

**Waddie Mitchell Keynote Address
National Cowboy Poetry Gathering 2001**

Transcription

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Charlie Seemann: Good morning.

[audience applauds]

Is everybody awake and ready to have a good time?

[audience cheers]

Alright. I'm Charlie Seemann, the executive director of the Western Folklife Center, and it's my pleasure to welcome all of you to the seventeenth National Cowboy Poetry Gathering. And I can't believe we've been doing this for seventeen years, but—

[audience applauds]

And I'd like to mention that this is all being broadcast live on the Western Folklife Center's website, and so if you want to yell out a nice Elko greeting to all those people on the Web all over the world, that would be great.

[audience cheers]

Wonderful. You notice when I did this introduction I said that this was the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering. This is something that we're very pleased with. Last October, the United States Senate passed a resolution – Resolution 326 – that was introduced by a retiring senator, Richard Bryan, recognizing the Elko Cowboy Poetry Gathering as the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering.

[audience applauds]

And a full text of that resolution, talking about the event and the history of it all right inside your program booklet, so if you have a legislative turn of mind, and want to read a little legalese, it's all right there for you. And we'd like to thank Senator Bryan and his staff for all their assistance with that, but particularly, all the poets and musicians and volunteers and Western Folklife Center staff and you the audience, who, over the seventeen years have made this event what it is. And we're proud that it's now the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering.

The theme of this year's gathering is The Great Basin, and after we've, we've done Australia and Hawaii and Mexico and Ireland and Scotland and lots of other themes

and places and connections over the years, this year we decided that we would bring the theme back to our own region, sort of to home base here, and look at the ranching traditions of the Great Basin and Great Basin buckaroos. You'll want to visit the Folklife Center, we've got a great exhibit, a gathering of Great Basin gear with some historical gear there, but also some of the best work of contemporary gear makers that's on exhibit in a very fine exhibit in our exhibit gallery, along with Willy Mathews, his outstanding paintings that he's been doing for a number of years documenting buckaroo life in the Great Basin.

The Gathering wouldn't be possible without the generous support of a lot of sponsors, and they're all acknowledged in the program book, and we'll be recognizing them throughout the week, but I'd like to start the week off by just thanking a few of our most major sponsors this morning, and those would include The Ford Foundation, the R. Harold Burton Foundation, the Nevada Commission on Cultural Affairs, the Jon Ben Snow Memorial Trust, George S. and Delores Doré Eccles Foundation, the William Randolph Hearst Foundation, the E.L. Wiegand Foundation, George Gund III, the Nathan Cummings Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, Anne Pattee, the City of Elko, and Nevada Arts Council, and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. How about a round of applause for all those folks who help make this possible?

[audience applauds]

And while we're, you're in town, I encourage you to patronize our other sponsors – lots of local sponsors and businesses who help make this possible, and they're all listed in here and there's a map to help you find their places of businesses – business – and we hope you'll go there and visit with them. We've got three more great days of poetry and music and celebration ahead of us, and I hope you're all ready to commence having a good time. It sure sounds like it.

The Center is governed by a really remarkable and dedicated group of people who volunteer their time as trustees of the Western Folklife Center, to help us carry out the mission we have of bringing events like the Cowboy Poetry Gathering to fruition and all the other kinds of things that we do. And these are a great group of folks who actually do give a lot of time and hard work to this, so this time I'd like to introduce the chairman of our board of trustees, Doctor Mike Fisher, who is going to introduce our keynote speaker. Mike?

[audience applauds]

Michael Fisher: Good morning. I know that Charlie thanked what I consider the tripartite partnership of the audience, the performers, and the sponsors, but from the bottom of our heart, as a board of directors, and as the chairman of the board, I really, really am appreciative of each and every one of you and the wonderful things that you do to make this the wonderful event that it is every year. As Charlie said, my name's Mike Fisher, and I have the good fortune of being the chairman of the board of the Western Folklife Center.

I however have been given the unenviable task of introducing our keynote speaker. Now, it's not necessarily a problem of material. He kindly provided me with his latest press release done by the Free Press, twenty-three pages long, and so that's not really where I started to have my problem. Rather, it's more a problem of finding new and heretofore unknown material.

Now, don't get nervous. We did a little research, but none of it is in any sense bad. This is a man who appreciates the difference of growing up on the isolated ranches in places like Jiggs, Nevada; Beowawe, Nevada, and appearing sixty-five floors above the hustle and bustle of New York City, being in the Rainbow Room in Rockefeller Plaza. He's a pragmatist who understands both the rancher and the cowboy, and yet, he's a man of depth and clarity. Someone who's sense of humor has allowed us to understand better everything about the ranch life. He's a man I'm proud to call a good friend, and someone who will do this podium great justice and honor, one of our very own – Waddie Mitchell.

[audience applauds and laughs]

Waddie Mitchell: Friends,

Here's to the trail that we decided to ride,
To the code that we chose to adhere to,
To our sun-burnt old hid and our damn foolish pride
And mischief we seem to get in to.

Here's to the wages we spend free in town,
To those greenhorns with gumption and try.
To those friends we have found who will not let us down
And pleasures we can not deny.

Here's to the horses, the cattle, the range,
To the drink that is longer and wetter.
To those think us strange in our refusal to change
And to the women we'd like to know better.

[audience applauds]

The theme for this year's Gathering is the ranching tradition of the Great Basin. The name was given to this region for the topographical phenomena within its boundaries. The Great Basin encompasses part of southeast Oregon, eastern California, southern Idaho and western Utah, and most of Nevada. The word *basin* denotes the fact that rivers run into it, but not out. It's actually home for over a hundred basins and has over a hundred and fifty mountain ranges dividing them. It's sometimes called *The Big Empty*, *The Big Nasty*, or the *Sagebrush Ocean*. Virtually all of it is considered high desert.

Early explorers to this region, the trappers and such, came and recounted it as a harsh land with little vegetation, with a scarcity of water, and often muddy or stagnant, and not fit for man nor stock. They wrote that game was a rarity, and their journals tell us of them resorting to eating their own pack animals on occasion. They tell us of

encounters with the native peoples who ate bugs and pine nuts for their subsistence. They said all in all, it's an uninviting region. Starting in the late 1840s, a few of the hardier pioneers did settle. They scratched out a living by trading with Indians and wagon trains, or providing goods and services for the Cavalry, and living a pretty self-sustaining and self-reliant life.

In 1862, Congress passed the Homestead Act, and sponsors of this legislation believed that the vast lands of the West would be of no real value until lived upon and improved, thus providing a tax base. Typical politicians.

[audience laughs]

They offered title to a hundred and sixty acres if you'd but live on the land for five years and do some basic improvements. Or you could pay a dollar and twenty-five cents an acre in lieu of the residents' requirement. After fooling with the laws a bit and upping it to three hundred and sixty acres in some place, they figured by 1900 maybe six hundred thousand families had settled across the West. They set aside a big bunch of the best acreage to entice the railroads westward.

Most of the settlement movement was from the east to the west, but that wasn't necessarily so for the Great Basin. California had been settled and lived in for several hundreds of years, and the folks there were predominantly of Spanish origin. The gold rush and the import trade furthered strengthened the region's economic growth, and in the latter part of the nineteenth century, real estate that had once been home to thousands of beef cattle was now being much sought-after for farming, industry, and residential use. Many of the California land grant rancheros were not finding it economically feasible to use such land for grazing of cattle any more. This is what moved the cattle business of California to the vastness of the Great Basin.

Now, no one from grass country would look at this area with envy other than in its vastness. The scarceness of water and farming ground lent it to little other than grazing livestock in virtually all the settlements other than a few mining camps or railroad stations sprung up around the livestock industry. So where most states west of the Mississippi were settled from east to west, the Great Basin region found much of its settlement from west to east. By the late 1870s, many thousands of cattle were grazing year round throughout the Great Basin. With this fenceless, seemingly endless range, it seemed that the future of this type of ranching was promising; then the hard winter of 1889-90 hit, and upwards of eighty-five percent of all stock in the region winter-killed. This broke the back of the seemingly strong industry and the ranchers who did not go broke or sell out realized that they'd have to develop many acres of hay ground to sustain the cattle through winters. Thousands of sheep were introduced to the Great Basin while the cattlemen were still trying to recover, and open range issues started to become a real problem.

Because of the high desert's limitations, those who homesteaded this area would typically settle around water sources, and because three hundred and twenty acres could not support them, they would develop springs and water on the range around them. They were allowed to file with the state for ownership of that water. The area that their livestock could use for grazing was dependent on the water resources they owned, and this is what created the boundaries for their ranches. But it wasn't until 1934 that these

boundaries were legitimized by the passing of the Taylor Grazing Act, which over a period of time defined the areas that had been settled by the ranchers and created an allotment that tied the outside range to the base property the ranchers owned. The Taylor Grazing Act provided that the grazing allotments would be bought, sold, used as collateral at the bank, passed on to their heirs, and would be taxed as part of the rancher's estate when the estate was passed on.

Essentially, this is the same way that Texas, Oklahoma, and most other western states defined the boundaries of a ranch, but with one big difference: they did it through their state or county governments, and their boundaries that were once open range became privately owned. The ranches in the Great Basin, however, found that after the Civil War, the young states did not have the population base or the tax revenue to manage these lands, or the authority to privatize them. The ranchers were given the opportunity to buy that land outright, but felt that in essence, that would be paying for the land twice. For oftentimes, they had invested more in the development of their range than would have been required to prove up on that land, had it been homesteaded.

At the time, the Taylor Grazing Act seemed like the fair and equitable way to settle the problems and disputes over the boundaries of ranches. In the community makeup of early California, those who controlled land and livestock were the holders of the base of their economy. Those in the livestock industry were at the top of their social and economic ladders – and could afford to breed and ride the best of horses and keep the men in their employ well mounted.

They would adorn their equipment with silver, and employ the finest craftsmen to build the gear they used. These are the guys that came to this country. It's as true today as it was back then, that a well mounted man feels a pride deep inside. Although the Great Basin buckaroo is certainly not near the top of his social ladder, and is likely near the bottom on the, of the economic scale, the pride that the Californio brought with him has endured.

The traditions adhered to by the modern day buckaroo are actually few that the Californio bought, as most of us know, the word buckaroo in nothing more than an Americanization of the word *vaquero*. Of course, the *vaquero* had his original roots through the Moors, but he had evolved socially, economically, and in his craftsmanship tradition to a high level by the time he came to the Great Basin. I'm sure a Californio *vaquero* from the early nineteenth century would find little he'd recognize in a twenty-first century buckaroo camp. Some of his horse gear and training methods are still being used, but – and we have retained through some sort of an Americanization of his language some of his nomenclature. *La reata*: lariat. *Hakima*: hackamore. *Mecate*: McCarty, and so on. But much of the way the yearly cycle of work has done and has evolved and has adapted itself to the terrain, weather, and vegetation – which is a world away from the coastal rancheros he would have known. You'd be hard pressed to find a group of men in any vocation who take more pride or achieve a higher level of skill than the buckaroo of the Great Basin.

Cattle ranchers and buckaroos lived pretty well here until a small faction of people in the late sixties and through the seventies became dedicated to removing livestock from the range. This began the weakening of the Taylor Grazing Act. In the mid-1960s, the administration appointed some folks to the land law review Commission. They held hearings throughout the West to determine the best way to manage these

public lands. Until such time as they were disposed of by the federal government. The recommendation of that commission was for the implementation of the dominant use theory, which meant managing areas with preference given to the dominant use – that being grazing, mining, recreation, or anything else. Since then, they have gone from the dominant use theory, to the now multiple use theory for the management of these public lands, still keeping a definite place for grazing livestock and the continuation of these ranches that are dependent on the use of those lands.

In recent years, with the political environment, and the environmental movement, we've seen a drastic decrease in the number of cattle in the Great Basin region. Because Nevada is over eighty-seven percent owned by the federal government, it is allowed these agencies managing the lands, which are heavily influenced by outside interests and political agendas to make drastic reductions in cattle numbers. More dangerous to the livestock industry and to the ranching way of life, or the loss of AUMs, is the present trend of the federal government buying up ranches they consider environmentally sensitive areas, believing they can best be managed by these agencies.

I don't believe the federal government can take better care of this land. I don't believe, and they've never proven they can make it more productive and care for it like a family rancher would. I don't believe they have the expertise, the motivation, or the reason for pride that's inherent in private ownership.

[audience applauds]

[break in recording]

Waddie Mitchell: -- these rivers and streams revert to those slivers of green that the first settlers came upon.

Not too many years ago I was asked to argue some range issues on the Larry King Show. They called the show the New Range War. They had a fellow who supposedly spoke for people wanting cattle off the range, and me for the ranchers' point of view. Before the show began, I was asked to sign some papers stating that what information I gave, I knew or believed to the best of my ability to be true. I suppose the other fellow had to do that same. I was sitting at the desk there with Larry King, and the other fellow came to us via satellite from somewhere.

Some of the allegations and so-called facts he spouted were absolutely ludicrous, and were obviously said to do nothing more than incite viewers. I also noticed that when he talked, a graphic was placed underneath him with his name and the title *environmentalist*. When I spoke, a graphic read: *Waddie Mitchell, Cattle Rancher*.

I thought to myself, *I can prove I'm a cattle rancher, but how can anyone prove that they're an environmentalist?*

[audience applauds]

I asked him on air what he did for a living. He said it wasn't important, but when I pressed him he answered, "Well, I'm a chemical engineer, but I spend a lot of time on the range, and I care deeply about it."

[audience laughs]

I have to question one's motives when they're willing to mislead or – to mislead or misinterpret facts to obtain what they want. I don't believe the end always justifies the means. When one is right, the facts will sustain their argument. But when one has to resort to using misleading statements, half-truths, or falsified data to make a point, I have a hard time believing that they even believe what they're saying. And that leads me to suspect ulterior motives.

Why is environmentalist a title you can arbitrarily bestow upon yourself? One certainly can't call himself a mechanic if he's never turned a wrench or a doctor if he hasn't earned the proper diploma. I consider myself one concerned with the environment, but would not feel that I had the right to stand up with the self proclaimed title and speak for the masses; I only feel I could speak for myself. I don't believe that everyone that belongs to the Sierra Club or other environmental groups is my enemy or is out to do wrong, but I am concerned they may be basing their opinions on some misinformation given to them by those groups.

I am all for informational and philosophical dialog between folks with different opinions. I believe it's constructive to hear all sides of an argument so we might better as individuals and groups, make decisions. I believe it's our obligation as human beings to learn from the past maybe mistakes that we've made. And indeed, if it needs changing, and our future generations depend on that, then we are obliged to do so.

Environmental responsibility is a must, not an option. But I don't believe that a policy that affects a fine and upstanding lifestyle, that has proven the best use of the land when managed properly, should be slick-talked, campaign-bombarded, or sound-bayed out of existence.

[audience applauds]

As for the U.S. government owning eighty-seven percent of the state of Nevada, I failed in my endeavor to find any legality in the Constitution, or have found in the Constitution anything that addresses the government owning that much land. In Article One, Section Eight, the government does address it. It spells out what Congress has the power to do, and I quote – I got to tell you, I've taken to carry this little copy of the Constitution and Declaration of Independence around with me, because it's awful easy to spout these facts, but if you just pull it out it takes somebody about three minutes to read what I'm talking about and no more than an hour to read the whole thing, covering the whole spectrum. Article One, Section Eight starts out:

Congress shall have the power to do – and it goes on in different paragraphs to spell out what they have the power to do. But let's start here:

-- to exercise exclusive legislation in all cases whatsoever, over such district – in parenthesis – not exceeding ten miles square, as may be session in particular states, and the acceptance of Congress, because the seat of the government of the United States, and to exercise like authority over all places purchased by the consent of the legislature of the state in which the same shall be. For the erection – now the first part is talking about Washington, D.C. Ten miles square.

The same shall be for the erection of forts, magazines, arsenals, dock yards, and other needful buildings.

That's the sum of it.

Nothing in the many federal papers that were submitted to the states in support of the ratification of the Constitution talked about anything but limited powers for the federal government. I admit the government owns a good part of this state through somewhat of a default and I believe it had every intention of disposing of that land. But through a growing, all-powerful bureaucracy, it has now taken the position of not only owning that land, but is aggressively seeking more.

The BLM owns a lot of land down in the Las Vegas valley which has become very valuable. They are allowed now by law to sell that land and turn around and spend up to eighty-five percent of the proceeds from that sale to purchase so-called environmentally sensitive lands, which translated means ranches. Laws also give them the authority to trade land for equal value land.

Not so long ago, a California spectator – or speculator, excuse me –

[audience laughs]

-- bought and traded seventy thousand deeded acres of ranch land just east of here, and traded that with the BLM for six or seven thousand acres of land up near Wendover. The BLM estimates they have between seven hundred and fifty million to one billion dollars' worth of land to sell in the Las Vegas valley alone between now and 2018. The average price for a ranch is about fifteen hundred dollars an animal unit. The state of Nevada has about five hundred and twenty thousand beef cows. At that rate, seven hundred and eighty million dollars would buy up every animal unit in the state with money left over to buy more in Utah or Idaho or whichever direction they decided to go.

Added to the money that will come out of the Las Vegas area, is the money that can result from the Northern Nevada Land Bill that is in front of Congress right now. This bill provides that fifty percent of the monies that the BLM gets from selling land around towns in northern Nevada could also be used for the purchase of so-called environmentally sensitive lands. Grazing rights on federal lands have always been tied to water, and both are tied to the deeded property ranchers own. It now turns out that they can pay for private property with money from the sale of private lands and public lands. I don't understand that. I don't understand how they own these public lands in the first place. Think about it: they could buy every single cow unit in the state of Nevada and have money left over.

Today, there are now fully forty percent fewer cattle in the Great Basin region alone than there was in 1984 when we were first just starting this poetry gathering up and finding that there was an interest from people all over the country in preserving and perpetuating the cowboy and ranching lifestyle.

My question to you is this: if we are here at the Cowboy Poetry Gathering to relish and help preserve this heritage in ranching and cowboy way of life, what are we preserving it for? And more importantly, *whom* are we preserving it for? Are we saving this way of life for our children and our grandchildren who we hope will wear hats and wild rags and know which end of the cow gets up first?

[audience laughs]

Or for government employees who wear brown uniforms and use the ranch bunkhouses and ranch homes as administrative sites? Are we here to celebrate this lifestyle or to eulogize it?

On a brighter note –

[audience laughs]

-- we are about to start three of the very most fun and best days that any of us have in a given year.

Come gather round the fire folks
With open mind and ear
And get ready to experience
Three days with no compare.

For among us are the balladeers
The poets of the trail
The pickers and philosophers
The weavers of the tale

They are here to take us places
That in life we might not see
Address issues, ponder questions
That have plagued eternity

Make us laugh and cry and wonder
Feel another's joy and pain
Get a glimpse into the future
And the past from wince we came

They'll amuse us with their antics
And delight us with their wit
Give us insight into courage
Explore cowardice and grit

Remind us the importance
Of retaining dignity
Help us recognize the closeness
Of the human family

They'll educate and entertain us
And inspire every one
So sit right down and listen up
Because folks, we're about to start the fun.

Welcome!

[audience applauds]