

Barney's Campfire

By J. R. "Ole" Olesen

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This will be my first column, a job assigned to me as a member of the Tumbleweed Tales Society of Pahrump, Nevada, on cowboy poetry. I was born in 1935 and raised on a small cattle ranch in Phillips County, Montana. I left the ranch in the fall of 1959 and started a career as a salesman. I began writing poetry about my experiences on the ranch after I retired in 1997. This column will be not only about cowboy poetry but also about the attitude and outlook on life that all cowboys have.

What is the cowboy poetry genre? That appears to be a good question. In the beginning it was a group of real cowboys out on the trail, sitting around a campfire telling stories set to verse. Most of the stories were about events in their daily lives and almost none were written down. They were recited from campfire to campfire and most were changed, at least to a degree, over time to suit the ideas of the orator. Most of the stories were lengthy and consisted of many verses. Survivors of that era have been set to music such as "The Strawberry Roan" (Curly Fletcher), "When the Work's All Done This Fall" (unknown author), "Red River Valley" (Unknown author), "The Streets of Laredo" (unsure who the author is), etc. A good deal of what is left from those early days has now been attributed to that great writer, "Mr. Heronimus Anonymous," all great writers need a first name.

Cowboy poetry has evolved over the years to include all kinds of comments on current affairs of ranch and cowhand life. These poems are for the most part based on personal experiences and are generally humorous in nature. Much of this poetry remains unpublished, there just "ain't" any money in it, and is seen, by this writer, as a fun experience and a hobby. What part of it that is published is usually a matter of pride, self-published. I will tell you again, from personal experience: "There ain't any money in it." The very best way to experience today's cowboy poetry is at something called a "gathering." This old cowhand remains extremely grateful for "gatherings" because they provide me with an audience for my work as a poet.

The first modern gathering was a group of Nevada cowboys who met at Elko, Nevada some twenty-six years ago. Their gathering caught the eye of the national media and modern cowboy poetry was on its way. Today there are gatherings held all over the West year round in both large and small towns. This writer attends the

second oldest gathering held at Lewistown, Montana on the second weekend of August. The Lewistown gathering has been held for twenty-five years and is included in the top one hundred things to do before you die. The gathering includes poets, musicians, sometimes storytellers, and a flea market for both western gear and art. They have a poetry contest for school children. It always includes a poet and guests-only-barbecue held on Thursday night featuring an open mic. Both Friday and Saturday consists of several venues featuring poets, musicians, and the flea market of western gear and art. The Saturday night show features the winner of the poetry contest along with a warm up by local poets and a well known western entertainer. A nondenominational cowboy church ends the event on Sunday morning.

The Montana gathering has a web site:

<http://www.montanacowboypoetrygathering.com> or click on the link found on this site to obtain the dates for this year's event.

This will wrap up my first column of old cowboys and their poetry. Watch for future columns which may or may not include some of my poetry, and stories about some old timers I know while growing up on that ranch in Northern Montana.

--- J.R. Olesen
aka "Barney"