

Ken Spurgeon – Home on the Range

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

Home on the Range. That's the state song of Kansas, but many people may not know the fascinating back story of the disputed authorship of this wonderful song. Now a Kansas film company is making the true story come alive on screen. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Ken Spurgeon is founder and executive director of Lone Chimney Films, the company which is producing a docudrama called Home on the Range. Ken is from Wichita originally. He got a bachelors and master's degree from Wichita State and became a teacher. He now teaches history at Northfield School of the Liberal Arts and at Friends University.

Ken became a Civil War reenactor, wearing period costumes and reenacting the battles of the Civil War. Videographers wanted footage of these battles, and Ken became interested in the filming process.

"I loved the visual elements," Ken said. "That's how many of us learn." The process of bringing a story to life on film fascinated him. After serving as a close-up extra on a film shoot in Virginia, he decided he wanted to write and produce screenplays and documentaries.

Ken and friend Jonathon Goering put together their own film company. He remembered the stories of Bleeding Kansas and the fact that a lone chimney is sometimes the only thing which remains from an abandoned farmstead of yesteryear. Ken named his new enterprise Lone Chimney Films and later got it designated as a 501(c)3 non-profit organization.

In 2005, Lone Chimney Films produced its first documentary, a Civil War story called Touched by Fire. The second documentary was called Bloody Dawn: The Lawrence Massacre. Both films have aired more than twenty times on regional PBS stations across the midwest and have been shown in more than 200 classrooms.

The third documentary was called The Road to Valhalla about the Kansas-Missouri border war and its after-effects. That film won the Best Documentary award from the National Cowboy Museum in Oklahoma City.

After giving a talk about his films one day, Ken was approached about a new film idea: The true story of the song known as Home on the Range. The more he explored the idea, the more intrigued he became. He visited with Wichita musician Orin Friesen and Kansas writer Sharon Black who had written about the topic.

Home on the Range was highly popular. It was also the subject of a national lawsuit. An Arizona couple claimed to have been the first persons to have written the song and sued for royalties.

An attorney had been dispatched to find the true origin of the song. His travels took him to Smith County, Kansas, where eyewitnesses attested to its having been written by Dr. Brewster Higley in the 1870s. The attorney found that the Smith County Pioneer newspaper had published Higley's poem in 1874 prior to the Arizonans, proving that Higley was the original author.

Higley had written the poem about his Smith County cabin which was located north of the rural communities of Gaylord, population 141, and Cedar, population 26.

Now, that's rural. The poem was later set to music and modified slightly. Its popularity would spread across the nation.

The fascinating story of the attorney's discovery of the truth about the song is dramatized in this new docudrama called *Home on the Range*. It stars Buck Taylor who appeared in *Gunsmoke* and western actor Rance Howard who is also the father of Hollywood director Ron Howard. Mitch Holthus plays an old-time radio announcer. Orin Friesen served as musical consultant. The film even includes the rock group Kansas singing *Home on the Range*.

The movie premiered in January 2017 in Wichita, Kansas City, and Smith County. It has been shown at the capitol in Topeka for the Governor and state legislators and will be shown at various communities across Kansas and beyond. For more information, go to www.lonechimneyfilms.org.

Home on the Range. It took a lawsuit to prove that this song indeed was first written by a Kansan, and now Ken Spurgeon is making a difference by sharing this history with others. I'm glad this film has found its home – well, you know where.

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