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**Cowboy poet Duane Nelson recites a selection of verse during an event at The Dalles Wasco County Library. Mark B. Gibson file photo**

# a cowboy's Poetry

By RaeLynn Ricarte  
**The Dalles Chronicle**

Cowboy poetry grew out of rough men swapping tall tales by a crackling campfire in the Wild West and has spawned songs such as "Home on the Range" that have become part of the American tradition.

"It was really a way of making a long, hard day's work a little more fun," said Duane Nelson of Eightmile Road in Wasco County.

He is carrying on the tradition of cowboy bards by writing and performing his own verses at brandings, banquets and other social occasions.

"It's kind of a vocal history that has its own niche," he said of the art that has grown from simple verse over the years to more complex patterns.

"Generally, the poems are about horses, cattle, ranching, the land and the lifestyle. Some are funny, some are serious but most are not 'woe is me, the world is ending.'"

Nelson, 59, got started as a rhymester 15 years ago when his wife, Lori, talked him into entering a contest at the Granada Theater in The Dalles.

"It was not the world's best but people seemed to like it," he said of that experience.

Since that time, he has compiled a CD of his best works and taken the stage before large gatherings in the Northwest as well as many local venues. He is currently helping to organize the 8th annual Columbia Gorge Cowboy Gathering, to take place in November.

"A lot of my poetry talks about cattle drives and ranching, about when the west was wild. Although a lot has changed, the cowboy is still a loner with an independent spirit and a deep love of the land," said Nelson.

He said there are differences between performing for an "up close and personal" small audience and the "thrill" of a gathering with hundreds of people, and both are equally satisfying.

"The normal delivery is to just talk like it's a conversation," he said. "I'm a little more dramatic and somewhere in between that and people who use a lot of gestures."

There is no end to subject matter for poems, said Nelson, because cowboys have to be a jack-of-all-trades to be successful. They need to know everything from updating financial records on a computer to pulling a calf out of the birth canal and repairing farm equipment.

"You better love the lifestyle because you aren't getting rich doing it," he said. "It has to be in your blood and you have to get some good breaks along the way to make it."

Most of Nelson's life has been spent in the gorge – he was gone for about a decade – and although he now works at Hood River Supply and is not a full-time rancher, he lives by the rules of the range.

He said the values of the cowboy – built around the Golden Rule and often a strong Christian faith – embody what has made America great and are principles every citizen should strive to follow.

He said the cowboy lifestyle exists in western North America and is vastly different than many trends found in urban areas.

*continued on page 4*



continued from page 3

"It's in your head and in your mind and heart; it's a way of life," he said.

Although cowboys can be hard-bitten and not the best conversationalists, Nelson said, they would defend to the death the people and animals under their care.

"A cowboy can put his prized dog or horse down with no expression on his face but he might go behind the barn and cry about it, that's just the way it is," he said.

He said ranchers were some of the earliest environmentalists because they figured out that if they didn't take care of the land, it wouldn't take care of them. He said grazing and farming practices have adapted to that reality and new science is incorporated into agricultural practices to preserve the ecosystem.

Nelson has 25-30 poems memorized and ready to go for any occasion – or whenever he's challenged.

"I'm usually thinking up a poem in my head or saying it out loud," he said.

When not helping out with a branding or a cattle drive, Nelson can be found spending time with one of the six children in his and Lori's blended family or playing with one of their six grand-children.

## REQUIEM by Duane Nelson

"Naw, she don't mean much to me," he said, and  
kicked the dirt by his feet.  
"Just a big old worn-out red dun mare, Life's been  
hard, and she's kinda beat."  
"One of these days, I'm gonna put her down, she's  
just out here eatin' my grass."  
He takes a dusty handkerchief out of his pants,  
across his forehead he makes a pass.  
"Her knees are puffy, and her wind is broke." He  
puts a fresh chew in his lips.  
"She got all that from a life of toil, she's sure a hard  
knockin' old rip."  
The old blue eyes see every scar, as he looks the  
dun mare over.  
He'd been there for damn near every one; she'd  
never belonged to another.

Excerpt from the poem  
*Requiem* by Duane Nelson



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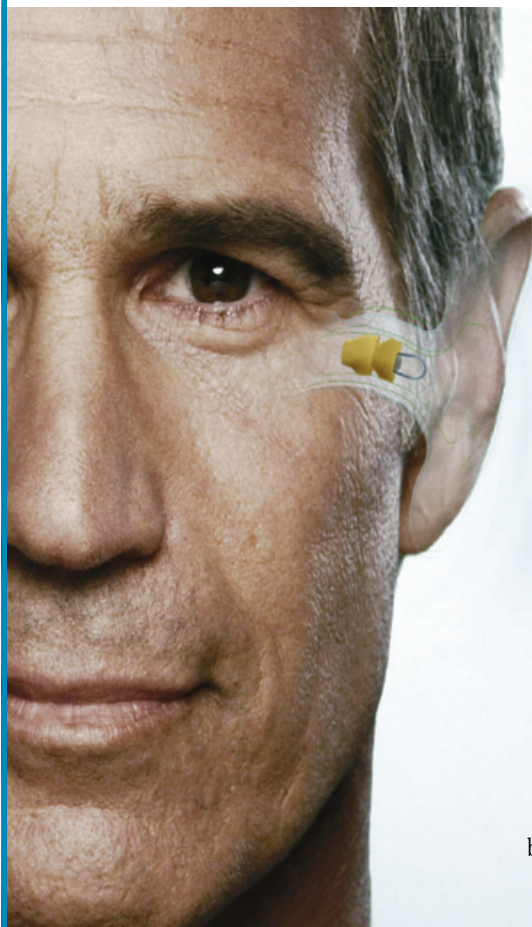
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**Tim Seitz transfers a head loop to the front feet of a calf, as a rider in the foreground throws slack into his line to release the heel loop of a second calf during spring branding at the Filbin Half-Circle F corral on Tygh Ridge. Mark B. Gibson photo**

# Branding

By Mark Gibson  
**The Dalles Chronicle**

Before branding or doctoring cattle the animal must first be constrained, and there are a number of methods used by area cattlemen.

## Heading and heeling

Team roping has long been a rodeo staple. When the calf is released from the roping chute, it is flanked by two riders. The “header” first ropes the head of the running animal by throwing a horizontal loop over its head. If the catch is good, the header “dallies” or hitches his rope to the saddle horn and the “heeler” ropes the hind feet by throwing a vertical loop (imagine a rolling hoop) that sets under the belly of the calf, its top strand against the front of its back legs. This is the “trap.” As the calf is pulled or moves forward, it steps into the loop which is dallied and drawn tight over both heels, which restrains the calf.

In rodeo, this stops the time and the calf is released. On the ranch, this is simply the first step.

If a calf or steer has been headed and heeled, the ground crew then takes control of the animal's head and transfers the head loop to both front feet, using a specific twist to the loop that forms a sort of figure 8. Once the loop is secure, the “header” backs his horse, drawing the steer tight between the two horses.

The steer is at that point fully controlled and can be worked on as needed.

In practice, many calves are “heeled” first and dragged to the working area, where a second rope is attached the front leg and the animal stretched.

## Dead Man's Loop

A variation of the above procedure involves the use of a “dead man's loop.” The loop is a rope well staked to the ground, with a section of inner tube or other strong elastic along its length. It is used to replace the tension provided by a “header” and allows the animal to be stretched by a single horseman.





**The heeler (Roger Johnson), far left, and header (Shawn Brumley), far right, put tension on their ropes after the head loop has been transferred to the forelegs by ground crew members Tim Seitz and Lester Lindell. Waiting his turn in the background is horseman K.L. Schanno.**

The calf is heeled and dragged to the dead man's loop, to which its front feet are constrained. During this process, the ground crew is quick to yell "One legger" if a calf should kick one leg free from the heeler's loop, which may cause injury to the calf as it is pulled to the dead man's loop. "One leggers" are released and re-roped.

Once captured between the heeler and the dead man's loop, the heeler backs his horse to provide tension, immobilizing the calf between the dead man's loop and his horse.

### Squeeze Chute

Most corrals are equipped with a squeeze chute, which allows safe handling of large animals.

Animals are gathered, and separated as needed into interconnected corrals. Those needing branding or doctoring are sent down an "alley," or narrow chute, at the end of which is the squeeze chute. As the head of the animal exits the chute, a lever is pulled to activate a "head gate," which closes about the neck gate and stops the animal from moving forward or backward. A second lever shifts the sides of the chute inward, squeezing the animal so that it is held securely. Yet another lever swings or slides a gate behind the animal, to keep following animals from pushing into the chute.

The vertical bars of the sides of the chute latch and unlatch to provide access to various portions of the animal.

### Calf Table

Although chutes are adjustable, small calves can be problematic in the larger chutes. A calf table is a smaller version of the squeeze chute that can be rotated to lay horizontally like a table.

**Top right: A "Dead Man's Loop" in use during a spring branding at the Dillon Land and Cattle Company ranch in Maupin. The loop is made from a section of rubber inner tube spliced into a lariat.**

**At right: Dufur rancher Mike Filbin pulls a bar to trigger the release of the head gate of a squeeze chute while working cattle at his corral on Tygh Ridge.**







Roper Dallas Aschoff sits tight as Mark McDaniel, left, and Lester Lindell wrestle a calf to the ground. Mark B. Gibson photo

# True Grit

## in a time of turmoil

By RaeLynn Ricarte  
The Dalles Chronicle

Branding time in south Wasco County is a cultural tradition — neighbors gathering to help each other out and enjoy some social time.

“Out here, it’s all about being a good neighbor,” said Dufur Gap Road rancher Mike Filbin, who runs 400 pair (cows and calves) on leased private and public lands.

He and wife Kitty recently held a community branding event at their Tygh Ridge Corral and friends came from far and wide to lend a hand.

“All the ranchers take turns helping each other,” said Tara Aschoff, who raises horses at the northern edge of the Warm Springs Reservation.

She and her husband, Dallas, travelled to Tygh Ridge on a blustery spring day for the Filbins branding of several dozen new calves with the Half Circle F symbol. The herd is a mix of Black Angus, Red Angus and Hereford cattle.

“Do what has to be done” is one of the values that cowboys (and gals) live by and no whining is allowed about whatever conditions the task entails.

“You’ve really got to like misery to be in this line of work,” jokes Mark McDaniel, a hired hand for Filbin and others area ranchers. “People think being a cowboy is glamorous but, a lot of the time, it sure isn’t.”



Riders sit their horses and talk as the ground crew finishes preparing for a spring branding session at the Filbin corals on Tygh Ridge. Pictured are, left to right, Roger Johnson, Shawn Brumley, K.L. Schanno and Dallas Aschoff. Mark B. Gibson photo

Watching the ranchers at work is a reminder that, while cities have developed a media-driven culture, the rugged traditions of the cowboy remain largely unchanged.

A cold wind and occasional rain drops didn't stop the work crew from springing into action once the roping began. A community branding is also a time for showmanship and there is an informal competition among riders and ropers.

Dallas, Tyler Alsop, K.L. Schanno and Roger Johnson, among others, saddled up and took turns roping the calves by the back legs and neck. Once roped, it took only seconds to get the animal down and then one of several men on the ground moved the rope from the neck to the front legs so the two ropes could be stretched taut enough to hold the animal immobile.

Standing by was Mike, who performed castrations, and helped wrestle the calf into submission if necessary.

McDaniel then moved in with the branding iron to brand the calf's left shoulder with the symbol that has been in the Filbin family for generations; brought to Oregon from Mike's grandfather's ranch in Oklahoma.

The smell of burnt flesh and hair permeated the air as Tara and Kitty teamed inoculations, worming and the task of notching the calf's left ear for further identification. They also attached a yellow tag to help it bat away flies and keep the spread of pinkeye down among the herd.

Within two minutes, all of those tasks had been accomplished and the next calf was on the ground awaiting attention.

"There are folks that don't want us to brand anymore but cattle rustling is still alive and well," said Mike. "As long as there is thieving, there will be a need for brands."

Part of what gets everyone through a long work day is the anticipation of the cold beer and barbecue that lies ahead.

"You get to see your friends more this way," said Tara of the long distance between ranches and the busy schedule that makes free time a rarity during the spring and summer months.

Watching the ranchers at work is a reminder that, while cities have developed a media-driven culture, the rugged traditions of the cowboy remain largely unchanged.

The branding iron might be electric or heated by a propane burner, instead of metal banked in the fire, and tractors might be used to plow ground instead of harnessed horses, but the lifestyle is much the same.

"I lived in Portland when I met Mike and was truly a city girl so I had to get used to this," said Kitty, laughing at the memory of her first visit to his family's property, which they now own, in a dress and high heels.

Conversations with the cowboys (and gals) on the range reveal that their title isn't just a job description; it is an unspoken agreement to follow the Golden Rule by word and deed. To live by shared values of hard work, fair play, self-reliance and accountability to yourself and others.

The job of tending cattle still involves plenty of time in the saddle and manual labor. Modern day cowboys value independence as much as their ancestors and carry a quiet pride that, even though they are a minority of the population, they supply food for a nation and beyond.

In fact, the U.S. Agriculture Census shows that farmers and ranchers pump nearly \$300 billion per year into the national economy.

Although rising production costs caused in part by an increasing burden of regulations is threatening the viability of smaller operations, the biggest threat to the future might lie within the family.





**Mark McDaniel burns the Half-Circle F brand into the left shoulder of a calf. The brand is owned by Dufur rancher Mike Filbin, who bossed the crew working calves at his Tygh Ridge corral. Mark B. Gibson photo**

In 1900, over 39 percent of the American population worked on family farms, according to census data. Forty years later, those employed in family farm work had dropped to 23.1 percent of the population.

An estimated 70 percent of farmland will change hands in the next 20 years but, in many families, the next generation does not want to continue in the business.

A very large percentage of family farmers today are in their 50s, 60s or 70s and only about 6 percent of all farmers are under the age of 35. Many old timers are planning to work as far into the retirement years as they can.

"Ranchers are getting older and our families are looking at how hard this life is and deciding that they could make more money doing something else," said Kitty.

The Filbins have three children and only one has expressed interest in taking up the reins to continue their operations. Out of their 10 grandchildren, five boys and five girls, only one is wanting to follow the ranching tradition.

"It's a lot of hard work and they see that and it's just not what they want to do," said Kitty.

In 1900, over 39 percent of the American population worked on family farms, according to census data. Forty years later, those employed in family farm work had dropped to 23.1 percent of the population.

The 1970 census revealed that only 5 percent of the population farmed. The decline continued in 1990, with a mere 2 percent of the population remaining in farm work.

While large corporate farms are on the rise in American agriculture, family farms are being systematically wiped out of existence. The number of smaller farms in the U.S. has fallen from about 6.8 million in 1935 to about two million today.

The threats to these operations are many, including a federal government that piles more and more regulations on the backs of farmers, which drives up their production costs and lowers income.

Government economists estimate that fewer than one in four farms in the U.S. now produces gross revenues in excess of \$50,000 per year.

"It's a big gamble now," said Kitty.

A discussion of what is taking place in the world to threaten their way of life was sure to take place over the hot beef dinner that followed branding time at the Filbins.

But cowboys are doers not talkers and while there was work to be done, comments exchanged were mostly good-natured ribbing and insults. Participation in a tradition that dated back to the days of the Wild West and a time when the adage "The Spirit of the Cowboy is the Spirit of America" was more than just folklore.





The buck stops and starts with Dufur rancher Mike Filbin, left, but a large crew makes everything work more smoothly when a lot of cattle need worked. Working in the ground crew are, left to right, Mike Filbin, Tara Aschoff, Hanna Seitz, Tim Seitz, Lester Lindell and in back, Mark McDaniel. Each crew member has a specific task to accomplish with each calf, from clipping the ears for identification to administering vaccine.



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Emmitt Cornford wrestles with a heel-rope calf in Maupin during a spring branding at the Dillon Land and Cattle Company ranch based in Dufur.

Mark B. Gibson photo

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# Farm Facts

## Wasco County

The Oregon State Extension Services has compiled these statistics to show the value of agricultural commodities in Wasco County:

- Sweet cherries make up 51 percent of sales, or \$55.2 million.
- Grains hold second place with a 23 percent yearly slice of the economic pie, or \$24.7 million, and hay is a 5 percent sliver at \$5.8 million.
- All pears generate \$2.9 million in revenue each year.
- Other crops are valued at \$11.9 million annually and livestock at \$7.2 million.
- An estimated total of 152,381 acres is in agricultural production in Wasco County.

## Sherman County

All crops in Sherman County brought in a total of \$117.3 million in 2012, according to the Oregon State Extension Service. Following is a breakdown of that figure:

- Grains, such as wheat, account for \$54 million of agricultural commodity sales, followed by specialty products at \$4.3 million.
- Field crops generate \$1.6 million annually and hay and forage about \$258,000. Tree fruits and nuts account for about \$1.5 million.
- Cattle bring in \$3.3 million and other animals and products about \$90,000.
- An estimated 117,315 acres in Sherman County are in agricultural production.



# F&R

THE DALLES CHRONICLE

The Chronicle started an on-going series in 2014 focusing on the agricultural industry, which is the economic engine for Wasco County and the source of many local jobs. We choose to feature the life of cattle ranchers for the inaugural year due to the continuing decline of small ranches. Our attention will turn next year to cherries and then to grains and other commodities.

Farmers and ranchers interested in participating in this educational effort can email reporter RaeLynn Ricarte at [rricarte@thedalleschronicle.com](mailto:rricarte@thedalleschronicle.com) or call 541-506-4604.

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# Cowboy CLOTHES

By RaeLynn Ricarte  
The Dalles Chronicle



Eric Hyatt, A former Marine and hired hand for the Dillon Land and Cattle Company models summer dress on the range.

Cowboy apparel has become a fashion trend in the western part of the United States but the clothing has longed served a practical purpose on the range.

## HAT

The high-crowned, wide-brimmed hat, mostly made of soft felt but also of leather and straw, is an adaptation from the Mexican sombrero. The first American version was created in 1865 by the John B. Stetson Company and called "Boss of the Plains." Eventually that hat was given a front crease in the "Carlton" version that became cowboy style and is still widely used to shield the cowboy's face and head from both sun and rain.

## CHAPS

Chaps are the sturdy leather coverings to protect the legs of a cowboy when he is riding through a brushy landscape. The American version was adapted from two large pieces of cowhide used as protective apron by cattle herders in Spain and Mexico.

By the late 1870s, most Texas cowboys wore the leggings that buckle over trousers out on the range. During the hot summer months, the half-length chaps called "Chinks" are shorter and of lighter weight to make riding more comfortable.

The fringe on chaps also serves a practical purpose – funneling water away from the seams of pant legs. The word chap is a shortened version of the Mexican words "chaparejos" or "chapparreras" and, ultimately, from the Spanish "chaparro," meaning a low-growing thicket.

## BOOTS

The American cowboy boot was heavily influenced by the footwear of horse-mounted livestock herders from Spain known as "Vasqueros." By the cattle drive era of Texas, Oklahoma and Kansas (1866-1884), the leather boot had been adapted to meet the needs of the open range.



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Winter weather has Eric Hyatt layering up in chaps and a coat that can repel rain water and keep him warm.

The slick, treadless leather sole allows easy insertion and removal of the foot from the stirrup. The tall heel has the lifesaving ability of preventing the foot from sliding out of the stirrup when the cowboy is riding an unpredictable young horse or at work rounding up cows.

Tall leather shafts on the boot also promote safety by protecting the cowboy's legs from thorns and brush while he is in the saddle and from snakes and loose rocks on the ground.


#### SPURS

Spurs are short spikes or a spiked wheel worn on the heel of the cowboy boot to goad a horse into forward or lateral movement. The device dates back to the Celts in 5<sup>th</sup> Century B.C. and became an art form in design and decoration by the 15<sup>th</sup> Century.

The spur is held in place by a leather strap that goes over the arch of the foot and under the sole in front of the boot heel.

#### COAT

The oilskin barn coat, or the longer duster, is a popular coat among ranchers because it can survive rough treatment from work environments that would ruin other fabrics. Although the original versions were made from sailcloth and covered by a thin layer of tar, today's coats are manufactured from heavy cotton cloth that is waterproofed with multiple coats of linseed oil to become waterproof, windproof and warm.



**Mid-Columbia Health Foundation Board Member & Wheat & Cattle Rancher Cynthia Kortge:** Cynthia Kortge was born in The Dalles and raised on a wheat farm near Dufur, Oregon. She works alongside family for Kortge Wheat & Cattle Company and volunteers for several community organizations. Cynthia joined the Health Foundation board in 2011 and is a major supporter. Join Cynthia in helping us build a health community.

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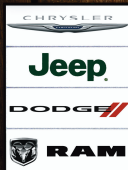
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