

# Cowboy Poetry Adventures

by Paddy Bowman

Imagine herding 21 high school students from the coast of Oregon to the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, over nine days in the middle of the school year. English teacher Mark Mizell and French teacher Jon Broderick mustered not only the passion but an ambitious plan that took students from Seaside, Oregon, to the 17th annual Gathering. “It all started when I took a writing workshop with Hal Cannon,” Mizell said. Cannon is a folklorist who founded the Western Folklife Center and helped to found the Gathering, now a hugely popular event that has helped to inspire many other gatherings around the country. Broderick’s interest stems from helping start the Fisher Poets Gathering in Astoria and incorporating fisher poetry into his teaching.



*Ben Fry, Nora Beckman, and Freddy Blanche of Oregon perform during the Cowboy Poetry Gathering*

Three years ago, Mizell and Broderick took 35 students to Elko as spectators. This year, with the help of the Western Folklife Center and the John Meyer Trust Foundation, they accompanied students who actually performed in Elko. They began by introducing students to reading cowboy poetry, then writing poems about western life. Any Seaside High School student willing to attend Monday night and daily lunch period writing hours could participate. The odyssey included a two-day stay at a ranch in southern Oregon so students could experience cowboy life, then a quick visit down to the California Railroad Museum in Sacramento. Finally, they boarded the California Zephyr for Elko, encountering a senior citizens’ group who invited the students to perform a “trial run,” then sat talking with them afterward.



*During their two-day stay at the Yamsi Ranch, Seaside students head out on a crisp morning to feed the cattle.*

In Elko, students stayed with families and performed a traveling show of poetry, music, and sketches that they originated at a rural schools conference, a junior high, and the Gathering. “It’s so refreshing to get out of the classroom and get to know the kids in a different setting,” Mizell noted. “Much of what they learned was unplanned, for example, communicating with the senior citizens on the train. Both age groups broke their stereotypes of ‘gray-haired people’ and ‘teenage maniacs.’” Several students saw and wrote about their first snow. During their stay at the Yamsi Ranch in Chiloquin, Oregon, students experienced daily chores such as early morning cattle feedings. They were treated to an extensive writing workshop with cowboy poet Paul Zarzysky during

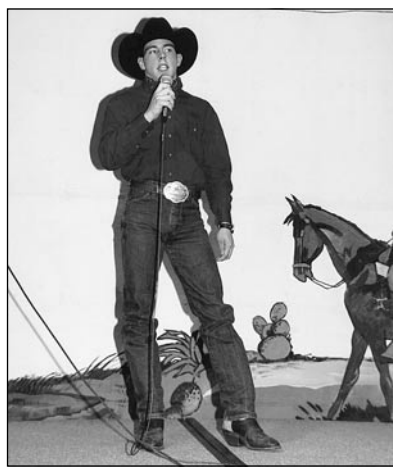


Photo by Darci Johnson

*Dustin Pierce, 16, a student from Cal Farley’s Boys Ranch near Amarillo, Texas, performs during the youth portion of the 17th Cowboy Poetry Gathering.*

the Gathering, who dedicated the first poem of his main-stage performance to “21 of the neatest kids I’ve ever met up with.” Seaside students learned invaluable lessons about life and about writing.

Mizell and Broderick weren’t the only teachers to use the Gathering to inspire poetry. The Cowboy Poetry Team at Cal Farley’s Boys Ranch, a 10,000-acre residential childcare facility for boys and girls outside Amarillo, Texas, began when students heard Tim Jobe reciting his own poetry last year. He heads up the horse program at the ranch. “I’ve been a cowboy all my life,” Jobe said. “I’ve been messing around with cowboy poetry for several years. I’d been to several gatherings, but not the one in Elko.” The team meets after school so that students may use Jobe’s collection of books and audio and video recordings of cowboy poets. Quickly, they began writing their own poetry as well and have performed around Texas and New Mexico. In Elko, students from grades 5 to 10 performed at a local school and the youth portion of the Gathering. They also attended all the performances they could fit in.

## Cowboy Poetry Resources

What is cowboy poetry? The life, work, and language of cowboys are rooted in many cultural groups, from Africa to Mexico, but British ballads are one of the chief influences on cowboy poetry. According to the Western Folklife Center, “It was a jazz of Irish storytelling, Scottish seafaring and cattle tending, Moorish and Spanish horsemanship, European cavalry traditions, African improvisation, and Native American experience, if also oppression. All the old ingredients can be heard and seen in the cowboying way of life even today.” Learn more and hear real cowboy poetry and music on the Western Folklife Center Web site [www.westernfolklife.org](http://www.westernfolklife.org), including *Voices of Youth on the Radio*, which engages teens in documenting life in Elko through sound recordings and photography. The Center offers a compilation of poems, songs, stories, and pictures in *Buckaroo: Visions and Voices of the American West*, Hal Cannon and Thomas West, eds., \$29.95.

Students at the childcare facility “actually live out the work of cowboys,” Jobe said, helping to run cattle, manage horses, plant and harvest crops, mind a dairy farm, and ride in rodeos. Despite their busy schedules, team members meet weekly. Their enthusiasm led Jobe and communications coordinator Darci Johnson to dream of organizing a youth cowboy poetry gathering at Boys Ranch. The trip to Elko was part of the planning process. She said, “We were inspired by the Gathering and watching our kids’ confidence soar as they performed and received feedback from some of the well-known poets. We’d like to be a part of preserving western heritage and values by hosting young people from across the country. Right now, we’re looking at June 2002, but we’re still in the planning and approval stages.”

One of the educational benefits that

Oregon teacher Mark Mizell has seen through incorporating cowboy poetry is that students learn, “Hey, poets breathe air, they aren’t dead, maybe everyone has a poem inside.” Not every teacher has a principal like Mizell’s, who challenges teachers to be creative and allows students



*Seaside High School students pose for a picture with cowboy poet Paul Zarzysky during his writing workshop in Elko*

to miss regular classes for a week, but studying cowboy poetry is possible year-round on the Western Folklife Center Web site (see sidebar, p.12). The Gathering occurs in late January annually, which allows time to plan your own student field trip in 2002. Or, integrate cowboy and other folk poetry into your curriculum through books, recordings, and the Internet. For example, inspired by his work with the Great Basin Writing Project, Elko High School English teacher Robert McGinty is beginning an online exchange between students and a cowboy poet. He notes, “This kind of poetry feeds students’ love of communication.”

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*Students from Seaside, Oregon, had nightly writing assignments during their cowboy poetry adventure. The poems they wrote show the strong impression made by the trip’s experiences, not only their work with the cowboy poets and the ranch, but also, seeing their first snow.*

### **The Day I Lost My Snow Virginity**

I had only seen her from a distance, her postcard perfect curves and pale face. I longed for her touch like a child with his face against the window of a toy store. I met her on a cool January day. A grin tickled my face as we passed by her. She caressed the trees with her fragrance and her lush cheeks gave way to dimples formed by the fresh tracks of a deer.

I stepped out of the van and rubbed her somber thighs. A milky way of stones freckled her legs. I held her hand tightly and she disintegrated between my fingertips. I packed her skin together, forming a frosty sphere out of her fragile flesh. I gripped too hard and she nipped my nose with a sudden chill. “Feisty,” I said, “just the way I like ‘em.”

I rested on her torso and scratched my name in her stomach with a branch. The white glare of the sun melted into her flawless complexion. I gathered another piece of her and flung it at a nearby dog.

Her arms reluctantly released me as I stepped onto the train. Her gracious scent lingered on my skin.

*Jeff Hinton*

### **The Simple B.S. of Life**

They rare up in the rustic, white Chevy Blazer, hopping out in experienced \*Carhartts and \*\*Romeos. The heat from the raging bonfire starts to burn their faces as they pile on more palettes. They idly stand by listening to an old friend telling a story from the distant past. The sound of the waves crashing against the wet-concrete sand and the wind whipping through the scraping vetch making sweet music to their ears. Could this simple, satisfying Saturday night gathering become a song to the music of their lives?

*Noelle Harer*

*\* Carhartts - a popular brand of work jeans in Oregon*

*\*\*Romeos - comfortable slippers worn by many loggers and fishermen out West*

### **The Country Side**

The sun and the shadows blend the greens, yellows, golds, and the browns

Of the countryside together  
Just as an old woman sits and weaves  
her baskets.

I can’t help but wonder why her baskets  
stay together so well,

Just as I wonder, will the countryside

stay or will it go?

As the world grows, I watch the countryside slowly go,  
A house here, a building there.  
One by one, I watch them go up.  
And see the countryside slowly go.

*Sarah Simpson*

Gerda, the woman who runs the Yamsi Ranch made a big impression on the students and their teachers.

### **Gerda**

I am Gerda, Yamsi matriarch.  
I have treated my land like a friend  
And it continues to thank me.  
Three score plus ten years of precision living.

I have cooked thousands of meals  
And shared stories with buckaroos,  
dudes, doctors, lawyers,  
and, now, coastal cowboys.

Though my ranch is as big as the sky  
There’s no room for self-pity up here.  
Even in the winter when things slow down

And I feel myself dying back with the aspen leaves,

I still push on  
Knowing that, when spring comes,  
My soul will soar  
Like the geese returning to our marshes.

*Mark Mizell*