



NEBRASKA BY HEART

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Curriculum Unit • Grades 6–8
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Cowboy Poetry from Nebraska Poets

NOTE: “cowboy poetry” is a term that nowadays is used generically for western poetry written not only by cowboys but also by cowgirls, both male and female ranchers, and other persons involved in farming and ranching in the U.S.

Yvonne Hollenbeck Clearfield, South Dakota (Raised in Gordon, Nebraska)

Yvonne and her husband Glen Hollenbeck raise cattle and quarter horses on a family ranch in South Dakota. She is a poet and musician who grew up near Gordon Nebraska. Her father is Harry Hanson, a well-known champion old time fiddler from Gordon. Yvonne learned to play music from him and they have often performed together. The poem below is from a true story of when her husband was ten years old and he was caught out in a Great Plains blizzard while riding home from school. It is reprinted with permission. See a listing of Yvonne’s publications and recordings in Resources.

Give Your Horse His Head

He would saddle up his pony
and bundle up real good
then load his gear, check the cinch
just like every cowboy should.

Then he’d climb up in the saddle
..feeling happy, as a rule,
then down the trail you’d see him lope
a-headed off for school.

His mom would gladly drive him there
but he did not want that;
he liked to ride his pony
wearin’ boots and cowboy hat.

He loved the birds and animals
he’d watch for on the way;
besides it did his pony good
to ride him every day.

Then one day, during recess time
the sky got dark and gray;
a call came that a real bad storm
was headed out that way.

The teacher let the children out,
Little Cowboy headed home;
but soon the snow was blinding him;
he was out there all alone.

He had soon lost his direction
and thought he'd got off course,
and knew the only chance he had
was to trust his little horse.

His mom and dad were worried sick
all they could do was pray.
Where could their little cowboy be
as the blizzard raged that day?

They hoped he'd found a neighbor's home
where he'd be safe and sound;
perhaps he'd stopped at Father Doyle's
but phone lines were all down.

It seemed like an eternity
when suddenly they heard
what sounded like a horse outside
they could neither say a word.

They opened up the back porch door
and shed some tears of joy;
when they saw that dear old pony
and their precious little boy.

Now many years have come and gone;
the little cowboy's growing old,
remembering still that frightful day
...the wind...the snow...the cold.

And as we go through life it seems
there's things that blind our way;
and why we take a dead-end road
is sometimes hard to say.

But we are all aware that life
is full of things we dread;
instead of pulling on the reins,
just give your horse his head.

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Willard Hollopeter Woodlake, Nebraska

Willard is a lifelong Nebraska Sandhills rancher. He's been writing poetry forever but began sharing it with the public some thirteen years ago. He also writes a bimonthly column for two publications, occasionally has a story in a magazine, has a weekly radio program called "The Heritage Trail," is on the Nebraska Arts Council's touring program, and is poetry chairman of the Nebraska Cowboy Poetry Gathering and Old West Days held in Valentine each October. He has one book of poetry, "So Many Winters," and is working on another. The following poem was written for a friend's wedding celebration. It is reprinted with permission. Also see Willard's listing in Resources.

NOTE: "Doc Bar" was a famous quarter horse stallion. The Doc Bar Breed is considered exceptional and is popular for ranch and performance horses.

Cowboy Love Poem

He saw her standing there
And his pulse began to race.
He was smitten at first sight.
You could see it in his face.

He knew he had to have her,
Of that there was no doubt.
He didn't know just how,
But he was gonna figure it out

Her beauty addled his thinkin',
As she stood there in his sight.
Her body was a work of art.
She was put together right.

Her good looks were inherited.
Passed on by her mom and dad.
He knew her family lineage,
And he wanted her real bad.

He couldn't be contented,
Without her in his life.
He knew that down the road,
He was gonna want a wife

But just for right now,
His need was drivin' him silly.
And he knew he had to buy
That little Doc Bar filly.

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Lyn DeNaeyer Messersmith Alliance, Nebraska

Lyn is a freelance writer, newspaper columnist, and third generation rancher in Cherry county in the Nebraska Sandhills. All of those occupations pay equally poorly, but she's see a lot of good country and met some mighty fine folks on the path to the poorhouse. She's been featured at Cowboy Poetry Gatherings in most of the western states as well as Canada. She also presents historical programs with her trail partner, Deb Carpenter. Deb and Lyn are affiliated with the Nebraska and South Dakota Arts and Humanities Councils and enjoy presenting writing workshops for students of all ages. The following poem is reprinted with permission. See a listing of her publications and programs in Resources.

All Our Women Have It

I don't know her name,
this relative from the past
in the faded photograph,
looking proud, but not quite haughty
with a certain lift to her chin.
A hint of mischief underlines
the mouth about to speak her mind,
or say something slightly naughty.

Her shoulders are squared
In a manner that belies
Laughter lurking behind dark eyes
destined to outwit time.
Wisps of hair escape efforts
to appear sedate or mild,
and she wears an almost smile
that somehow matches mine.

I know it's in me too,
the strong and stubborn pride
that holds the tears inside;
gives her an air, somehow apart.
Though I don't know her name
I'd wager she was next of kin
to wildflowers and the wind,
And I've inherited her heart

© Lyn DeNaeyer Messersmith

Howard Parker (1935-2004) Gordon, Nebraska

A fourth generation rancher in the Nebraska Sandhills south of Gordon, Howard was a three-time Nebraska State Champion saddlebronc rider and a musician, as well as a poet. He died of a heart attack while working on his ranch in 2004. The following two poems are reprinted with permission. See a listing of his publications and recordings in Resources.

The Passin' of an Era

He was old when I first knew him
Or at least seemed old to me
And he didn't look at all
Like what a cowboy ought to be.

He didn't buy no fancy outfits
Like us young guys were want to do
Said, "Hell, this ol' Hamley will last as long
As what I figure to."

His string of mounts looked like the nags
In some old "Western Horseman" joke
But he could ride 'em all day and not be afoot
And they would pull till somethin' broke.

He wasn't much for poetry
Philosophy or song
Just said, "It's a great country to grow old in Kid
Cuz it sure don't take too long.

When you can drive six head of horses
And hardly touch a line
And they replace you with a tractor
Then you've plumb outlived your time.

Well, he didn't last much longer
When it come his time to go
They filled that little country church
And they stood out in the snow.

We knew just like the preacher said
That we'd all lost a friend
And watched the passin' of an era
For we'll not see his likes again.

© 1987, Howard Parker

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Howard Parker (1935-2004) Gordon, Nebraska

Horse Tradin'

Well, a horse trader he showed up one day,
And he sure would wheel and deal,
For horses, saddles, bridle bits--
Anything he could buy or steal.

And I started thinking about Ol' Pal
And wonderin' what he'd bring.
He was cow-hocked and parrot-mouthed
And he just turned twelve this spring.

And anything that he could do,
He couldn't do too well.
I just happened to have him handy,
Out in the round corral.

Well the trader takes a look at him,
And Lordy, don't ya know,
He found some other things that's wrong,
That I didn't think would show.

Well, he'd make me an offer,
Then he'd take another chew,
And I'd talk about how dry it was,
And wondered what the hay would do.

Then finally we struck a deal,
Some later in the day.
And I've got the money in my hand
As I watch him pull away.

Then I got to thinkin'
About that ol' horse, ya see;
Wonderin' where he'd end up,
And who his new owner would be.

'Cuz if ya didn't want to rope him,
You better have some oats or corn.
And that ol' devil would still bog his head
On a cold December morn.

Well, they were gonna have an auction,
And it wasn't far away.
And I thought that I would drive over,
Not doin' much that day.

Well, the trader gave his testimony,
With Ol' Pal a-standin' there,
How, "he was plumb safe for anybody,
And you could catch him anywhere."

Then there was a lot of other things
I didn't know that he could do,
Like, "rope calves or steers off him,
Pick up buckin' horses, too!"

So when the biddin' started,
I just got right in the game.
And I guess I didn't know when to stop,
'Cuz the ringman called my name!

Well, I lost two hundred dollars,
But Ol' Pal is mine once more.
At least he's four years younger
Than he was the time before.

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