

# Writing the Range

by Trish O'Malley

**E**VERY JANUARY, Elko, Nevada, hosts the Cowboy Poetry Gathering, an event that gives hundreds of cowboy poets, musicians and folk artists the opportunity to celebrate the diversity of ranch culture in the American West. Some 7,000 to 8,000 people listen to poets recite classic rhymes of the range and contemporary verse as open and controversial as public lands.

Originally Elko was a somewhat typical “cowtown,” where ranchers brought cattle to the railroad yards and purchased supplies. But over recent decades more and more of the area’s economic base has shifted to the booming mining industry and the service businesses associated with tourism and gambling. Predictably, many students are not from the ranching culture. And even among rural students, there is often a greater familiarity with the Little Mermaid and Spice Girls than Bruce Kiskaddon and Bob Wills.

Through cooperative efforts with teachers, administrators, and artists, the Western Folklife Center, producer of the Gathering, has developed an educational program for some 5,000 student participants in grades K-12.

About a thousand 4th and 5th graders visit the historic Pioneer Hotel, headquarters for the Western Folklife Center, where working cowboys guide them through the annual Gathering of Gear exhibit, explaining how the finely crafted leather, silver, or braided gear is used. Students are encouraged to get right next to gearmakers demonstrating their craft so they can learn specific names and techniques. Hands-on activities offer students a chance to put their newfound knowledge to use, and cowboy poets and musicians entertain them with songs and verse that are filled with the colorful words of the cowboy workday. In addition to tasting the many flavors of Western culture, they even get a chance to taste a traditional western drink at the bar: sarsaparilla.

So what does all of this have to do with writing poetry? First, students are exposed to a tradition of writing that is about daily experiences, validating this real working lifestyle. Second, they are exposed to the music of language, or what Montana poet Paul Zarzyski describes as “the ring and ricochet of cowboy lingo off the stirrup bone of the middle ear.” The “cool” words of the cowboy emerge in the stories, songs and poetry shared formally and informally throughout the Gathering activities.

Back at their home schools, teachers encourage the writing and reciting of poetry during the week of the Cowboy Poetry Gathering. Guest poets, musicians, and craftsmen are invited into the classroom, further inspiring and guiding the creative process, and by the end of the week nearly 40 students are invited to recite poetry or sing a song at the Gathering’s popular “Youth Session.” Through all this, the students not only have a lot of fun playing cowboy and becoming better acquainted with their ranching neighbors, they gain new opportunities to express themselves through the written word.

*Trish O'Malley is program coordinator at the Western Folklife Center, Box 1570, Elko, NV 89803, www.westfolk.org. Tickets and information on the next Gathering are available toll-free, 888/880-5885.*

**Cowboys Are Real**

*by Douglas Wayne Brown, III*

Cowboys are real,  
Like leather and steel.  
A heart of gold does the cowboy hold,  
for his life and his land,  
is a story untold.

He'll give you his shirt,  
if you needed it more,  
for a cowboy's heart  
is a general store.

Looks of leather,  
hands of steel,  
when you look at a cowboy,  
what you see is real.

**Best of the West**

*by Jason Porter*

Sun's gone down,  
And all around  
Little creatures  
Hunting the ground.

Gone home.  
For what did I see?  
Stars in the skies  
And owls in the trees.

Gone to bed,  
See you tomorrow,  
Ready to borrow  
The full blue sky.

**A Cowboy**

*by Patrick and Sally Dunn*

A cowboy eats beans  
And has good dreams.  
When he's asleep  
He doesn't count sheep.  
When he wakes up  
He fills his cup.  
He saddles his mare  
But forgets to comb his hair.  
When he's all done  
He goes and has fun.

**A Smart Coyote**

*by Seamus Dufurrena*

A smart coyote  
can do what he desires  
If he is careful.