty has been absent for some days and whether or not the band will accept the offer has not been decided on, we learn." Ellis County was one of the former homes of Billy in his earlier married life. Old Day County was where Billy had the Crossed Saber Cattle Ranch and where he served as deputy sheriff for some time.

Naturally with all this build-up and fame, for it was a "going organization" at this time, well known and received, Billy was followed by the "news hounds" and at this point it was not surprising that some one with a flair for show business would covet the organization, so in the Repley Record of December 3rd, 1925, we read a social item which must have had more than social significance. "Mr. and Mrs. Otto Gray, of Stillwater, attended the entertainment at Hominy for which McGinty's band, of this place, furnished music." The Band broadcasted later from KVOO and the Tulsa World published a picture of the group with a write-up of the origin and fame of the Band.

Evidently Otto Gray was thinking of taking over the organization since he had a talent for managing such a group on a wider basis and scope of operation. It was well known that the local boys would not be in a position to make tours out of the state, so if the band were to answer the call for nationwide engagements, it would have to be reorganized. An engagement at Hominy made this perfectly clear. The men could not afford to neglect their business affairs for so long a time.
We read in the *Ripley Record*, copied from the *Stillwater Gazette* the latter part of December, 1925:

Bill McGinty's Cowboy Band of which Otto Gray of Stillwater, and a group of Ripley folks are members, will extend its field of action in January 1926. Arrangements have been made by Mr. Gray to appear on the Orpheum vaudeville circuit in Kansas City, Mo. for two weeks, beginning January 17, and for a radio concert for the W. H. Sweeney Automobile School in Kansas City, it is reported.

J. M. Hemme of Kansas City, son of F. W. Hemme, of Stillwater, completed arrangements for the band's appearances in Kansas City.

The boys were dated for a week at Hominy, as stated above, soon after being taken over by Mr. Gray, but when the week's engagement was over they resigned from the organization in toto. This made it necessary for a complete reorganization with the old name only, "McGinty's Cowboy Band," for a group of players outside the Ripley community. Since they had no connection with the town of Ripley the original and well known group was no longer with the band and it passed out of existence as a Ripley organization.

Billy went with the new organization for a time, but was soon compelled to return to business at Ripley. In talking over the Band's progress, Billy recalls that George Youngblood and his own son, O. W. (Jack) McGinty, made several trips to the radio station at Bristow before they were able to "sell" the new band to the radio authorities at that place. Another amusing incident is one that he tells. When the Band went to Bristow for the performance given above, as their first, and Mr. Youngblood made the flowery speech above reported, Billy says that Youngblood stood before the "mike" and became utterly speechless for several seconds before he could utter a sound. But Mr. George Youngblood was the band's first sponsor and "daddy" and kept up his interest all along in the progress of the organization.

In running through some old papers and clippings recently, the writer found this parody on a very popular song of the day: "Alexander's Ragtime Band." A penciled note at the foot of the typewritten song words stated "This was the first Cowboy Band on the air, and this was the first song that was sung. It was rendered by Paul Harrison, 'Fat' (Alvin) Mitchell and Mollie McGinty. Mrs. Marie Mitchell played the piano":

Tune in and hear, tune in and hear
Bill McGinty's Cowboy Band;
Tune in and hear, tune in and hear—
It's the best band in the land.
They can play the old-time tunes
Like you never heard before,
Just like the ones that they
Played in days of yore.

It's just the grandest band what am, Honey Lamb,
Tune in and hear, tune in and hear
Bill McGinty's Cowboy Band.

Bill is the man, Bill is the man
Who is the captain of this Band;
And if you want to hear
The good old tunes played fine and dandy,
Tune in and hear Bill McGinty's Cowboy Band.

Thus the Band arose, entertained the early Oklahoma people, gained a splendid reputation, prospered for a time, and like all things in nature, passed quietly from the scene of action, but all old timers of the Ripley neighborhood still talk of the "old time fiddlers" in "Bill McGinty's Cowboy Band" with affection as they seem to hear those old tunes still ringing in the ear of memory.