

Annie Wilson – Tallgrass Express

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

There are many balladeers in the music business, and there are many beautiful Flint Hills in eastern Kansas, but there is only one official Flint Hills Balladeer. Annie Wilson was named a Flint Hills Balladeer by Governor Sam Brownback in recognition of her wonderful musical talents and her love of the Kansas Flint Hills. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Annie Wilson (no relation to this author) grew up in Wichita and spent time at her grandfather's Flint Hills ranch. "I fell in love with the Flint Hills," Annie said. After college, she ultimately became a teacher. She also met and married John Wilson, who was ranching near the rural Flint Hills community of Elmdale, population 55 people. Now, that's rural.

Annie also enjoyed music, having learned to play guitar at age 11. When the Emma Chase café in downtown Cottonwood Falls started having jam sessions with local musicians on Friday nights, she joined in.

"I suffered from stage fright," Annie said. "But the people here were so open and non-judgmental." Annie started playing and singing and learning from the other musicians. In 2004, she and others formed the musical group, the Tallgrass Express String Band.

"We always played bluegrass," Annie said. "But those songs were about back in Virginia or my old Kentucky home. I thought to myself, 'We could write songs about things right here in Kansas.'"

So, Annie began to write. She didn't get much encouragement from the music industry. "People say, if you want to make it big, you have to write about lost loves and universal themes," Annie said. "But I didn't care about making it big. The audience I want is local," she said.

Annie Wilson wrote about the things she knew and loved: The tallgrass prairie, rural lifestyle, farmers and ranchers, life on the ranch, and the wildlife and prairieflowers of the beautiful Flint Hills. "My husband John has taught me so much about ranching and the land and the people of the Flint Hills," Annie said.

Tallgrass Express produced CDs in 2005 and 2007 which mostly included traditional songs that others had written. But the songwriting bug had bitten Annie and she started to write and then record her original work. In 2010, Tallgrass Express produced a new CD of original songs of the Flint Hills, virtually all of which were written by Annie.

"The Flint Hills are worth singing about," Annie said. In January 2013, at the annual Flint Hills visioning summit, Governor Sam Brownback named Annie as a Flint Hills Balladeer. True to her title, she kept writing and recorded 24 more Flint Hills songs which were featured in a two CD set produced by Tallgrass Express in 2014. She has now written more than 50 Flint Hills songs.

For more information, go to www.tallgrassexpress.com.

One of her original songs is Last Stand of the Tallgrass Prairie. Here is an excerpt:

(music)

There are many balladeers in the music business, and there are many beautiful Flint Hills in eastern Kansas, but there is only one official Flint Hills Balladeer. We commend Annie Wilson for making a difference with musical talent and a heart for the Flint Hills. She makes a wonderful musical ambassador for Kansas.

And there's more. The most recent CD includes original songs by two authors: Annie Wilson and one other. We'll meet her fellow songwriter next week.

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