

# Prairie Words

*Celebrating the romance of the West,  
cowboy poetry got its start around campfires a century ago.  
Today it is still a popular part of western folk culture*

BY JUDY WAYTIUK



STETSONS FIRMLY CLAMPED ON sweaty brows, three adults and one boy in his early teens sit stiffly on child-size chairs, facing their audience from a worn plank stage in the creaky second-floor assembly hall. It smells faintly of late-summer hay, worn wood, a little dry manure and hard-baked soil. I remember the same rich whiff from my childhood: my grandfather's farmhouse.

The building, erected in 1910 as a school, is now the Jasper Cultural and Historical Centre in Maple Creek, a town of 2,400 tucked into the southwest corner of Saskatchewan and named after the nearby trickle of water that meanders lazily through pasture and prairie. The creek becomes impressive only during spring runoff, when it is full of melted snow. In dry years, parts of it evaporate almost completely. This has been a dry year.

The four shifting carefully on their rickety chairs are cowboy poets. They have come to the annual mid-September Cowboy Poetry Gathering and Western Art Show. Two years earlier, as I was passing through the Cypress Hills on my way to Calgary, I saw a poster for the coming gathering. On a schedule then, I could not stay for it. But this time I have made it, pulled by the landscape and the rich history and romance of cowboy culture. Half a dozen times I have checked out of my local Winnipeg library an old copy of *Wolf Willow*, a book by the Pulitzer prize-winning author Wallace Stegner about his childhood in south-



western Saskatchewan and neighbouring Montana in the early 1900s. I finally bought my own copy. I have brought it with me.

About 90 poets and "pickers" – guitar or banjo players – and nearly 40 artists and artisans are in Maple Creek this September weekend. The poets and pickers play at half a dozen venues in town. Merchants sell tack, boots, Stetsons, horse blankets, artwork and western-style clothing from the back room of the legion hall.

This gathering has become part of an informal circuit across Western Canada and the Midwestern United States. The poetry's cantering rhythms – and occasionally awful rhymes – have caught the hearts of rural prairie people on both sides of the border. There are chapbooks of poetry, tape cassettes and CDs. There's even a video featuring Doris Bircham, a "cowboy" poet and cattle rancher who hails from a ranch near the town of Piapot, not far from Maple Creek, and who is a moving force behind Western Canadian cowboy poetry and the gathering here.

"I've written poetry since I was a child," she says. "I just didn't know for a long time that's what it was." The roots of all cowboy poetry lie in the soil, she believes. "The grass, the prairie, is our lifeline, you know, and I guess I feel really intensely about it. I've been to the mountains, I've been to the ocean, and I always want to come back to the prairie, where I can see."

CHRISTOPHER LEMAY



## Cowboy

poetry is a long-preserved, still-evolving part of folk culture. Much

of it is pure doggerel, but it carries the romance of taming the West

Cowboy poetry is a long-preserved, still-evolving part of folk culture that got its start around campfires in the late 1800s. Much of it is pure doggerel, but it carries the romance of taming the West, sitting tall in your saddle, squinting into the setting sun. Today's cowboy poets may put pick-up trucks and tractors into their rhymes, but the poetry still blends storytelling, cattle tending, easy humour and hard lessons. In big cities, gatherings attract thousands; in this isolated cow town, perhaps 400 take in each recital.

Some of the poets are bunking at Maple Creek hotels, but most have brought their own accommodation: a cluster of motor homes – an aluminum-sided wagon train – park on the broad lawn behind the Jasper Centre. Frank Gleeson, a poet and lifelong rancher from Williams Lake, B.C., leans against one of the motor homes.

"I guess I started when I was a boy," he says. "Use'ta write poems about the girls in class and pass them to other boys. Then when the teacher caught me, I'd hafta make a spitball out of 'em and throw 'em. But then I didn't write any more for 50 years. Started again four years ago. Like to put humour in. People like to laugh, y'know?"

Poets on break occupy folding lawn chairs set up in shade cast by the motor homes. They swap road stories and wait for their next turn up.

The three-day gathering occupies the Jasper Centre, the legion hall, the old armoury, the



lawn behind the Southwest Oldtimers' Museum and the Cypress Lodge seniors home. Each year, the gathering spills over into the agricultural grounds – the High Chaparral Arena and neighbouring Second World War vintage airplane hangar, dubbed the Drill Hall, where ranchers and farmers hold sales, rodeos and roping contests outside and auctions inside. During the Cowboy Poetry Gathering there's either a horse auction or a stock-dog show, where ranchers can eye or buy the finest cattle-herding dogs. This year, it's a horse auction – the Cypress Hills Registered Horse Breeders Association's 21st Annual Production Sale. I stop to watch, standing beside the bleachers, and I fall in love with the first animal to be auctioned, a skittish four-month-old sorrel filly. "I tell you what," coaxes the auctioneer. "She's got everthin' goin' fer her, just as well marked as you kin git." The brown-and-white-dappled filly dances nervously on the straw-covered stage as she's walked back and forth. She sells for less than \$1,500; had she been exhibited later in the auction, she would probably have fetched more. Afterwards, I see her in the stalls with her new owner.

The filly has a red bridle on; a young woman is stroking her and talking sweetly, calming the tense youngster. Envious, I drive back across the railway bed to the Jasper Centre.

Frank Gleeson picks up the chest-high podium that's standing in his way on the stage, sets it

