

**Paul Starrs Keynote Address
National Cowboy Poetry Gathering 2006
Transcription**

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Charlie Seemann: Good Morning!

[audience applauds]

How many of you got some sleep last night and how many stayed up all night already?

[laughter]

My name's Charlie Seemann, I'm the executive director of the Western Folklife Center, and it's a pleasure to welcome you all to – if you can believe it – the twenty-second National Cowboy Poetry Gathering.

This year the theme is *Cowboys of the Americans*. How many of you were at the show last night here? Yeah.

[audience applauds and whistles]

Pretty amazing stuff from Canada and Texas and Brazil and lots more to come during the week. I wanted to mention a few of our sponsors. We, as you know, we've got lots of people who help make the Gathering possible and who help with the work of the Western Folklife Center during the year, but I just wanted to mention a few: The Ford Foundation, The Wallace Foundation, The R. Harold Burton Foundation, the MetLife Foundation, Nevada Commission on Tourism, National Endowment for the Arts, the City of Elko, Standard Wholesale Supply, Sierra Pacific Power Company among others. So how about a hand for those folks who help make it possible?

[audience applauds]

One of the things that I like to do each year is to stop and pause for a minute and remember those who have been very close and dear to us who we've lost during the past year. And there's a page in the program booklet called *Empty Saddles*, and I'd just like to mention those folks, and we, we lost the great Texas poet J.B. Allen this year, Sean Blackburn, who played with Liz Masterson and was here a number of times early on; the great Western historian and writer Alvin Josephy, who was very instrumental in getting the Western Folklife Center started, and was on our National Advisors' Council; Chris LeDoux, a great musician; the logger poet Lon Minkler – you know, we have fisherman

poets with this from the Northwest, and several years ago we had logger poets, and Lon was here, a great guy. Brian Morris from Denio, Nevada, a reciter of classic poetry, and the artist Joelle Smith, who, a great artist and greatly missed. We'll hold them in our thoughts all during the week and I know they'll be here with us in spirit.

Now I'd like to introduce the chairman of the board of trustees of the Western Folklife Center, and he's going to come out and say a few words to you. Mister Stan Aiazzi. Stan?

[audience applauds]

Stan Aiazzi: From of the board of trustees, welcome. You know, many of you probably wonder, how do you they do this year after year after year? Why is it such a world class event? And I can tell you that we have world class people at the Western Folklife Center in the form of staff.

[audience applauds]

We have reached prominence nationally now, and one of the reasons is because Charlie Seemann is so fantastic and in, in waves of kudos, you should know that he was recently appointed to the board of trustees of the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. Isn't that great?

[more applause]

And having sat in the audiences for many years, I know when to leave. And with that, I'm going to turn this show over to...they didn't tell me who. I don't know if it's our speaker or someone else. I think it's Charlie, I hear him coming back. Thank you!

[audience applauds]

Charlie Seemann: Thanks, Stan. We have a really, really hard working board of trustees and national advice, national advisory council, and literally, we couldn't do what we do without them, so how about a hand for them, too?

[audience applauds]

A while back I picked up a book called *Let the Cowboy Ride: Cattle Ranching in the American West*, and as I got started reading the book and got further into it I thought, "We have got to have this guy come and speak at the Cowboy Poetry Gathering." And it took a couple of years to make that happen, but we're pleased now to have with us Doctor Paul Starrs.

He's a professor of geography at the University of Nevada in Reno, and he might be thought of as a person of mixed ancestry. He was born in France, was the child of American diplomats, and three quarters of his early schooling was abroad in Spain, Guatemala, Mexico, and England. His parents were Californian from the start he inherited their nationality. Paul schooling included two years on the working cattle ranch,

The Brand Is the Swinging T, at Deep Springs College, and a bachelor's degree from UC San Diego. Until 1984, he cowboied in the White Mountains on the California border – Nevada border, running, running cattle at up to thirteen thousand feet. At that point, he quit to complete a master's degree in geography at the University of California at Berkeley. He also did a PhD there, and in 1992 he began teaching at the University of Nevada. Paul has advanced to become a full professor, and in the last eight years, has received every award for teaching, and some research awards, that can be had in the state of Nevada, including in 2005, the National Case-Carnegie Nevada Award as Professor of the Year. A Fulbright Scholar, he is the author of the book I mentioned, *Let the Cowboy Ride: Cattle Ranching in the American West*, and this last year, *Black Rock*, coauthored with his Nevada colleague, the photographer Peter Gowan.

Paul has many Elko stories, and one of his best friends and mentors was the late Owen Ulf of Reed College and Lamoille. He promises it's a great pleasure to be back here. Would you make welcome, please, Doctor Paul Starrs.

[audience applauds]

Paul Starrs: Let me get my paperwork right here...very good. Thank you all for coming. My goodness, it's kind of a great dark world out there for me, but I can hear that you're there, and I assume if I say anything wrong I'll hear about it as well.

[clears throat]

It's a great pleasure to be back in Elko, it's a great pleasure to be back at the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering. It's been a long time since I've been here, but those years back and forth have taken me to some pretty interesting country, and it's so nice to see you coming back and spending time in northeastern Nevada, wherever you're from. I met many folks today and over the last couple of days, including some around the Buckaroo Beer tap – you know who you are.

[audience members laugh; Starrs clears throat]

Anyway, my theme for today is why we write poetry about cowboys.

Twenty years ago, after a couple of horseback wrecks that left me with a shoulder that pops out in the middle of a good cough, I hung up my spurs, literally. They have a nice spot on my wall. But I haven't given up thinking about the experience of those years in which buckarooing a big territory and four hundred cows, was a part of my life. We are here, I suggest, to recapture the bliss of horse corruption embodied in that great cowboy life.

It wouldn't be hard to stand in front of you and work through the voids and potholes of the story of the Western cowboy, as if we were collectively an NDOT crew on anabolic steroids, torturing a hole in the pavement and its asphalt until the fringes are smoking hot, and then tossing a few shovels of macadam, lugging up the edges with a tarry mop, and finally, getting the biggest dude on the crew to wail with a heavy tamper, until what remains is more or less flat, and the void amounts to scarcely a memory. But there's a lot of half-assed work in the world, and a topic that's so serious is trying to

engage with the twin themes of poetry and cowboys, can use a full measure of concentration and explanation.

While the opinions span a fairly broad range, I go with the view of the Jewish cowboy songwriter/novelist/politician, Kinky Friedman.

[audience laughs]

In an editorial for the vaguely venerable grand old lady of national newspapers, The New York Times, the *Kinkster* offered a calculus of the cowhand. *True cowboys*, he writes, *must be able to ride beyond time and geography. They must leave us a dream to grow by, a haunting echo of a song, a fine dust that's visible for generations, against even a black and white sunset.*

Where literature meets an elemental and ancient human endeavor, pastoralism, or herding, there's a story to be told. Others, including a former student and sometime inspiration, Barney Nelson – an original Elko cowboy poet back in 1985 – have offered distinctive and sage analyses of the linkages of a ranch hand and the land. But it's appropriate for us to dwell here upon another toothsome theme that brings its own fascinations, the craft of the cowboy bard.

My ostensible approach to this topic is stenciled atop this page. *Why we write poetry about cowboys*. The *Why*, you will swiftly realize, is a more deceptive and slippery starting point than might at first be realized. As a rule, when something starts out with a *why*, it's because there's a question involved, and I will readily admit that it would be deceitful and wrong for you to think that there's any question at all in my use of that phrase. What I propose is to offer an essay, a term that harkens from Michel de Montaigne that argots an attempt at a relatively precise and classic French literary construction, which holds that they essay, or *essai*, is an attempt, a forthright effort to convince. And that, my friends, is what this is all about: conviction. Not in the sense of our unkempt and unlamented third cousin, four degrees removed, who's doing three to five years in the Lovelock Correctional Center for mopery, but instead, this sort of conviction that means *I do believe that you should believe what I believe*.

[audience laughs]

What I [ad verve], is that the crafts of the poet and the cow hand, in their best forms, share a commitment to care and to felicity of expression. They share a humane art. In the case of the poet, the best expression is perhaps rhymed, but not always. Couched in elegant word choice, but sometimes not, framed to capture emotion or place or an exact situation or various other imponderables.

One of my teachers from way back when, Roy Harvey Pierce, who was an unlikely sort of person to read cowboy poetry – unless it happened to be written by the Puritans – put the matter simply, and I would say, accurately: *The poet's responsibility is to make the best use of language that is possible in a given culture. Poets and authors of fiction have done precisely that.*

This is a matter of immense delicacy and no minor difficulty, and while I accept that they are probably fistfights looming in terms of just what the best possible use of

language amounts to, it's true; I submit that a poet can do things with words that are concise, beautiful, and not easily replicated.

In fact, I imagine that's exactly why many of us are here in northeastern Nevada, with storms perennially threatening, sitting inside a warm building and listening to well-formed words, instead of bouncing across a field, hoping that the flatbed feed wagon doesn't hit a rut and toss us like an afterthought into a windblown snowdrift.

And of the cowhand, or the rancher, what? That's another matter, but not very far a field. The cowhand, whether buckaroo or Texas waddie, and in fact, whether gaucho or vaquero or charro, shares a trait that the world around – cowboying *is* a worldwide practice – and that is an appreciation for humans working in a long standing contact with domesticated animals, and being shaped by continuous relationship with the physical world around us. Those domesticated animals can include sheep, cattle, routinely horses, but I'm not willing to exclude goats, though most hands would turn pale at that.

Other countries, other pastoralists have their own animals, and so long as those are relatively big and relatively rugged, and have been part of the human bestiary at some point since Noah, they might as well qualify. And in case you're curious, it's Tinsel on the left and Vlad on the right.

[audience laughs]

The point is, there's a craft to the trade of the animal tender, the shepard, the goat herd, the cowhand, the *llamero*, the horse wrangler, or even the swine herd. My wife says that's Dracula herding pigs.

[audience laughs at slide]

Honesty commands a concession that some of those trades have more innate romance than others, this from the Spanish oak woodlands is actually an immensely romantic trade, and that's why you get to where the big, black cape.

But the title of *keeper of the herd* applies, whether people involved, the people involved are hired hands or owners. So the life of the hand is very little removed, except by financial responsibility from the ornate economic sagas of the ranch owner, who if anything, would have more to loose in failing to tend the herd. We call this person a *steward* or a *caretaker* or a *herder*, and each of those terms is framed with affection for our charges that will not quit.

No less momentous a personage than the Western literary historian, rancher, and University of Texas professor J. Frank Dobie, famously commented in his *Guide to the Life and Literature of the Southwest*, that – and I quote –

The cowboy became the best known occupational type that America has given the world. He exists still and will long exist, though much changed from the original. Dobie goes on: Romance, both genuine and spurious, has obscured the realities of range and trail. The realities themselves have, however, been such that few riders really belonging to the range wished to lead any other existence. Still quoting, bankers, manufacturers, merchants, and mechanics seldom so idealize their own occupations. They work fifty weeks a year to go free the other two.

The Marxists among us will instantly shriek that any such sympathetic talk of ranching's romance clearly constitutes an elaborate plat designed to distract the cowboy from an essential alienation from the means of production. But again Dobie reposts,

Many scores of autobiographies have been written by range men, perhaps half of them by cowboys who never became owners at all. I can tell you that there is nothing comparable in world literature – stone masons, aqueduct builders, architects, proctologists – even psychiatrists and lawyers – have nothing that beings to approach the vibrancy of the cowboy yarn, whether presented in prose, film, photography, song, cuisine, scent, leather, or poem.

Yes, that is a substantial claim, but, and not one lightly made. As a scholar, Dobie's Texas affiliations rendered him opaque to some of life's brasher realities, a problem not unknown to the adopted sons of that region, but Dobie was smack dab on top of it when he came to writing. There are thousands of books, and therefore hundreds of thousands – it would probably not be an exaggeration to say millions of pages of literature on the cowboy theme. Dobie's 1942 *Guide to the Life and Literature of the Southwest* lists forty pages of accounts of range life alone. Forty-two pages in 1942.

And some of the very best writing on a cowhand's existence, by the likes of Lamoille's Owen Ulf, for example, are in fact creations of the 1980s and 1990s; though Larry McMutry, Linda Hasselstrom, J.P.S. Brown and Mac Hedges are not a whole lot farther off, and I actually think that in terms of the Western and the Western yarn, Cormac McCarthy is even better in some ways, if harder to bare and a little bit harder to read.

Although I, a minority of one, may argue that there's more charm in the personalities of goats than in many a cow, it's inarguable that there is something about long days on horseback that allows for deep consideration of chance ideas that with time and reflection, turn passing fancy into a more profound bit of philosophy.

Who can forget Owen Ulf's apt evaluation in *The Fiddleback* of the relationship of hand, horse, and cow? Which held that the cowboy life is, and I quote,

the presentation of an unending morality play in which a creature of unrestricted autonomy, sits on the back of a creature of feverish volatility, and together they struggle to subjugate a creature whose chief characteristic is perverse intractability.

[audience laughs]

Actually, full disclosure obliges me to continue the quotation, although I don't have it written down, and I just remind you that Owen concluded that thought with,

The only flaw with the cow's approach is that she's so dedicated to her perverse way that sometimes the savvy hand and horse can turn that against her.

[more laughter]

There's an enduring quality of humility and forced adaptation in the cowhand's life that can be brought across encapsulating the real. It's not easily done for whatever reason in the life of the assembly line worker, the sales rep, or the baker or the traffic cop. In the matter of poetry, long sojourns in nature translates to prolonged opportunities to come up with an idea or a verse or a rhyming scheme, and then revise it a whole lot of times, until the phrasing, cadence, and humor or pathos is tuned to a fair-thee-well.

It's a bit of arrogance of our modern age to claim that the really talented person can get by without practice. The cowboy poet understands that; he understands that that claim is a lot of hooey. There's a place for spontaneity, and spontaneity has its place at the privacy of your desktop or testing a few stanzas in front of a mirror. The excellent poem is produced by wear and tear, like a comfortable pair of Wranglers, or chink chaps, or the smooth turning cricket of a spade bit that has had all its rough edges worn off by slobber and good use.

What's necessary is to make a performance seem effortless, and as anyone knows, pulling off such an act takes an almost eternal stretch of practice. Such are the contradictions of art.

But what I'd like to mull over with you for the next few moments is an accompanying question, namely, why does cowboy poetry have such a resonance in the here and now.

[audience laughs]

I knew you'd like that one.

[Starrs and audience laughs]

The year 2006, it did after all mark the 22nd Anniversary of the Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko. I attended the first, if by accident. I was going through the area and there it was, and in those days when folklorists Hal Cannon and Meg Glaser and various other folks were getting things up and running, the concept of *tickets* and *sold out* had to have seemed hallucinatory.

[audience laughs]

But how Elko and its suburbs have changed since then, and isn't that a larger part of the story?

We, and that is a sturdily global we, since Germans and Spaniards and Venezuelans and Magyars, Hungarians, or Mongolians, or Mexicans favor cowboy life hardly any less than Americans, all face, we all face a changing world. What's changing most of all is our contact with the world around us. Our cars, or our SUVs, are hermitically sealed demi-worlds where the outside rarely intrudes. So many people travel Interstate, limited access freeways that hammer us with their relentless sameness. Riding miles in the back of a pickup truck,

[audience laughs at slide]

exposed to the elements, is not only rare, in many states it's actively illegal, and only a fraction of one percent of Americans – a fraction of one percent of Americans – has ridden a horse for more than three or four hours a month.

The future is not what it used to be, and the connections of city people to the rural world around us have faded. Like it or not, upwards of ninety-five percent of Nevadans and Californians and Arizonians, and nearly as – nearly that many Utahans, are city people according to official definitions of where they live, and how many other people they live with.

[audience laughs]

We – that means *we*, and we *us*, and not the rural *we* – have lost a connection to the outside world of nature, a world that once feared and once loathed, and which was something our farming forefathers and mothers – if they were that and not city people already – would have worked very hard to get away from.

Few indeed are the people who have embraced the opposite, though there are some, like the famed potter Dennis Parks, who in his lovely book *Living In the Country Growing Weird*, describes a deep rural adventure, moving with his family from besieged southern California to Tuscarora, in the remote, in its remote corner of the Silver State. Recollect that at the end of the nineteenth century, the bright lights of the city were taken in the United States to be liberating and exciting. How far have we come to now wish for a return to the open spaces and the challenges that just a few generations ago people were looking at in terror and fleeing with élan?

David Lowenthal has contemplated the larger phenomenon of reshaping history in a wonderful book called *The Past is a Foreign Country*. And the title communicates a salient argument – that the past is not familiar, that we pick and choose from the past to meet our current needs, creating a landscape of memory.

Cowboy poetry is full of that, and the biggest twinge that afflicts many of us who have worked on both sides of the fence – which is to say, have taught Western history, geography, and literature, but have also worked for years as ranch hands – is a prevailing weariness now that *cowboy poet* has become a title that people actually put on business cards, and which can provide some significant part of a living wage, there are questions about authenticity. Cowboy poetry was different in the days when it was a sidelight – in the days when a ranch was a ranch, as opposed to a profession, and therefore the *we* in this is complicated. We who admire cowboy poetry are looking in from the outside, but so are some of the poets, despite very earnest attempts – which I know we all applaud – of cowboy poetry gathering organizers to keep things authentic, if that's the right term.

On the other hand, the spirit of the writing tries to keep its rural yearning the same, and the poetry is perhaps better constructed and more grammatical and no less fervent if it comes from professional poets.

A good friend of mine from graduate school days is perhaps the hardest-core field geography guy I've ever met. The sort of person who spoke of his two terms in Vietnam as a lerp, as a cakewalk, and who became an exotic wildlife buyer in Alaska, purchasing rhino horns, insipid cat meat, and cobra blood and – well, you name it – all the while

working undercover for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as their ace agent. He's one of the greatest experts on wildlife smuggling in the Western hemisphere, but what does he really want to do? Well – and I'm not making this up – my friend goes by the Alaska Buckaroo, and he's one of the resident experts in Anchorage, Kotzebue, Fairbanks, and other spots inside the Arctic Circle on cowboy versifying.

And upswing of interest in cowboy poetry and the world that it presents is a function of nostalgia, but to be honest and direct about it, nostalgia requires a degree of familiarity with a life that most folks don't have anymore. Teleporting to the past just isn't possible, and probably wouldn't be half as much fun as might be imagined if it were possible. We have, in fact, created false memories of ranch and cowboy life that emphasize a few picturesque and dramatic features of cowboy existence....

[audience and Starrs laughs at slide]

...like I said, dramatic features of cowboy existence – roping, broncs, wrecks, scraps, heading into town, roundups, bars, hats, and horses, but which don't bear much resemblance to the rote of daily cowboying life. It's hard to find the perfect pan to riding drag, building fence, packing posts – forget packing posts – packing two rolls of barbed wire, that's a bad job. Treating scours, pulling nightshade, or trotting for five hours on a ground-eating circle to see how a bunch of cattle are spread out. The amazing thing to me, is that some cowboy poets have done just that, and when they succeed, it's something to be respected and is wonderfully authentic.

Poetry, after all, comes in many forms. What consistently stays alive in the works of cowboy poets is a respect for stories and a broad sense of appreciation of the workplace, if we can call the great outdoors that. In poems, the wonderful twists of an O. Henry-style ending often appear: sadness and humor abound. These are themes that are not altogether evident in the daily lives of many Americans, or should these happen to appear, they generally sneak in under a cover of prevailing stress that few ranchers and cow hands would own up to, aside from the financial difficulties of the ranch owner's life.

No cow hand ever worked carefree, but in a song poem, like Cole Porter's *Don't Fence Me In*, a version by Mary McCaslin is especially beautiful and poignant for me. The fence that Wildcat Kelly tries to avoid is as much metaphorical as it is literal. He's skirting the entanglements of confinement and restriction and responsibility. The daily life of most modern folks is all about obligations and requirements. How could it be otherwise? Precisely, this is where the poetry comes in, and why there's so much empathy and enthusiasm about cowboy poetry.

There's something else, too: cowboy poetry is *performed*. It has an argue that this is a twenty-first century thing, that cowboy poetry has a fan base because it's vibrant and done on stage and that it's, eclipses traditional poetry. That's not true, first of all, because many people do read poetry, whether it's Billy Collins or Gary Snyder or Bob Haas or Louise Gluck, or W.S. Merwin, and even more write poetry. I have two daughters who do and they're each better at it by far than me, and that doesn't even begin to deal with the slam poetry contests or rap songs or the folkloric wordsmiths like Arlo Guthrie or Bob Dylan or Ani DiFranco, who are performing poets in their own right, but setting words to music.

An added energy can be gleaned conventional, non-cowboy poets when they do readings or performances, but an almost essential trait of the cowboy poet or prose teller is the need to perform, whether around a campfire, in a bunkhouse, at a roundup, on television, or in the biggest darn meeting hall in the land. Poetry that needs to be performed is a novelty and it is a good one.

Well, a survey about a dozen years ago found that *cowboy* was the number one career choice of Americans who were left free to elect what they might do with their lives. This came just a year or two after the movie *City Slickers* was released...

[audience laughs; Starrs coughs]

...and is certainly tied to a national paroxysm of enthusiasm for ranch life that came with Billy Crystal's high jinks. There was more to it than that. The cow hand was the contrary figure to the dot-com, upwardly mobile, ninety-hour work week cyber-nerd. The cow hand is taken to be beyond all that.

In truth, though, there's no such separation, though the perception that there is poses a constant dilemma. Ranchers still have to use the Internet, do email, use Excel for their books, pay workers' comp fees, and think about retirement benefits, if not for themselves than for their employees. Modernity has not passed them by.

[audience laughs at slide]

While a brash young cow hand may aspire than nothing more glamorous than a custom built saddle that can easily cost several months, if not a half year's wages, and a long wait to boot, and that's only a foretaste of what has to be dealt with later in life.

Everyone has moments of dreaming about being freed from responsibility, of escaping the limits of family and schooling and relatives. But the wonder of the cowboy poet is that these features come back to life. That anyone could ever think the cowboy was a creature of the wild, a citizen of nature, a free spirit, hasn't really listened to the poems. They're about *community*, about responsibility, about doing right by friends, helping the land, and doing good. That is, although some might try to deny it, a thick slice of life in the new millennium. We could do well to listen to the lessons of cowboy poetry. A recent essay by Theodore Roosevelt the Fourth, the grandson of the President, was titled, *Why Is America – Rural America – at Loggerheads with the Environmental Movement*. Any of you out there see, see this piece? I don't see any hands waving.

Take a look at your most recent Patagonia catalog. For an essay about the relationship of the rural and the urban West to appear in a catalog for the most prestigious, highest-end, outdoor athletic equipment is really saying something. So it's worth picking the catalog with the guy doing some extreme skiing thing ripping off a cornice, and flip in about page twelve or fourteen there's T.R.'s essay in there. It's quite an interesting piece. It looks very precisely about how we need to listen to what is being said in the country's rural places. And you coming to the Cowboy Poetry Gathering, having an instant access to an urban audience are indeed, each of you in your own way, a kind of ambassador of the urban to the rural and the rural to the urban.

There is a remarkable kind of juxtaposition in this country now. I'm not sure how I feel about it, since the politics that go along with it are kind of weird: rural is cool, and

no one wants to – whoops, let’s see if we can keep that. There we go – rural is cool, and no one wants to stay in the city if it’s possible to get away, at least for a while. Second homes are proliferating like tumbleweeds, and the fundamental problem is that I want one, too. This is putting us in a difficult bind that is an expression of what Arthur Okun Lovejoy once called *primitivism*: the conviction that a previous time and way of life was innately better than the life someone is leading now.

We can think about turning our backs on the present, but the past doesn’t pay those mortgages or pay for our kids’ camps and the alternatives are not great. I think of Jerry Jeff Walker’s terrific song, *The Night Rider’s Lament* – I think a couple of people did it before him, but I know his version, with its final chorus mocking the outsiders:

*Why do they ride for their money
Why do they rope for short pay
They ain’t getting nowhere and they’re losing their share
They all must be crazy out there.*

The Night Rider’s Lament. The bottom line is a simple one, although in the light and dark, there’s a lot of in between. Cowboy poetry is about relationships, with one another, with nature, with domesticated animals that depend on us for their feed and to help them and do right by them. It’s also about camaraderie and about affection, about hard work and going to sleep tired. And reading it, and more important, seeing it performed, is about our modern life and what we can make of it. Cowboy poets try to clear that way for us, and the road is a fine one.

[audience begins to applaud]

Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Nope! I got one more paragraph!

[audience laughs]

And it’s a doosey!

[more laughter]

My pages stuck together.

And let there be in the end some symmetry, the same Kinky Friedman that we started out with had his own conclusion about classic roles of Western life. *The notion of the cowboy*, he wrote in his New York Times Op/Ed piece, *has always been one of America’s most precious gifts to the children of the world.* I would be loathed to disagree. Thank you very much.

[audience applauds]