

The poet spins yarns about the people and their times; about their stock and ranch life, in stories that he rhymes.

R.P. SMITH:

Rancher & Cowboy Poet

BY TROY SMITH

Poetry of any sort is meant to be heard, and the poetic verse produced by R.P. Smith might be heard ringing through the hills on a cool, crisp morning. Out in Nebraska's cow country, R.P. tests the rhyme and rhythm while tending his stock. He polishes his delivery before the harshest of critics — his wife and children. Then once or twice each week, R.P. performs for appreciative audiences as he makes rounds on the after-dinner circuit.

R.P. has been categorized as a cowboy poet. That title suits him, but it might not reveal the scope of his poetic license. Some of his works chronicle the trials and triumphs of hard-riding, horseback cowboys, but nearly as many center on cow folk more likely to straddle a four-wheeler. The common thread is that R.P.'s poetry mirrors the lives of common, everyday people engaged in the cow business.

"I get such a kick out of people who start to grin and nod their heads as they hear one of my poems," says R.P. "Later they'll come up and say, 'I've been there.' They've had an experience like the one in the poem — maybe with a little different twist, but they can identify."



R.P. Smith performs his cowboy poetry for audiences that identify with the trials and triumphs of the cow business.

Experience

R.P. can identify because he has been there too. Raised on a ranch near Broken Bow, Neb., he returned to the family operation after college. R.P. and his wife, Beth, also began building a cow herd and, despite his initial protests, a flock of ewes. Beth has a little shepherd in her background. Side by side, they worked toward the day they would go on their own.

They accomplished that goal and, along the way, their ranch romance blossomed. The demands of a growing family did lead to an adjustment of Beth's priorities.

"Beth is a veterinary technician, so I used to have really good help," R.P. explains. "She still helps when she can; but we've got these five little kids, and they do seem to demand a lot of her time."

Consequently, R.P. has spent many days



With no intention of giving up his day job, RP Smith is working to improve and expand his 270-head cow herd. Results from use of Angus AI sires are increasingly evident in the crossbred herd.

Keeping his day job

Writing and performing cowboy poetry provide an outlet for RP Smith's creativity. It provides a little income too, but he hasn't given up his day job. A rancher first, his primary enterprise consists of about 270 commercial cows. He and his wife, Beth, have tried to be creative and innovative in their approach to ranching too.

At the start, they ranched with RP's parents. In 1980, fresh out of the University of Nebraska College of Technical Agriculture in Curbs, RP came

home brimming with knowledge and ready to set the world on fire. Some of his fresh ideas met with reluctance from his father, who wasn't sure he was ready to see the operation pushed full-tilt toward the cutting edge of production efficiency.

"At times," admits RP, "it was kind of like Bill Clinton and Newt Gingrich ranching together."

Actually, the return to the ranch was timely. RP's father, Bob, was just entering an

as a one-man crew. Family, neighbors and a few city friends provide supplemental help. Often they provide inspiration for poems based on actual experiences, colored with just a dab of exaggeration. More fodder for rhymes comes from situations involving rangy cows, half-broke horses and those sheep. Assorted runaways, breakdowns and government programs are fair game. R.P. pokes fun at politicians too, but not all of his verse is humorous. Some reflect this cowboy's abiding faith, for R.P. is certain that any ability he has is God-given.

In the spotlight

From a repertoire of some 75 original poems, R.P. appears before crowds gathered for everything from church camp meetings to national trade association conventions. Even after several years of writing and performing, R.P. remains a little bit surprised by the growing demand for his services as an entertainer. It's nothing he had planned.

"I'd never even heard of cowboy poetry before I saw cowboy poets Baxter Black and Waddie Mitchell on television back in 1987," says R.P. "After that show I just couldn't get to sleep, I got up and started jotting down some thoughts about this sorry, fence-crawling old cow we had. A poem just sort of fell out of me. After that first one, it got harder. In fact, four years of trying yielded only nine poems. I almost gave up."

Then a friend persuaded R.P. to participate in a cowboy poetry gathering in Valentine, Neb. That first public appearance generated encouragement and new inspiration for the fledgling poet.

Back at the ranch, everyday events and chores triggered new poems. Of course, wrecks on the ranch make good material, but some of R.P.'s most popular pieces were born out of a humorous look at work-day practices.



Back at the ranch, R.P. Smith dons the uniform of a working rancher. Like many others, his is a one-man outfit relying on supplemental labor from family and neighbors.

A long-time believer in the benefits of artificial insemination (AI), R.P. admits that some people think it rules his life. He laments that plight with tongue in cheek through poems with titles like "AI's Anonymous" and "Evolution of an Arm Man." The latter selection goes like this:

**His shoulders don't hurt all the time,
just every now and then.
Like when he lifts his breakfast spoon,
raising it above his chin.**

**He thinks it's just part of the job
that goes with his career,
Of preg-checking and AI'ing cows —
a job done from the bovine's rear.**

**When he was young he used his right arm,
but it came out of joint in a Hereford cow.
It was painful getting it extracted,
so he uses his left arm now.**

**His left arm isn't holding up.
It may suffer that same fate.
And he is running short of appendages
with which to compensate.**

**He has decided to take up karate
or the ancient art of tee kwon do.
With his new-found balance and control
there's no telling how long he'll go.**

**So he can keep on working
even though his shoulders are kaput;
As he pulls a sleeve up to his knee
and preg-checks with his foot!**

R.P.'s early performance prompted invitations to recite his poetry and get paid for it. Appearances before small local groups led to opportunities to entertain larger audiences at banquets and conventions. R.P.'s appearances aren't limited to cattle-oriented audiences, but most of his gigs have an agricultural connection. He designs his program to fit the audience, but some poems seem to work for almost any crowd. One that never fails is Cadillac Rap. Reciting that rap-beat tale of a Caddy-driving cattle feeder, R.P. dons sunglasses and adds a bit of moon-walk choreography.

"But most of my stuff is geared to cattle people," adds R.P. "They have their own world, you know, and you probably have to be part of that to appreciate a lot of these poems."

R.P. believes audiences from cow country are some of the most appreciative, and they make him grateful to be part of their world. He is a rancher first, but he is their poet too. "How many people do you know that are able to spend their lives doing what they really want to do?" asks R.P. "Here am I, right where I want to be, doing the two things that I most enjoy. Not a day goes by that I don't thank God for that."

A

eight-year period of service as master of the Nebraska State Grange, which required considerable time away from home. R.P. was there to keep things running, implement a few of his own ideas and find a toehold in the cow business.

A true "arm man"

One practice that R.P. introduced was artificial insemination (AI); and after establishing his own herd, he continued to use AI extensively. Starting with quite a mix of

crossbred cows, R.P. chose Angus sires to breed for uniformity and quality in his replacement females and feeder calves. All replacement heifers and up to 85% of the cows are bred artificially. He calls AI an essential tool for genetic improvement of his herd, but just as important were the side effects of its use.

"When it comes to AI, I don't think you can do just a little of it," R.P. says. "To really get any good out of it, you've got to be pretty serious. And it affects



Beth Smith helps R.P. with computerized herd records. Here they check numbers before finalizing culling decisions.

R.P. SMITH: RANCHER & COWBOY POET

your whole operation, because everything else has to wrap around your AI program — nutrition, health, handling facilities and your management in general. In the long run, AI made our operation better because it made us do some things we should have been doing already.”

RP. breeds heifers to calve during a 45-day period and the cows in 60 days. The desire to enhance his prebreeding flush with early grazing led R.P. to develop a pasture rotation system. As

more dedeed and rented grass has been added to the operation, range management has been augmented through cross-fencing and development of water pipelines.

Like most cowboys, R.P. has an aversion to farming, but he does raise hay and some corn for silage. He rents all the extra cornstalks he can find and rotates cows through the fields during the winter.

Believers in data

While R.P. has computer savvy, he admits that Beth is

a big help in keeping records to track cow performance. More than 10 years ago, the couple decided that the only way to take full advantage of their herd's genetics was to retain ownership of their calves. They started weaning earlier (by early October), to save more grass for cows and replacement heifers, and partnered with a commercial feedlot to feed the calves.

They target an early April market, so quick arithmetic shows the calves are harvested at an average age of about 13 months. R.P. says

the calves never have failed to gain at least 3 pounds (lb.)/day from weaning to slaughter. Some groups have produced 70% Choice carcasses, but R.P. says the primary objective is good yield and a Quality Grade of high Select or better.

“Our plan has been to have them finished by the first week in April,” RP. explains. “That market is as good as it gets in most years. It wasn't good enough in either of the last two years, but on average the plan has worked.”



Christmas Poems

by RP. Smith, Broken Bow, Neb.

"Song With No Tune"

An alarm sounds inside my head;
I force myself from a warm dry bed,
And with a lantern to aid my sight
I stumble out into the frigid night.
The snow raises its voice to complain
As if my footsteps cause it great pain.
I hope all is well and I'll be back soon —
My feet sound introduction to a song that
has no tune.

Precious few men get the chance
To take a night-check on a ranch.
Horned owl sits on its perch
And waits for mouse or mole to lurch.
I say, "It's me," when he questions, "Who?"
And still he asks me, "Who are you?"
Beneath star-filled sky and crescent moon
He sings a verse in the song that has no
tune.

Coyotes sing without refrain
Their haunting chorus of pleasure and
pain.
Damsels whistle; the suitors fight;
Their voices rise into the night
With neither bass nor treble clef.
I praise my Lord that I'm not deaf.
Beneath star-filled sky and crescent moon
They sing the chorus of the song that has
no tune.

The heifer seems alarmed by her
offspring's birth.
She jumps to her feet to prove her worth —
Tries to warm the calf with her hot breath.
He must rise soon to ward off death.
Now she dries it with her tongue
And hums a song of encouragement to
her young.
The calf is on its feet and nursing soon,
Supplying rhythm to the song that has
no tune.

The cold night air stings my face.
Cold tries to stop time in its place.
And I wonder if I really know,
Is this now or a hundred years ago?
This song sung as sung for centuries
before —
I listen as I walk once more.
Reappearing like the land of Brigadoon —
This ancient song that has no tune.

Some think the life I talk of is past.
I assure you, friends, I'm not the last
To herd the stock that graze God's earth.
It was shepherds first told of His Son's
birth.
They were the first to tell the world —
And on stockmen His simple blessings
still are unfurled.
And if our Savior tarries, though I believe
He's coming soon,
Stockmen a thousand years from now
will know the song that has no tune.

"The Trail to Bethlehem"

The Christmas story in the book of Matthew tells of the Wise Men
from the East.
I wouldn't wonder if the trail boss on the trip was named Hop-
Along Ride-a-Beast.
Perhaps he had just transferred from a research station to ag
faculty at BCU,
And a couple of the guys from theology offered him the job of
camel chore crew.

They said they were heading west, that a star would guide their
course,
And they could sure use a man who knew stock, be it camel, mule
or horse.
Now Hop had a green-broke camel he'd just switched for a bosal
to snaffle bit,
And this sounded like a real good chance to put some miles on it.

These Wise Men started on their journey looking for the newborn
King.
The livestock were well-tended because Hoppy didn't miss a thing.
Life out on the trail to the other Wise Men was something pretty
new,
But Hop loved the life and the campfire nights, and to their goal
they were true.

The men did begin to question their directions, so in Jerusalem
they stopped to ask;
And who did they find but King Herod to help them with their task.
"A new king," Herod exclaimed. "Well, isn't that just dandy sweet!
When you boys find Him, tell me where He is and I will worship at
His feet."

Now Hoppy knew how to read livestock by the way they held their
ears.
He didn't like the slant of King Herod's, and that night a dream
confirmed his fears.
So when they left Jerusalem, he knew they wouldn't be coming
back;
And the Lord also told the other Wise Men around Jerusalem to
pack.

These men had traveled for at least a year and maybe even more,
But they followed the star and traveled on 'til they found what they
were looking for.
The other men were packing gifts of frankincense and myrrh.
Hoppy had brought along a set of golden inlaid spurs.

They found and worshipped the Child King and sang praises until
morning.
An angel came to see Mary's husband. Of King Herod he was
warning.
So Mary, Joseph and the Christ Child from Bethlehem did flee.
And Hoppy and the Wise Men were thankful for the Child they got
to see.

The Wise Men's task was now completed, but the story does not
end,
For our Lord still has the power to guide and broken lives to mend.
God can use any of us to serve Him in His plan —
The first step isn't to ride a camel across a foreign land.

Just accept the gift that was given a couple thousand years ago,
And you can find a peace on earth that only Jesus' friends can
know.
No matter what your call in life — be it professor or buckaroo —
Saddle up and follow that newborn King. There's a place on the
trail for you!