

Geff Dawson – Poetry Rodeo

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

The rodeo is coming to town! But this isn't a competition of riding bulls or roping calves. This competition takes the form of rhyming words. For the first time ever, the National Cowboy Poetry Rodeo is coming to Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Geff Dawson is the new organizer of this event, which he is bringing to Kansas for the first time. Geff grew up at Abilene, where he was always around horses and rodeos. After studying at K-State, he and his wife Dawn bought a place in rural Wabaunsee County north of Alma, population 785 people. Now, that's rural. Geff worked at the Aye Ranch for a time and now manages the Illinois Creek Ranch.

Like me, Geff is a cowboy poet. Like me, it was not something he planned to do. "I'd come home from work at the ranch and tell my wife about something funny that happened that day," Geff said. "She'd say, 'You ought to write that down.'"

He wasn't very quick to take the time to write those things down, but one day when he did sit down to record the day's events, he tried to write in rhyme. He found it was a fun way to tell a story. Geff became a cowboy poet.

"If you told my ex-English comp teacher that I became a poet, she'd probably faint," Geff said with a smile. But he found he enjoyed doing it, and audiences enjoyed it as well.

In 2002, Geff started performing his poetry. He also started playing the guitar and singing cowboy songs. "I played guitar and sang when I was younger," Geff said. "But it wasn't like riding a bicycle. I had to learn to play all over again."

Geff performed for various audiences in the region. Then he learned about something called the National Cowboy Poetry Rodeo. It was like a national competition of the cowboy poets. They would recite their poems before judges in various categories.

In 2005 he went out to compete in the cowboy poetry rodeo in Kanab, Utah. He did fairly well, but on the way home he said to his wife, "I'm going to go back and win this thing." For the next twelve months, he wrote, practiced, and refined his poems. In 2006, he won the Best of the Best national championship. In 2009, he returned and did well again, winning the Best of the West shootout.

Geff continues to travel and perform. But two years ago, Geff got disturbing news: The man who had founded the National Cowboy Poetry Rodeo was turning 80, and he was going to close down the rodeo and retire.

"I sent him an email and told him that I hated to see this wonderful format lost," Geff said. "I even asked him if he would consider selling the rights to it so we could keep it going." Ultimately, that is what happened, and Geff purchased the copyright and the rights to produce the event.

But what would he do with it? The founder of the rodeo had moved the annual event around to various states, and he told Geff that when they held it closer to the center of the country, they got more contestants and more interest.

That was all the encouragement Geff needed. One can't get any closer to the center of the country than Kansas, and Geff wanted to bring this event to his home state.

What's more, perhaps the world's first and most famous cowtown was Geff's hometown of Abilene.

Geff approached the county fair in Abilene about holding the rodeo in conjunction with the fair, and the fair board embraced the idea. Now the plans call for the National Cowboy Poetry Rodeo to be held in Abilene during the Central Kansas Free Fair on July 30, 31, and August 1, 2015.

The rodeo is coming to town – not with bulls and broncos, but with rhyme and meter. We salute Geff and Dawn Dawson for making a difference by bringing this event to Kansas. “I'm sure the poets will put on a good show, so watch for more about the National Cowboy Poetry Rodeo.”

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.