Imagine herding 21 high school students from the coast of Oregon to the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, over nine days in the middle of the school year. English teacher Mark Mizell and French teacher Jon Broderick mustered not only the passion but an ambitious plan that took students from Seaside, Oregon, to the 17th annual Gathering. “It all started when I took a writing workshop with Hal Cannon,” Mizell said. Cannon is a folklorist who founded the Western Folklife Center and helped to found the Gathering, now a hugely popular event that has helped to inspire many other gatherings around the country. Broderick’s interest stems from helping start the Fisher Poets Gathering in Astoria and incorporating fisher poetry into his teaching.

Three years ago, Mizell and Broderick took 35 students to Elko as spectators. This year, with the help of the Western Folklife Center and the John Meyer Trust Foundation, they accompanied students who actually performed in Elko. They began by introducing students to reading cowboy poetry, then writing poems about their first snow. During their stay at the Yamsi Ranch in Chiloquin, Oregon, students experienced daily chores such as early morning cattle feedings. They were treated to an extensive writing workshop with cowboy poet Paul Zarzysky during the Gathering, who dedicated the first poem of his main-stage performance to “21 of the neatest kids I’ve ever met up with.” Seaside students learned invaluable lessons about life and about writing.

Mizell and Broderick weren’t the only teachers to use the Gathering to inspire poetry. The Cowboy Poetry Team at Cal Farley’s Boys Ranch, a 10,000-acre residential childcare facility for boys and girls outside Amarillo, Texas, began when students heard Tim Jobe reciting his own poetry last year. He heads up the horse program at the ranch. “I’ve been a cowboy all my life,” Jobe said. “I’ve been messing around with cowboy poetry for several years. I’d been to several gatherings, but not the one in Elko.” The team meets after school so that students may use Jobe’s collection of books and audio and video recordings of cowboy poets. Quickly, they began writing their own poetry as well and have performed around Texas and New Mexico. In Elko, students from grades 5 to 10 performed at a local school and the youth portion of the Gathering. They also attended all the performances they could fit in.

Cowboy Poetry Resources

What is cowboy poetry? The life, work, and language of cowboys are rooted in many cultural groups, from Africa to Mexico, but British ballads are one of the chief influences on cowboy poetry. According to the Western Folklife Center, “It was a jazz of Irish storytelling, Scottish seawarring and cattle tending, Moorish and Spanish horsemanship, European cavalry traditions, African improvisation, and Native American experience, if not the one in Elko.” The team meets after school so that students may use Jobe’s collection of books and audio and video recordings of cowboy poets. Quickly, they began writing their own poetry as well and have performed around Texas and New Mexico. In Elko, students from grades 5 to 10 performed at a local school and the youth portion of the Gathering. They also attended all the performances they could fit in.

Cowboy Poetry Adventures

by Paddy Bowman

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Students at the childcare facility “actually live out the work of cowboys,” Jobe said, helping to run cattle, manage horses, plant and harvest crops, mind a dairy farm, and ride in rodeos. Despite their busy schedules, team members meet weekly. Their enthusiasm led Jobe and communications coordinator Darci Johnson to dream of organizing a youth cowboy poetry gathering at Boys Ranch. The trip to Elko was part of the planning process. She said, “We were inspired by the Gathering Elko was part of the planning process. She said, “We were inspired by the Gathering and watching our kids’ confidence soar as they performed and received feedback from some of the well-known poets. We’d like to be a part of preserving western heritage and values by hosting young people from across the country. Right now, we’re looking at June 2002, but we’re still in the planning and approval stages.”

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Students from Seaside, Oregon, had nightly writing assignments during their cowboy poetry adventure. The poems they wrote show the strong impression made by the trip’s experiences, not only their work with the cowboy poets and ranch, but also, seeing their first snow.

**The Day I Lost My Snow Virginity**

I had only seen her from a distance, her postcard perfect curves and pale face. I longed for her touch like a child with his face against the window of a toy store. I met her on a cool January day. A grin tickled my face as we passed by her. She caressed the trees with her fragrance and her luscious lips gave way to dimples formed by the fresh tracks of a deer.

I stepped out of the van and rubbed her somber thighs. A milky way of stones freckled her legs. I held her hand tightly and she disintegrated between my fingertips. I packed her skin together, forming a frosty sphere between my fingertips. I packed her and her slender form into the van. I didn’t think twice before driving away. I stepped out of the van and rubbed her somber thighs. A milky way of stones freckled her legs. I held her hand tightly and she disintegrated between my fingertips. I packed her skin together, forming a frosty sphere between my fingertips. I packed her and her slender form into the van. I didn’t think twice before driving away.

**The Simple B.S. of Life**

They rarely stand by listening to an old friend telling a story from the distant past. The sound of the waves crashing against the wet-concrete sand and the wind whipping through the scraping vetch making sweet music to their ears. Could this simple, satisfying Saturday night gathering become a song to the music of their lives?

Noelle Harer

*Carhartts* - a popular brand of work
denim in Oregon

**Romeos** - comfortable slippers worn by many loggers and fishermen west of the Mountain States

**The Country Side**

The sun and the shadows blend the greens, yellows, golds, and the brown. The country side has many faces as they pile on more palettes. They can’t help but wonder why her baskets stay together so well. Just as I wonder, will the countryside stay or will it go?

As the world grows, I watch the country side slowly go. A house here, a building there. One by one, I watch them go up. And see the countryside slowly go.

Sarah Simpson

**Gerda**

Gerda, the woman who runs the Yamsi Ranch made a big impression on the students and their teachers.

I am Gerda, Yamsi matriarch. I have treated my land like a friend And it continues to thank me. Three score plus ten years of precision living. I have cooked thousands of meals And shared stories with buckaroos, dudes, doctors, lawyers, and, now, coastal cowboys. Though my ranch is as big as the sky There’s no room for self-pity up here. Even in the winter when things slow down And I feel myself dying back with the aspen leaves, I still push on Knowing that, when spring comes, My soul will soar Like the geese returning to our marshes.

Mark Mizell