



Thomas Edison “Brownie” Ford

***Ballad Singer, Storyteller, and Craftsman
(1904 - 1996)***

Thomas Edison “Brownie” Ford, who was of Comanche and Anglo-American descent, was a Louisiana legend. Dynamic at the age of 91, he was without peer as a master of cowboy crafts, a singer of ballads, and a gifted storyteller.

Born in 1904 at Gum Springs in the Oklahoma territory, Brownie Ford spent much of his life as a working “woods cowboy” and rodeo rider in Louisiana, Texas, and Arkansas.

He began breaking horses at the age of eight, and at the age of twelve, he left home and joined a Wild West show. He lived on the road much of the time from 1920 through the 1950s, working as a bronco buster and clown for rodeos and a sharpshooter and rider for Wild West and medicine shows. During the off-season, he worked as a cowboy. He recalled that he was twice reported dead after accidents in the rodeo arena. “Sometimes I’m amazed at what I walked away from,” said Ford. Rodeos and medicine show also gave him a chance to sing during intermission.

After a decade in Baton Rouge in the honky-tonk music scene, he settled down in Hebert, Louisiana, in Caldwell Parish, where he and his wife Cody ran a bait shop and grocery store for many years. Until about 1991, he worked horses part-time. Brownie repaired saddles, made girths, chaps, bridles and other pieces of tack, plaited rawhide, and crafted hide-bottomed chairs by hand. He learned these crafts on his own and continued them all of his life since the age of about ten or eleven. His greatest gift was

his deep, mellow voice and his extensive repertoire of cowboy songs, frontier ballads, medieval ballads, blues-based classics, country music of the 1940s and 50s, and parlor ditties of the 1880s and 1890s. He began playing the guitar as a boy, although his father, a sharecropper in East Texas, disapproved. However, it wasn't long before he was playing for house dances, then roadhouses and honky tonks, and Saturday night dances.

He said, "There was a time when my whole life was playing music, ranch work, rodeos and Wild West shows. It was a rough life but a long adventure." Brownie Ford learned British and American ballads from his family and cowboy songs while working in the rodeo and Wild West shows and on ranches.

His debut CD, *Stories from Mountains, Swamps, and Honky-tonks* was released by the Louisiana Division of the Arts in 1991 as Volume 8 in the Louisiana Folklife Series. Brownie Ford was awarded a prestigious National Heritage Fellowship in 1987 and named a national "living treasure" for his songs and his contributions to American folklore. He toured, demonstrating his crafts, and captivating audiences with his ballads and true stories of roundups, busting broncos and Wild West shows. He performed all over the country at Folklife festivals and was featured on two month-long "Cowboy Tours" of the western states, sponsored by the National Council for the Traditional Arts. In 1983, he was invited to participate in a program sponsored by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress and was inducted into the Louisiana Folklife Center's Hall of Master Folk Artists.