

SINGING COWBOY

TEX MORTON, the singing cowboy who describes himself in the newspaper advertisements as "probably the world's most famous New Zealander," was actually born in the same district that nourished Lord Rutherford of Nelson. What gives added piquancy to his claim is the fact that he also attended Rutherford's old school, although as far as is known he has not yet proclaimed himself to be Nelson College's greatest old boy.

Bob Lane (that is Tex Morton's real name) was born in 1916 at a house in Riverside Road, in the heart of Nelson city. His house, he remembers, was just along from the swimming baths, and only a few yards from the Maitai River. Although he is reported to have run away from home when he was 14, he in fact remained at school until 1932, when he was 16. When he left—it was the darkest year of the depression—he obtained work with some other boys, canvassing for dry cleaning, buying gold, selling radios, and so on, and travelled all over New Zealand, from Gore to Waihi. Finally, he forgets in which year it was, he got a job with a travelling boxing troupe at the Napier Mardi Gras. He used to sing, help put up the tents, fight a round or two if necessary, drive a truck, and do other odd jobs. The troupe was part of a travelling vaudeville show run by an Australian family called Foster, who now have a big name in the Commonwealth. "We were all battling in those days," he says.

An old schoolfellow remembers him as rather a facetious chap. There was a school newspaper that used to be passed around and which the boys had to pay a penny to read, to cover production costs. On the bottom of one week's copy Bob Lane had scribbled, "If I keep only one eye open can I read it for a halfpenny?" About this time he learnt to play the guitar from some of the lads and Maori boys around town, he says, and once sang on the local radio station, which was then controlled by a radio club, of which Ian Mackay, now supervisor of programme organisation for the Commercial Division of the NZBS, was secretary. Later he broadcast from 12B with Reg Morgan and Albert Russell.

He Yodelled for Variety

"When I was a boy I was supposed to be the greatest nuisance Nelson ever had," he says. "I was a parcel boy at Mackay's store for a while, and we used to whistle and sing and yodel all the time—you know how boys are. The

(continued from previous page)

for a living and who have faith in a future they want to make that will be better than the past.

I rather think they are the kind of Americans who may come to you in the future under the Fulbright scheme, and the kind of Americans New Zealanders will meet when they are sent to America under the Fulbright scheme. My impression of you was good when I came to New Zealand. In general it grew better as I lived with you. I leave giving you my very best wishes and thanks for all that you have done for me, for Mrs. Palmer, and for our son. I only hope that in some way we may have the chance of matching for New Zealanders the courtesies you have shown us.

story is that I learnt to yodel up in the Maitai Valley, but it was just one of the things I did in vaudeville. We used to sing a comic song and a straight song and a ballad, and then put in a yodel occasionally for variety."

He doesn't remember exactly when he adopted the name Tex Morton, but when he was about 18 he went to Australia, and there he shouldered a swag and roamed, and worked through the back country. He started collecting folk songs and putting to music ballads of



TEX MORTON (right) gives an impromptu guitar lesson to Gil Cooke of 12B

the kind made famous by Banjo Paterson and Henry Lawson. One or two recordings he made became best-sellers overnight, much to his own surprise, and before long the recording companies were searching him out in the bush to come and make more. Since then he has built himself up into a personality almost as famous out here as Gene Autry is in America.

When *The Listener* called on him in his hotel room one morning he was still in his pyjamas, and he talked volubly as he got dressed. He put on a pair of high heeled, laceless Australian stockman's boots—"I never wear anything else now. Low heeled shoes make my leg muscles ache." On top of the wardrobe was a wide brimmed stockman's hat and his shirt and trousers were of the same open air style. He wore a leather belt with a magnificent silver buckle.

"That belt once belonged to the world's greatest cowboy, Johnny Schneider," he said. "He originally gave it to Steve Laird, and once when I did Steve a very good turn, nothing would satisfy him but that he should give me his most treasured possession." Morton himself is of medium height and stocky build, and his tattooed forearms are corroborative evidence of the many years he has spent in show business. He radiates charm and energy,

but more than anything else he believes in himself. He lives the part of the singing cowboy every minute of the day, just as completely and intensely as most of us live our own fantasy lives for a few moments at a time in our dreams. His is the story-book success tale of the man upon whom the gods have showered all their kindness, without his ever knowing quite why.

Subsidiary Industries

Publicity plays a large part of course—publicity of the "most famous New Zealander" kind. But there is more to it than that.

At present there is a guitar factory in Melbourne, and another about to start in Auckland. Australia is dotted with Tex Morton Guitar Clubs, and papered with Tex Morton comics. His recordings and sheet music come close to out-selling any other individual competitor, he claims, while Tex Morton's Wild West Rodeo and Circus is known in every backblocks town in the Australian Commonwealth. For a while there was also the Tex Morton Dude Ranch, although that is an episode on which he now looks with unhappy memories—it was one of the enterprises that he didn't make a go of. But the rest of them are getting so big now that soon they will have to be amalgamated in a general holding company.

Many of the songs he sings are his own compositions, and he regards himself primarily as a song writer and guitar player, although he is better known here as a yodeller. He tries to popularise the idea that the Australian people have their own folk music, and to this end he broadcasts regularly from ABC stations, appealing to old-timers to send in old bush ballads which he later sings. He also has a poetry session on the ABC, where he recites poems of his own composition:

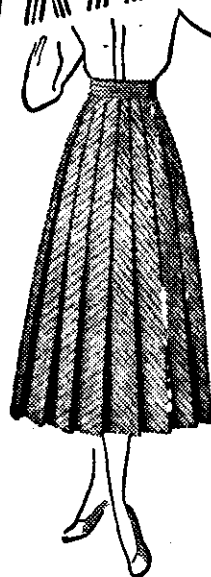
ONE night I was strolling—the time seemed to drag—
I paused for a drink from the bronze waterbag . . .

are the opening lines of a piece, "The King of Kalgoorlie," about Paddy Hannan, a well-known character on the West Australian goldfields in the early days. A statue (with drinking fountain) was erected to Paddy's memory—whence the reference to the "bronze waterbag."

"What I've been trying to get into the skulls of people over in Australia," he says, "is that they've got a folk music of their own." He doesn't like American imitations, although shortly he is going to Hollywood himself, to do radio and television work, and make "Australian stockman pictures."

(As we go to Press we learn that Tex Morton has just been made the first life member of the Composers, Writers, and Artists Society of New Zealand.)

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