

Cowboy poetry: Words of the land and a lifestyle

By **Candy Moulton**

Topographer, frontier doctor and Indian agent Valentine T. McGillicuddy met Calamity Jane at Fort Laramie in 1875 as he prepared to set off with the Newton-Jenney Scientific Expedition in an exploration of the Black Hills. Of the young woman who even then was



Waddie Mitchell at the 2017 Rural Roundup in Nevada. Sydney Martinez

making a name and reputation as a hard worker with a soft heart, McGillicuddy wrote: “She was something like Topsy in *Uncle Toms Cabin*, she was not exactly ‘raised she grewed.’”

The same might be said about cowboy poetry.

January 8, 1987 – the *Tonight Show* audience might have expected Johnny Carson’s quips, but almost certainly most in the television audience did not anticipate Baxter Black and Waddie Mitchell. These two – a former large-animal veterinarian and a Nevada buckaroo – had heretofore shared their brand of cowboy poetry with the people who understood the lifestyle, but Carson gave them a national platform, and they took hold of it with both hands – much like you’d do when working with cattle or horses.

Black, who signs his autograph upside down and backwards, had been traveling the small-town circuit for a few years. One of his early performances took place in Saratoga, Wyoming, in 1980 when the president of the Chamber of Commerce, the local veterinarian, invited Black to be the keynote speaker at the annual chamber dinner. After dinner it did not take long for Black to have the audience laughing as he shared one poem after another – many of them quite ribald and not suited for



Campfire entertainment at Wyoming’s Grand Encampment Cowboy Gathering. Candy Moulton



Charles Badger Clark

family audiences. He shocked everyone in the room filled with ranchers and business owners, and the town preacher, when he took one prominent rancher’s custom cowboy hat, punched out the crown, bent down the brim, and let one of his poems come to life. (I’ve always wondered if he had to make reparation!)

One of the grandfathers of cowboy poetry is Charles Badger Clark, who published his first poetry collection 1917. He was living in Arizona where the landscape of the Mogollon Rim and a cowboy good with a rope inspired one of his best-known pieces: “The Glory Trail,” often better known as “High Chin Bob.” That poem spread around the country, took on different verses and became a classic cowboy song.



Sydney Martinez



Sydney Martinez



Johnny D. Boggs

From left, the Western Folklife Center in Elko, Nevada; Jerry Brooks at Elko in 2017; and Jo Kirkwood at last year's International Western Music Association conference.

The Glory Trail (High-Chin Bob)

'Way high up the Mogollons,
Among the mountain tops,
A lion cleaned a yearling's bones
And licked his thankful chops,
When on the picture who should ride,
A-trippin' down a slope,
But High-Chin Bob, with sinful pride
And mav'rick hungry rope.

— Badger Clark

Perhaps even better known is Clark's "The Cowboy's Prayer," which has been recited at rodeos, ranch gatherings and events across the West for decades. Another Clark classic became a song covered by many performers since its first recording by Bob Dylan.

A Border Affair

Spanish is the lovin' tongue,
Soft as music, light as spray.
'Twas a girl I learnt it from,
Livin' down Sonora way.

I don't look much like a lover,
Yet I say her love words over
Often when I'm all alone —

"Mi amor, mi corazon."

— Badger Clark

Clark's early poetry has roots in Arizona, but he left that state in 1925 and resettled in the Black Hills of South Dakota in a small cabin in Custer State Park. There for the next 30 years he wrote poetry. The landscape of the Northern Plains and Black Hills is reflected in later poems. He became

the poet laureate of South Dakota in 1937. His work was published in *Sunset Magazine*, *Collier's*, *Scribner's*, *Arizona Highways* and by *Century Magazine* and *The Rotarian*.

It may seem that cowboy poetry was born in 1985 in Elko, Nevada, at the first Cowboy Poetry Gathering organized by Mitchell, Hal Cannon and a host of other cowboy performers. There in a school gym, Mitchell, who had been writing and reciting poetry since he was 10 and cowboying since he was 16, gave his first public performance. But Mitchell and the other performers that year were following in Clark's footsteps.

Gatherings across the West (Check websites for specific dates)

Colorado Cowboy Poetry Gathering
Golden, CO
January
ColoradoCowboyGathering.com

National Cowboy Poetry Festival
January-February
Elko, NV
NationalCowboyPoetryGathering.org

Cochise Cowboy Poetry & Music Gathering
Sierra Vista, AZ
February
CowboyPoets.com

Santa Clarita Cowboy Festival
Santa Clarita, CA
April
CowboyFestival.org



Jim Jones and Doug Figgs perform at Wyoming's Grand Encampment Cowboy Gathering, Candy Moulton

Grand Encampment Cowboy Gathering
Encampment, WY
July
GrandEncampmentGathering.org

National Cowboy Symposium & Celebration
Lubbock, TX
September
Cowboy.org

Durango Cowboy Poetry Gathering
Durango, CO
October
DurangoCowboyPoetryGathering.org

Red Steagall Cowboy Gathering & Western Swing Festival
Fort Worth, TX
October
RedSteagallCowboyGathering.com

Heber Valley Western Music & Cowboy Poetry Gathering
Heber City, UT
Autumn
HeberValleyCowboyPoetry.com



2017 Spur-winning poet Floyd Beard performing in 2019. Johnny D. Boggs

Cannon wrote of the roots of cowboy poetry: “The fact is that the first cowboy poetry event in Elko where polite society was invited took place April 3, 1926 when Badger Clark came to Elko and entertained a large crowd at the Elko High School Gymnasium.”

After that performance, the local paper said of Clark: “There is the naturalness of the westerner about him and about his writing which proves that his heart not only was in the west but has beaten in tune with it ever since it began its human labors. He is not an easterner come west – he is a westerner who never goes east – unless he must do so in the line of duty.”

Above all, cowboy poetry is an oral art form; you can read it, but in most cases it’s best to hear it recited or performed. And many of the best cowboy poets working today are performers as well as writers. They bring their words to life as they share the actions of men (and women) in the cow camp, the branding pen or the cow barn.

“I can’t ever remember ‘finding’ cowboy poetry,” Mitchell says of the entertaining and enduring art of cowboy storytelling. “It was always there. The cowboys sure never called it poetry.”

Mitchell’s writing endeavors include his poetry book *Waddie’s Whole Load*. “Still There,” the song Mitchell wrote with Juni Fisher, won a Spur from WWA in 2014 for Best Song, and in 2016 he won a second Spur for Best Song for “The Hand,” co-written with Trinity Seely.

Mitchell says his imagination “got let out of the gate” and he draws from

his cowboy experience for his original poems. “All the time I was growing up we had these old cowboys around,” he has said. “We didn’t have electricity and that meant we didn’t have TV. We had darn poor radio too When you live in close proximity like that with the same folks month after month, one of your duties is to entertain each other, and I suppose that’s where the whole tradition of cowboy poetry started.”

Like Clark, who often had his poems “adapted” by other writers, Gail I. Gardner battled a constant stream of folks who recited his poem “The Sierry Petes (or Tying Knots in the Devil’s Tail),” the presenters often giving credit to “Anonymous” as the writer. Gardner wrote that poem in 1917 and it has endured as a favorite for performers who blend their own original material with classic poems or songs.

The Sierry Petes (or, Tying Knots in the Devil’s Tail)

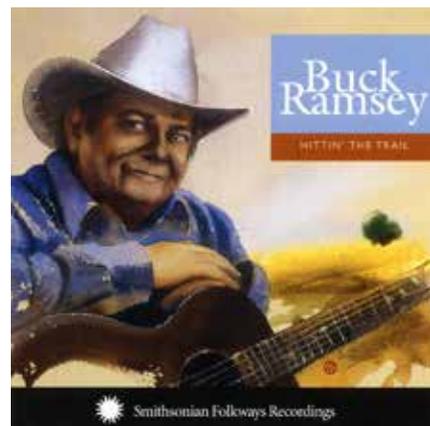
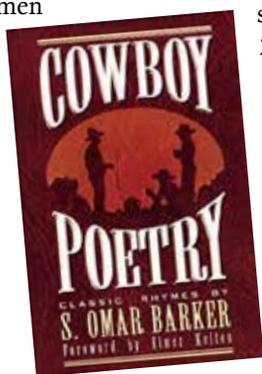
Away up high in the Sierry Petes,
Where the yellor pines grows tall,
Ole Sandy Bob an’ Buster Jig,
Had a rodeer camp last fall.
Oh, they taken their hosses and
runnin’ irons

And maybe a dog or two,
An’ they ‘lowed they’d brand all the
long-yered calves,
That come within their view.

– Gail I. Gardner

The roster of great cowboy poets stretches across the 20th Century and to the present. Among those who have written and recited to small and large audiences are Bruce Kiskadden, often called the “national cowboy poet laureate,” and former WWA president Squire Omar Barker,

whose initials S. O. B. certainly lent themselves to some humor. Born in a New Mexico log cabin, Barker published many books, including *Vientos de las Sierras*, *Buckaroo Ballads* and *Rawhide Rhymes: Singing Poems of the Old West*. During a prolific career he wrote



an estimated 1,500 short stories and novelettes, about 1,200 nonfiction articles, and some 2,000 poems.

Buck Ramsey cowboied across West Texas until a horse wreck put him in a wheel chair. Ramsey had performed with a band before his accident and, once he could no longer work as a cowboy, he started writing for newspapers, magazines and turning his cowboy experiences into poetry and songs.

His epic 50-page poem, “And as I Rode out in the Morning” (also known as “Grass” and “Anthem”), shares the experiences of a 14-year-old boy’s initiation into the cowboy way of life during the middle-to-late 1800s in West Texas. Texas Tech University Press published the poem in 1993 under its original name.

And as I Rode out in the Morning

And as I ride out on the morning
Before the bird, before the dawn,
I’ll be this poem, I’ll be this song.
My heart will beat the world a warning

—
Those horsemen will ride all with me,
And we’ll be good, and we’ll be free.

– Buck Ramsey

The poetry gathering that started in Elko in 1985 is now designated by Congress as the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering. It takes place the end of January each year – a time when cowboys can sometimes get away from the ranch and their cowboy work (if they can find someone to feed the cattle) and join in the fun that includes poetry and music performances, workshops and exhibits. The events take place on large and small stages throughout the northern Nevada city,

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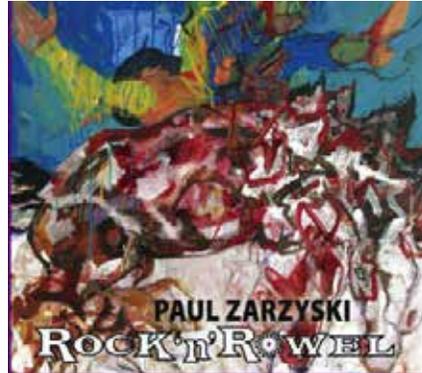
Gail Steiger

continuing well into the wee hours of the morning in informal jam sessions.

On the stage in Elko are the men and women and youngsters who are carrying on the traditions. They range from Mitchell to Gardner's grandson Gail Steiger, who has performed throughout the United States and across Europe.

Sharing the stage are Doris Daley of Canada and Carol Heuchan from Australia and young poets like Thatch Elmer.

One of the best wordsmiths, who has been a regular on the cowboy poetry circuit for decades, is former bronc rider



Paul Zarzyski, who won his first poetry Spur in 2004 for *Wolf Tracks on the Welcome Mat*. This poet has teamed with several songwriters including Ian Tyson and Don Edwards and his talent as a songwriter has been

recognized as well. He won a Spur Award for best song for "Hang-n-Rattle," in 2010, which was co-written with Wylie Gustafson. He teamed with Tom Russell and earned a Spur in songwriting in 2011 for "Heart of a Bucking Horse." Zarzyski has written a dozen books of poetry and prose and produced several CDs of his poetry and music.



Paul Zarzyski

From that first poetry performance in Elko by Clark, to the lineup of poets who take the stage in Nevada nearly a hundred years later, the breadth and

depth of this unique art form just keeps expanding.

The National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko started with poetry at the core, and it remains a gathering with significant focus on poetry, with a healthy dose of fun, some music and plenty of opportunities to learn more about cowboy lore.

Workshops in Elko range from rawhide braiding to hat making to Dutch oven cooking, as the gathering includes education programs with roots on the range. There have been programs on the cracker cowboys or cowhunters of Florida, the paniolo of Hawaii, the *vaqueros* of Old Mexico and the drovers of Australia.

The gatherings across the West provide opportunities to hear the work of today's cadre of cowboy poets – like Red Steagall, Andy Hedges and WWA members Deanna Dickin-son McCall, Sharon O'Toole, Pat Frolander, Dawn Senior, Rod Miller, karla k. morton and John D. Nesbitt – sharing their original work – or sometimes reciting the classics of the old poetry masters.

POETRY CORNER

Connection

By Betty Lynne McCarthy

Thin mane hair Mecate coil
taps bosal on slender nose,
twists and braiding carried forward,
ancient art Vaqueros.

Down from hand to dancing hoof
tattooing measured rhythm,
my center sinking, seeking balance,
matching force I'm given.

Cradled slickfork leather throne
creates a live vignette,
my soul now sings with horse alone,
part centaur and part duet.

To feel this fine connection riding
freely 'cross the plains,
achieving title "horseman" goes
beyond all earthly gains.

Where Even Diamonds Are Dark

By Larry D. Thomas

The New Mexico sky's
so inscrutably blue and vast
only the locals'

rugged cholla crosses
keep its sagging weight
from crushing them.

Skin's leathery as the thick,
cracked covers of old Bibles.
The sun's the only god

who's not forsaken them
as Old Satan, on a landscape
bereft of life but for needlelike

spines of Thompson's Yucca,
leers beneath his scales
of dark diamonds.

Hiking the Sierras

By Red Shuttleworth

The mistake is to think there is a trick ...
A magic song ... a woman you will meet

on a train to Reno. Reno's hot this time of year
like a nervous breakdown or drunkard's bottom-rock.

You're downhill from Reno, not quite past
a casino's wilted lettuce misfortune, slots logic,
a dental bridge sucked loose by a wedge of chewy
coconut-raspberry bread, and further slots logic.

You're not hiking the Sierras. You're more likely
sleepless, making sharp turns into filthy rest stops.

POETRY CORNER (continued on page 16)

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The Bering Land Bridge and the Badlands

By Alan Birkelbach

I do not consider it coincidence:
on the bush plane to the Bering Land Bridge
the co-pilot, sitting up front, was a dog.

The pilot pointed out to us
the shallow water and the curving finger
of land that once connected this to that.

It was hard to reset the mind to millennia
when we were soaking in the Serpentine Hot Springs,
the ancient water sizzling on the tub boards.

But later, we thought about the Dakotas, the first bony evi-
dence of dog
jutting out of the towers of sandstone,
something still vibrating, something that walked here.

The canine feet with us, alongside us.
The cold wind, the steaming waters.
The days of ocean and dust.

What we could see from our vantage point.
What we depended on, a snout that led us.
Something older than us, an echoing howl.

Horseback Through the Badlands

By karla k. morton

He said he rode out to this spot two days before,
this cowboy named Marshall
on a horse named Cowboy,

said he saddled up at midnight though he was tired
and sore from
the day of ranching.

And there it was: those Northern Lights
dancing all the way down South Dakota.

Imagine, he'd said, gifted such a sight.
Something like that
you carry with you

like a love note
folded tight against your chest

something you bring out
when no one's around;
desert hoof-steps
the only noise;
those Badlands crowned
in emerald joy.

Poets' parks tour ends

From Staff Reports

"The Words of Preservation: Poets Laureate National Park Tour" is complete.

As of November 25, 2019, WWA members karla k. morton and Alan Birkelbach, both Texas poets laureate, have visited all 61 national parks in the United States.

The 3½-year adventure was designed to document travels within the parks with the intent of helping to preserve and protect the nation's natural wonders. A poetry and photography book, published by TCU Press, should be available this fall.

And with this year's WWA convention set for Rapid City, the poets had this to say about South Dakota's national parks:

"There is incredible, and unique, wonder within each of the national parks in South Dakota alone. In Wind Cave National Park, there is beauty both above and below the ground; the very earth breathes. Badlands National Park is a maze of trails winding between towers of dirt and stone. A combination of prairie, fossil beds and forbidding, jagged vistas, it is truly an amazing sight."



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karla k. morton



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