The Cowboy Poetry Gathering: A personal view

Hal Cannon, Founding Director, Western Folklife Center

When the idea for the Cowboy Poetry Gathering came up in the late 1970s the cowboy image was at a low point. Hollywood had pretty much stopped making cowboy movies. Nashville had dropped the western out of country and western. And all sorts of new meaning had been pumped into the word “cowboy.” It was the age of the urban cowboy. Headlines used the word “cowboy” to refer to businessmen and political leaders who acted with disregard for others.

At the same time, on the inside of ranching, a new age was dawning. When over 90% of Americans lived and worked on farms as in Jefferson’s day or even at the turn of the 20th century when half of all Americans grew food, there were plenty of folks out there whose idea of the good life was agrarian. But by the mid 1980s, around 2-3% of Americans made their living in agriculture. It has only gotten worse since. In a recent poll, Texas teens ranked being a cowboy at the bottom of a list of desirable jobs. Ranch poet Wallace McRae once observed that people go to the touchstones of their culture when a way of life is threatened. Though we didn’t know it at the time, 1985 was ripe for ranching culture to claim its own story, to find the touchstones of its culture. Cowboys had always allowed their story to be told publicly by others – songwriters, scriptwriters, novelists – but increasingly that story, told in popular culture, became a monolithic Arthurian myth, far from the breadth of the real life.
Planning the first Gathering was a partnership between folklorists, a few cowboys, and some local folks from Elko. I suspect that the original founders had a wide variety of interests and motivations. When Jim Griffith had the original idea for the Gathering it was our desire to create a cowboy poetry event that truly represented the cowboys of the entire ranching region from young buckaroos to old punchers. To accomplish this we agreed that the first step was to undertake extensive fieldwork throughout the West.

We applied to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) for several grants without success. Finally, we prevailed and got enough money to undertake modest fieldwork. We matched the grant with in-kind fieldwork by state folk arts coordinators around the region. The more we looked for cowboy poets, the more we found. And in the end, I was able to take a year’s leave of absence from my job as the folk arts coordinator for Utah to organize the first event. Besides a lot of driving, gathering leads, and finding poets, we launched a “letter to the editor” campaign to rural papers across the West asking for information on cowboy poetry and those who practiced it. At the same time we began collecting all the published material available on the subject: manuscripts, newspaper collections, chap books, you name it.

As time drew near for the first Gathering, western folklorists selected a couple of dozen poets and reciters from around the region and convinced them, with some difficulty, to come to Elko to join the fray. We were talking to cowboys every day who, to say the least, were dubious about this whole enterprise. The more they doubted us, the more we strove to hear their concerns and design an event they would feel comfortable with. For instance, cowboys didn’t want to come to a city or go to a resort town. That’s one reason Elko was chosen as the site for the first event. The town’s history as a good cowboy center went back a century, and it didn’t hurt that the place had cheap wintertime hotel rooms, excellent public facilities and was already a place where cowboy poetry was not unheard of.

But if the cowboys who were intimate with cowboy poetry were dubious, it was nothing compared to my daily encounters with potential sponsors. How dare I challenge the prevalent stereotype that cowboys were all lacmonic dolts, incapable of emotion or brains? Over and over, the likes of Stetson Hat, Wrangler Jeans, Justin Boot, and nearly 150 other corporations that marketed the cowboy image, told me that cowboy poetry was an oxymoron. Luckily the NEA and a few other sponsors had some faith in us that first year.

After five years of planning the weekend finally arrived. The poets and folklorists rolled into Elko, Nevada in the middle of the night on a train to the middle of nowhere in the middle of the winter. Both Waddie Mitchell and I love to recount how we were setting-up chairs in the Elko Convention Center. We had about 60 in place when he looked at me and exclaimed, “Pard, let’s not go overboard. We don’t want to embarrass ourselves.” Just then the people started showing up. Pretty soon the room was filled to capacity and by the end of the weekend, somewhere between 500 to 1000 people had come to that first event.

Our choice to make decisions based on what cowboys wanted shaped our audience: almost 90% of those in attendance were cowboys and ranch families. It was a young audience and there was lots of flirting going on, especially at the cowboy dances. Today, I know several 16–20 year-old boys out on ranches whose folks named them Ian after romance at those first Gatherings dancing to Ian Tyson’s band at the Stockmen’s.

If the Gathering brought out the cowboys, it also brought out the press. The unlikely promise of authentic working cowboys reciting poems attracted them in droves – CBS News, People Magazine, the Wall Street Journal, The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, just to mention a few. No one was disappointed. The weekend was full of surprises. I remember a group of old cowboys sitting nervously on stage for a session called, “Good Horses and Bad Rides.” Each cowboy got up in turn, his knees shaking, and fought the tears as he recited a personal poem about the loss of a favorite horse. The particulars of each poem were different, but they all came out of a shared loss. None of them knew each other, and each one was a tough old guy who didn’t succumb to emotion easily. Each man thought he was the only one who had been compelled to write such a poem and as the cumulative effect of this shared experience began to build, you could tell that these people had found an artistic community—something they would never have thought to imagine before that moment. It was thrilling to watch.
We organizers were giddy. The poets told us that cow-
boys never could have pulled something like this off – it just wasn’t in their 
reertoire of the possible. The partnership between folklorists and ranch folks 
was deemed a match made in heaven. Then the head-
Doggerel.” The *Wall Street Journal* wrote a front-page article all 
rhymed in iambic pentameter. The Tonight show called and 
asked me to send cowboy poets. What a surprise. We had never 
tended to do any more than hold a one-time event.

Also, that week Elko business people and civic leaders asked us 
to a town meeting. The hotel owners said they had never 
 enjoyed such a good winter weekend. The saddle and western 
wear shops said it was their best day of sales ever. Many locals 
told us that the spirit of the town had been lifted immeasurably.

One man related how a normally surly waitress at the old 
Commercial Casino had actually broken a smile. A week later, 
he said, there were still hairline cracks in her make-up. Then a 
local casino owner stood up and offered to pay for a full-time 
event coordinator to plan the next Gathering and the local 
community college agreed to house the position. We were off 
and running.

So it’s now twenty years later and what has happened to this jewel?

The Cowboy Poetry Gathering is held each January and the 
regulars deem it the Cowboy’s Christmas. Our audience looks 
forward to it intensely and many make the pilgrimage every 
year. My wife, ranch-raised but now a city dweller, says it’s a 
chance to be with “her people.” Others come who have no such 
direct connection to cowboy life. Bess Lomax Hawes told me 
about a gentleman she met who didn’t look like he belonged. 
She got to talking with him and he told her that he was the 
CEO of a major corporation in Pittsburgh but came every year 
to the Gathering. His reasons for coming were three: He didn’t 
have to wear a tie; this was the only place he could spend three 
days listening to poetry and thinking about his grandparents; 
and as an afterthought he added, it was a place where he could 
cry whenever he wanted.

The Cowboy Poetry Gathering has become its own grassroots 
arts movement. The Gathering in Elko has been renamed the 
National Cowboy Poetry Gathering by an act of Congress, rec-
ognizing its role in spawning hundreds of events each year in 
small towns around the West. At least a couple of dozen profes-
sional cowboy poets now make most if not all their living per-
forming poetry. Waddie Mitchell is on the road nearly 300 days 
a year; Baxter Black is a regular on National Public Radio.

The event itself has dramatically 
changed over the years. It started out as a free weekend 
event that cost $50,000 to put on. Now, it’s a week long and 
draws 8,000 people with a budget of a half million dollars. 
We figure the event contributes 
at least $7 million dollars annually to the local economy.

Our organization, the Western 
Folklife Center, now operates a year-round cultural center and 
museum in a 34,000 square-foot historic building in Elko. We 
teach kids and ranch women to make radio shows and Internet 
films. We hold workshops on everything from saddle making to 
song writing. We make radio and TV shows that reach the 
nation. And we have amassed an incredible archives that will 
preserve the folklife of the West for generations to come.

At this point our annual budget is around $2.5 million dollars. 
We have a staff of 16 full-time employees and 300 local volun-
teers. We are one of the largest arts organizations in the state 
of Nevada.

With all the success of twenty Gatherings we face challenges. 
After one of the first events, *Glamour Magazine* listed us as one 
of the top ten places in America to find a beautiful man. Now 
half our audience is over 54 (we’re still beautiful, of course – just 
a little older). Most of you who come to the Gathering are western 
enthusiasts with discretionary time and money. This is not 
how it started out. The audiences at the first Gatherings were 
primarily cowboys and ranch families. Besides the gear shows 
and school programs it is a challenge to convince young people 
there is something for them at the Gathering. To some of our 
audience the cowboy is a dying breed; that is part of the 
romance. Yet if young folks see ranching as a dying culture, 
what future is there for them? For me, this is one of our biggest 
challenges; to help keep the cowboy lifestyle as an option for 
young folks.

But as I look at what this movement has meant, it gives me a 
good feeling to have been part of it. Personally, I met my dear 
wife through the Gathering and count some of my best friends 
from twenty years of gatherings. Moreover, there have been sig-
nificant contributions that were not present twenty years ago. 
The growth of the poetic voice of women in ranching has been 
phenomenal. The recognition of so much rural talent has given 
meaning to our communities. Cowboy poetry, is now seen as a 
contributor to American literature. People from this way of life 
have been heard in places that they would have had little access 
to because they came together under the banner of cowboy 
poetry. We have all been enriched by cowboy poetry and by the 
National Cowboy Poetry Gathering. Thank you for being a 
part of this saga.

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