If someone had told me twenty years ago that I would spend a good part of my adult life listening to and getting to know some breed of western animal called the cowboy poet, I would have told him he’d been eating locoweed. Actually, I wouldn’t have told him that — because twenty years ago, I didn’t know what locoweed was. But for those of us who have been here since National Cowboy Poetry Gathering Number One, it’s been a long and interesting ride. Poets have come and gone, far too many have passed away, the performers and the audiences are different, and the poetry is different, too.

We know, of course, that cowboy poetry got its start in the early trail-driving days after the Civil War, and that some eclectically minded cowpokes with extra time on their hands took the ballad tradition from the British Isles and mixed it in with the poetry and songs of soldiers and sailors and lumbermen, threw in a dash of popular Victorian poetry that they might have heard recited in school or the front parlor, added a lot of their own true-life experiences and a little bit of romanticized cowboy adventure from magazine articles and dime novels, stirred it all up and produced cowboy poetry.

But what gave the poems their crackle and zing was the lingo, mostly borrowed from Spanish, a constant testimony to all that we have learned from the vaqueros of Mexico and their ancestors, the horsemen of Spain and the Moors of North Africa. When you listen to cowboys augur or when you read a cowboy poem, you realize that Spanish is the home ranch of cowboy talk: remuda and ramada, dally and lariat, chaps and taps, bosal and quirt, coosie and buckaroo. Looking all the way back to the poems and songs of the 1870s and ’80s, you can see that diehard, inventive love of words that cowboys have carried since the first cowboy poem was published.

It’s not just a home-bred tradition. Cowboys, as Buck Ramsey liked to say, were great readers and would argue over how to pronounce “oz” on a can of tomatoes. To read, all they needed were shelter, light, and time – a line camp, a kerosene lamp, and a long winter. Cowboys would read Shakespeare and Homer, five-year-old magazines and newspapers, detective novels, King Arthur tales, the Bible, and, yes, cowboy stories – usually with a lot of skepticism.

But even though a lot of cowboy poetry was influenced by music – by-gospel songs, hymns, old ballads, popular songs, vaudeville songs, music-hall tunes, what have you – cowboys were never isolated from other kinds of poetry. They absorbed the popular poetry of their times – at first the long narrative poems of
Byron, Tennyson, and Browning, and then Longfellow’s poems: “Paul Revere’s Ride,” “Hiawatha,” “The Courtship of Miles Standish.” Some of the New England poets probably got read, too — William Cullen Bryant, John Greenleaf Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes. Midwesterners, too — James Whitcomb Riley, Vachel Lindsay, Edgar Lee Masters, and, later on, Carl Sandburg.

Did cowboy poets read Edgar Allan Poe? Sure. How about Walt Whitman? Maybe. T. S. Eliot? Ezra Pound? Probably not — but they devoured (and digested) the poets who had powerful rhythms and exacting rhymes and who wrote about the outdoor life, human bravery and endurance, and companionship. Think of the British poet of the sea, John Masefield, or Alfred Noyes, who wrote “The Highwayman,” and, most of all, Rudyard Kipling, whose poetry spoke of courage, mobility, and exotic lands, and Robert W. Service, with his poems of men in the Yukon hunting for gold, battling the elements, and facing death — and usually finding it.

And the cowboy poets of today aren’t out of touch, either. They read and sometimes recite Stephen Vincent Benét, Robert Frost, and Beat Generation poets like Gary Snyder. Even Bob Dylan’s lyrics are heard from time to time. But what most people don’t realize is that the fertilization goes in both directions, not just one. The popularity of cowboy poetry may very well be contributing to a renewed interest in closed forms, regular rhythms, and rhyme among mainstream and academic poets. The enormous attention and publicity given to poetry slams and performance poetry says something about the public’s perception of the old — fashioned academic poetry reading as tired, dull and worn out. The massive festival in New York City called the “People’s Poetry Gathering” has in the last few years brought together slam poets, performance poets, street poets, cowboy poets, logger poets, fisher poets, and half a dozen other species.

This Gathering, and the hundreds of regional, state, and local gatherings all over the West, have changed — no question about it. Some regret the loss of the good old days; others are zestful about the present and the future. We should realize, though, that cowboy poetry, like all forms of folk art, is just as dynamic and changeable as the ranching business. Ranching has seen technology arrive in the form of helicopters, ATV’s, global positioning systems, and computers. Some ranchers are giving up on feed lots and going with leaner, range-fed beef. Some are raising bison, ostriches, emus, llamas, or elk. And some are sitting down with environmentalists and government officials and talking long and hard about suburban sprawl, resort development, mining and logging, endangered species, failing water supplies, damage to the land and livestock from ATVs and other machines, the looting of archaeological and historic sites, vandalism, and rustling.

The poetry reflects the life. It’s been a long time since cowboy poets wrote about outlaws, gunplay, or shooting up town on Saturday night, and nowadays you don’t hear many poems mocking environmentalists or vegetarians or feminists. Cowboy poetry has become a major medium for people in the cattle business, but also for Westerners generally, people who care about the land and its beauty and the ways of life that go with it. And it’s not just in the content. The forms of the poetry are more varied, the rhythms are more skillful, the rhymes more exact and more inventive (no more rhyming “horse” with “of course” — what Paul Zarzyski calls the “Mr. Ed syndrome”). We’ve given up a strict adherence to ballad form, thanks to the
models provided by Charles Badger Clark, Henry Herbert Knibbs, and Bruce Kiskaddon, who refused to stick to the same shape and rhyme scheme in every poem. When he wrote "Anthem," Buck Ramsey even borrowed his stanza form from the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin.

And there are other changes as well. Twenty years ago, to misquote Wally McRae, "a bunch of cowboys came together and found out that they'd all written the same poem about their favorite horse." Our horizons are wider, our knowledge deeper. We know a lot more about the Mexican and Spanish origins of the work and the gear. We know a lot more about the trail drives, and the fact that perhaps as many as one-third of the cowboys who went up the trail were Mexicanos, African-Americans, and Native Americans—just imagine, for a moment, the music, songs, poems, and stories around those campfires! And thanks to this Gathering, we know a lot more about the poetry of other places and other peoples: Native Americans, vaqueros, charros, shepherds from the British Isles, drovers and bush poets from Australia, paniolos from Hawai'i, gauchos from Argentina, Uruguay, southern Brazil—and now, this year, adauchid (horsemen) from Mongolia. It's an amazing world, if you look at it from the back of a horse.

There's another big change as well. The poets I mentioned above were all men, and twenty years ago virtually every session at Gathering Number One was all—male—except for Georgie Sicking and Yula Sue Hunting and a few others, that is. Hardly anyone had heard of Sharlot Hall except for the folks from Prescott, Arizona, and absolutely no one had heard of Rhoda Sivell, Canada's first cowboy poet and one of the best. How times have changed. Women run their own ranches, drive their own trucks, doctor cattle, deliver calves, start colts, and negotiate with buyers. They publish books of poetry and make recordings, perform at and often organize gatherings, appear in anthologies devoted to women poets, and cowboy—on the range and on the stage. Women have brought to cowboy poetry an experimental spirit and a deeper sense of the realities of western life—not just its beauties and its satisfactions, but also the hard truths of isolation, loneliness, bankruptcy, even violence. From this new angle, cowboy poetry allows Westerners to express their deepest feelings about their lives, their families, their communities, their environment, and their futures.

It's good to see cowboy poetry stretching itself, trying on new outfits, getting ready for new seasons. See you in another twenty years.

David Stanley teaches folklore and literature at Westminster College in Salt Lake City. He co-edited, with Elaine Thatcher, a collection of essays, Cowboy Poets & Cowboy Poetry (University of Illinois Press, 2000). He also produced for Smithsonian Folkways a CD, Cowboy Poetry Classics (2003), and he's now putting together an anthology of classic cowboy poems. He has served as a staff member at nineteen National Cowboy Poetry Gatherings. His keynote speech is sponsored by Nevada Humanities.

The Medicine Keepers

A man might live and work beside
The fellers 'round the wagon
And never say two words unless
It's just hooraw and braggin'.

But sometimes in the solitude
Of some ol' line camp shack
He smooths a fruit can label out
And writes there on the back

A group of words redeemed from time
To last when he moves on.
Set down with hurried flourish
Fore his mem'ry of 'em's gone.

The spellin' may not be exact
Or commas where they ought,
But there within those rugged lines
A mood is somehow caught.

It might be full of sadness
From a death or crippled friend,
To just the mournful yearnin'
For a way that's bound to end.

Some others could be bawdy
While full of life and mirth
Or stories 'bout some saddle horse
That has no peers on earth.

There's many through the years been lost
Or burned or throwed away,
But others yet survive
To give us views of yesterday.

And still amongst the workin' hands
The words come now and then
To write a livin' history
Of the stock, and earth, and men.

— J. B. Allen