



ROSS HECOX

CATCH THE TRAIN TO ELKO



In celebration of the 25th Annual National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, four longtime performers travel back in time, recalling the event's roots.

STORY BY RYAN T. BELL

COWBOY POETRY AS WE KNOW IT TODAY officially arrived in Elko, Nevada, in December 1985, on a train that departed from the Salt Lake City Amtrak station. On board were a dozen working cowboys, with names that included Baxter Black, Glen Ohrlin and Wallace McRae.

As the train rolled into the night, the cowboys discussed horses, ranch life and—perhaps surprisingly—poetry. They were a group of individuals like none the American West had ever seen, a collection of cowboy poets going to Elko for the first official Cowboy Poetry Gathering. Twenty-five years later, the influence of these men and other similarly talented performers continues to be seen and heard on the stages of cowboy poetry's premier event.

◀ Milton Taylor, a bush poet from New South Wales, Australia, is among the international performers who come to Elko to be a part of a special time and place celebrating America's folk hero—the cowboy.



Top to bottom: Glen Orlin of Mountain View, Arkansas, shown center stage, has been a presence at the gathering since its inception. • Poets Paul Zarzyski and Wally McRae recite together at the 2008 gathering. • Gearmaking workshops and exhibits are held during the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering. • Joel Nelson performs in 1992.

PHOTOS COURTESY WESTERN FOLKLIFE CENTER



Folklorist Hal Cannon is a founding director of the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering.

BRIGID MCAULISSE

The Western Folklorists

Recollections from Hal Cannon, Salt Lake City, Utah

MEETING THE COWBOYS at the Elko train was a man dressed in a cowboy hat and blue jeans. Despite his dress, Hal Cannon was not a cowboy; he was a folklorist. The 1985 Cowboy Poetry Gathering was the culmination of many years of research and field work by Cannon's team of fellow Western folklorists.

"Cowboy poetry was an underground tradition," Cannon says. "People recited it around campfires and read it in magazines like *Western Horseman*. Cowboy poetry is the unpublished guide on how to become a working cowboy."

Prior to Elko, there hadn't been an organized effort to bring cowboy poets together, or even to recognize it as a folk genre. The only major push was in the 1970s, when Arizona folklorist Jim Griffith invited Van Holyoak to perform cowboy poetry at the Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife in Washington, D.C.

Holyoak's performance caught the attention of Bess Lomax Hawes, an administrator for the National Endowment for the Arts. The daughter of John Lomax, the famed musicologist who published the 1910 folk anthology *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*, Hawes became an enthusiastic supporter of the cowboy-poetry movement. She approved NEA funding for Cannon, Griffith and their colleagues to scour the West in search of cowboy poetry and those who performed it.

"The basis of folklore is that you go out and beat the bush," Cannon says. "You look for cowboy poetry where it exists. Our job as folklorists is to bring it together from all over the region.

"It takes some nerve to approach cowboys about poetry. A successful folklorist is able to build trust quickly with his or her subjects. That's not easy, especially with cowboys. They're suspicious because a lot of people have misrepresented their life and who they are."

One by one, the Western folklorists made their discoveries. Montana folklorist Mike Korn found Wallace McRae. Sarah Sweetwater in Nevada rounded up Ross Knox, Waddie Mitchell and Larry Schutte. David Brose in Colorado wrangled Baxter Black. At the time, these wordsmiths were anonymous working cowboys who dabbled in poetry. Thanks to their scouts and the gathering, however, they've become legendary lyricists and purveyors of cowboy tradition.

"It was a big surprise to a lot of cowboys that there were others who wrote poetry," Cannon recalls. "I remember one poetry session called *Good Horses and Bad Rides*. There were six cowboys on stage, all of them nervous because they'd never been in front of an audience. Coincidentally, each one recited a poem about the loss of a favorite horse.

"There was a sense of recognition among them, because it's hard to love a horse and then lose it. Poetry brings cowboys together at a deep level. It's kept guys coming back to Elko for 25 years."

Birth of a Gathering

Recollections from Wallace McRae, Forsyth, Montana

AT THE SALT LAKE CITY AMTRAK station, six cowboys, all strangers, stood waiting to board the train to Elko. Among them was Wallace (“Wally”) McRae, a third-generation rancher from Forsyth, Montana.

“I was standing at the station, and all of a sudden there were a bunch of people with cowboy hats on,” McRae recalls.

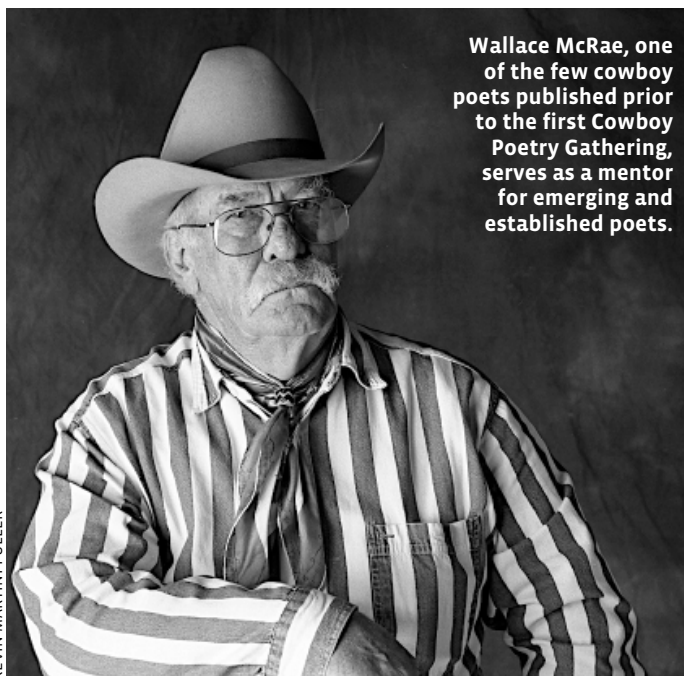
McRae was among the few cowboy poets who had been published prior to Elko. The first cowboy poem he wrote was inspired by the loan he procured from Production Credit Association to buy a ranch.

“They sent out a calendar every year that included poems by Bill Greaves, a member of the PCA board of directors,” McRae says. “When Bill retired from ranching and the PCA, I wrote him a poem thanking him for the enjoyment I got from reading his poetry in the calendars. At about that time the cattle market improved, so the punch line of my poem was, ‘You should have given it up 10 years ago!’”

Greaves sent McRae’s poem to the PCA. They asked permission to print it, and asked if he’d write another, which gave him a small body of work. A couple of years later, McRae received a phone call from Mike Korn, Montana’s state folklorist, asking if he recited cowboy poetry.

“He called back later and asked if I’d like to go to the middle of Nevada, in the dead of winter, for a cowboy-poetry contest,” McRae recalls. “J.M. Capriola Company was putting up a saddle as a prize to the winning poet. I told him that having a competition didn’t sound as fun as simply getting together to share poems. There’d be only one winner. Why couldn’t we all be winners? That was the universal response from cowboy poets across the West.”

Poets are sticklers for the way words are used. When a name for the 1985 event was finalized, “competition” was replaced with a word that was more pertinent to the spirit of Elko. The “gathering” was born.



Wallace McRae, one of the few cowboy poets published prior to the first Cowboy Poetry Gathering, serves as a mentor for emerging and established poets.

KEVIN MARTINI-FULLER

TIMELINE

1908

Nathan Howard (“Jack”) Thorp publishes *Songs of the Cowboys*, the first cowboy-poetry book. It’s a collection of poems he heard or wrote while traveling from ranch to ranch, beginning in 1889.



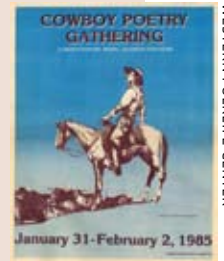
KEVIN MARTINI-FULLER

1979

Arizona folklorist Jim Griffith proposes the idea of a cowboy-poetry project.

1983–84

The National Endowment for the Arts approves a grant for Western folklorists to conduct fieldwork and organize the first National Cowboy Poetry Gathering.



WESTERN FOLKLIKE CENTER

1985

Forty cowboys from across the United States gather in Elko, Nevada, for the first National Cowboy Poetry Gathering.

1990

Australian bush poets appear at the 6th Annual National Cowboy Poetry Gathering. Future international cultural exchanges occur with Canada (1997), Mongolia (2004), Colombia (2005), Argentina and Brazil (2006), France (2007) and Mexico (2008).



CHARLIE EKBURG

1991–92

George Gund purchases the Pioneer Building in Elko and donates it as the new home of the Western Folklife Center.



WESTERN FOLKLIKE CENTER

1999

Cowboy poet Paul Bliss rides a horse 330 miles from Utah to Nevada to attend and recite his poetry at the gathering.

2000

The U.S. Senate passes a resolution naming the Elko Cowboy Poetry Gathering the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering.



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2003

Joel Nelson unveils his poem “Equus Caballus” in honor of the Asian lunar calendar’s Year of the Horse.

2008

Don Edwards performs “The Ghost of Jack Thorp” in honor of the 100-year anniversary of the cowboy-poetry collector who started the tradition.



ROSS HECOX

The Loneliness of Cow Camp

Recollections from Ross Knox,
Benson, Arizona

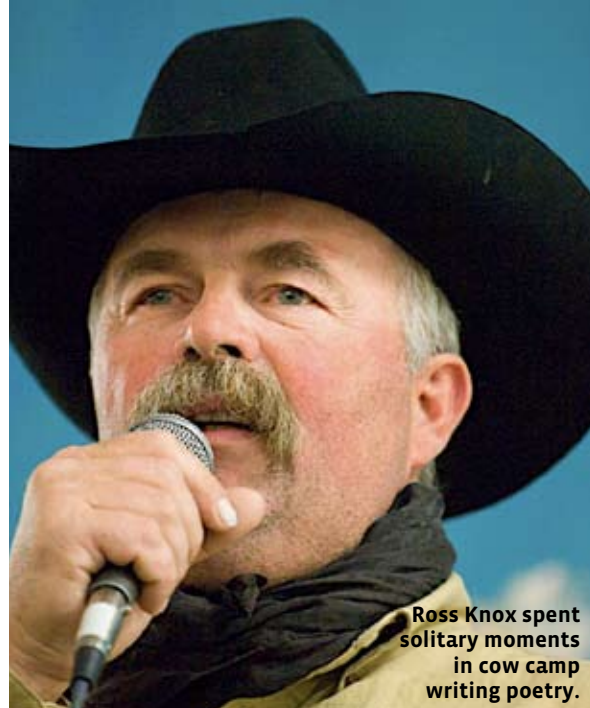
VETERAN COWBOY ROSS KNOX drove to the 1985 gathering from the Arizona ranch where he was working. The Western Folklife Center funded the fuel, so he figured the trip gave him an excuse to visit friends along the way. Knox was a familiar face on many Great Basin outfits, where he'd worked in various cow camps.

"I thought the first gathering was going to be a complete disaster," he says. "I couldn't believe that someone would travel more than 20 miles to recite a poem. But I was shocked at how many cowboy poets were there. I saw license plates from everywhere. I even knew some of the guys, but I had no clue they wrote poetry."

The reason Ross Knox didn't know about other cowboy poets was the same reason why he wrote poetry: loneliness.

"Being alone brings out the poetry in a person," says Knox. "When you're in a cow camp, you don't have anyone except your dog, a saddle horse and the cattle around you. While they're great companions, they're not much as conversationalists."

The nature of cowboy work is that you spend long periods of time in locations far removed from other people. Until Elko, cowboys didn't know that when loneliness or boredom compelled them to write a poem, they were contributing to an actual genre. After his



Ross Knox spent solitary moments in cow camp writing poetry.

JESSICA BRANDI LISTLAND

initial surprise, the fact that others wrote poetry made sense to Knox.

"When you're stuck out in the middle of the desert for months at a time, you don't have to be the most articulate man to sit down and write a poem," he says. "As it turns out, most cowboys have tried to write a poem at least once."

Family of Cowboy Poets

Recollections from Joel Nelson, Alpine, Texas

JOEL NELSON MISSED THE TRAIN to Elko in 1985. As with many cowboy poets, he went undiscovered by folklorists during their initial search. The fact that undiscovered poets come out of the woodwork from one year to the next, however, has kept the gathering fresh for 25 years.

"I saw an advertisement for the first gathering in *Western Horseman*, but I didn't go," Joel says of his journey to the Elko stage. "Afterward, I heard a lot about it, and it made me want to go. Pat Jasper, a state folklorist in Texas, was scouting in my area, and I recited some of

my material for her. The Western Folklife Center sent me an invitation to the next gathering in 1986."

Nelson has attended nearly every gathering since.

The poet is an introspective horseman, which comes across in his poetry and outlook on the cowboy life.

"There's rhythm and meter to everything when you work outside," he says. "Trotting across a grassy flat, working cattle, the day-to-day changes of the seasons—they all have a poetic cadence.

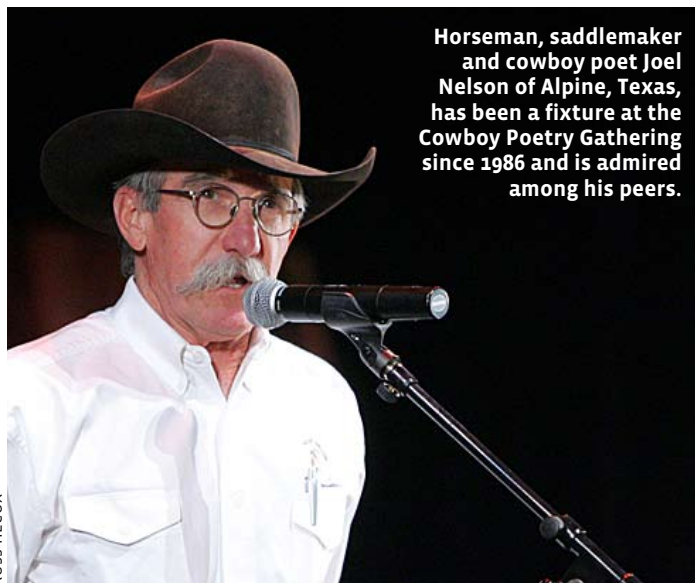
"The horse is the lowest common denominator in cowboy poetry; it's what cowboying boils down to. I guess there are some guys that ranch because they like cattle, but I ranch because I want to work horseback. The horse has been at the forefront of every piece of cowboy poetry I've written. Without him, there wouldn't be a piece."

Nelson's authentic poetry has earned him the highest honor: the admiration of other cowboys.

"I envy Joel because he comes up with poems I wish I had written," Wallace McRae says.

The respect is mutual, because Nelson ranks McRae as one of his heroes. Their friendship speaks of the family of working cowboy poets.

"My whole family of friends is an offshoot of the gathering," Nelson says. "Outside of Elko, we get together to ride, and work horses and cattle. Cowboy poetry has formed a bond between us that the work alone wouldn't quite form. I owe it to Elko, the horses and the words."



Horseman, saddlemaker and cowboy poet Joel Nelson of Alpine, Texas, has been a fixture at the Cowboy Poetry Gathering since 1986 and is admired among his peers.

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PIONEER PERFORMERS

These performers, part of the class of 1985 Elko entertainers, will join other veteran talent and a new generation of performers at the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, to be held January 24–31, 2009.

BAXTER BLACK, Benson, Arizona

DICK GIBFORD, Maricopa, California

YULA SUE HUNTING, Beryl, Utah

ROSS KNOX, Benson, Arizona

RAY LASHLEY, Grand Junction, Colorado

BILL LOWMAN, North Dakota

WALLACE MCRAE, Forsyth, Montana

WADDIE MITCHELL, Jiggs, Nevada

GLENN OHRLIN, Mountain View, Arkansas

GWEN PETERSON, Big Timber, Montana

DUANE REECE, Winkelman, Arizona

BOB SCHILD, Blackfoot, Idaho

GEORGIE SICKING, Kaycee, Wyoming

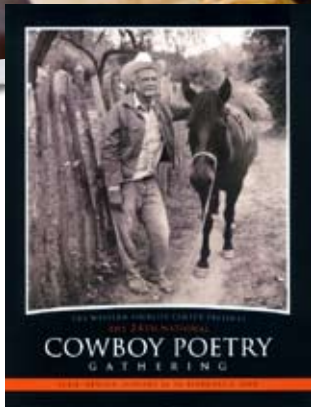
IAN TYSON, Alberta, Canada

JACK WALTHER, Lamoille, Nevada

Living and working on ranches, Waddie Mitchell, shown here in 1988, wrote poetry to pass the time. Little did he know it would become his profession.



Being on stage in Elko has launched the career of many a cowboy poet and musician.



2008
Cowboy
Poetry
Gathering
program

25 Years and Counting

THE FACT THAT COWBOY POETRY arrived in Elko by train is proof of the genre's adaptability. In the late 1800s, when cowboys were beginning to write poetry, the steam locomotive was considered one of the greatest threats to cowboy life. More than a century later, however, the locomotive is nearly obsolete, but cowboy life and cowboy poetry remains vibrant.

Guy Logsdon, an Oklahoma state folklorist, wrote it best in the 1985 Cowboy Poetry Gathering program: "As long as cattle and horses remain unlisted as an endangered species, and as long as humans maintain a taste for beef, cowboys will exist and will write new poems and songs about their lives, and it is safe to say that no other type of poetry is as universally written, read and loved by voluntary choice than that known as cowboy poetry." 🐾

Ryan T. Bell is a writer based in Montana. For information on and tickets to the 25th National Cowboy Poetry Gathering, which takes place January 24-31, 2009, call (888) 850-5885, or visit westernfolklife.org. For insider interviews, recordings and photographs from the gathering visit Bell's blog, "Route 287," on westernhorseman.com.