

MEDICINE HAT COWBOY POETRY FOUNDATION

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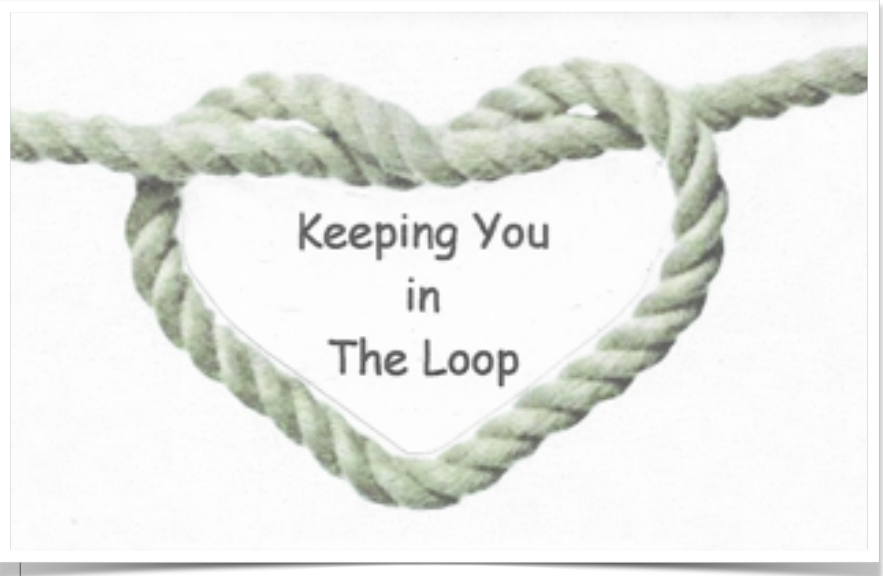
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Howdy!

Welcome to Cowboy Camp!

That's the greeting we gave all those who came to visit us. It's the first year for an outdoor area we call Cowboy Camp at Pioneer Village during the Medicine Hat Stampede. It was situated near the windmill and beside the corrals with Clydesdales that folks come to see.

It's logical I would want to be on the committee for Cowboy Camp. What an opportunity to stage a realistic view of what was the beginning of the ranching industry in southern Alberta! The trail drives were also the birth of the Cowboy Poetry genre.



Our annual event has been promoting Western Music and Poetry since 2019. We have brand stories and ranch histories on our website. We have various props and informative posters that fit Cowboy Camp perfectly. As well we've had connections with the Medicine Hat Stampede Royalty. In fact, the 2025 Rodeo Queen and Princess did the opening ceremony 'Burning of the Brand' to kick off Saturday evening headliner show.

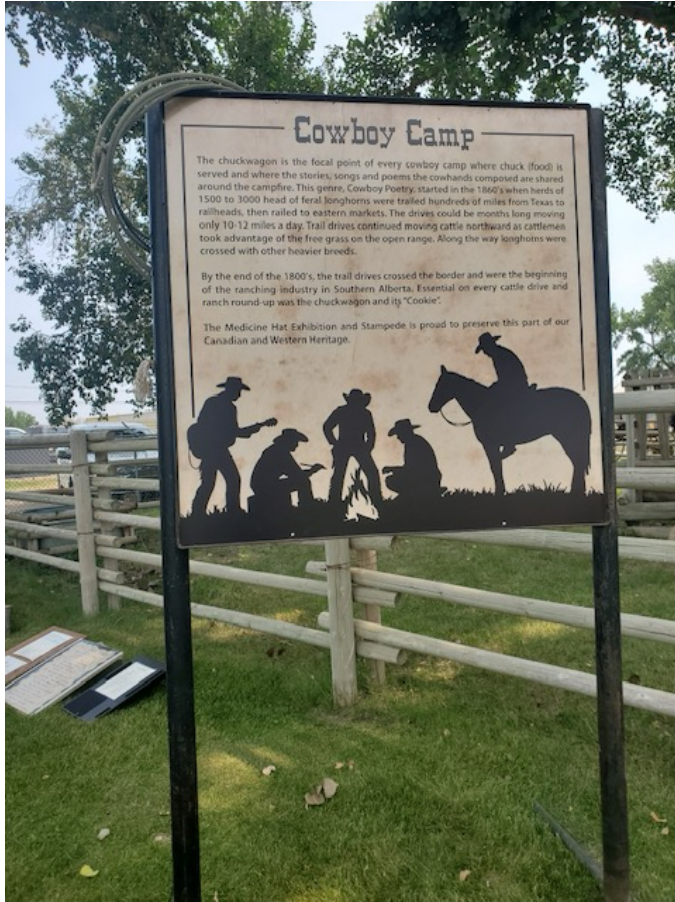
For several years I've also been a volunteer at McKay school sharing my experience as a 'pupil' at a one-room school. It's been exhilarating to connect with other Pioneer Village volunteers who are as passionate about history as I am.

Thanks to all who helped make Cowboy Camp happen: the Pioneer Village Committee and the MH Exhibition & Stampede Board, to all the volunteers and the performers, and to the folks who came by to learn about this part of our history.

Jen



One Cowboy Camp Audience



The Sign

A metal stand with a sign on South Boundary Road told folks where a Christian school was. The school is now closed and a house is being built on the property where the school once was. The stand has found its way to Pioneer Village where it now tells where Cowboy Camp is. This is what the sign says:

The chuckwagon is the focal point of every cowboy camp where chuck (biscuits, beans, salt pork, and coffee) is served and where the stories, songs and poems cowhands composed are shared.

This genre, Cowboy Poetry and authentic Western Music, started in the 1860's when large herds of 1500 to 3000 head of feral longhorn cattle were trailed hundreds of miles from Texas to railheads, then railed to eastern markets.

The drives could be months long and to cope with the daily grind of moving only 10-12 miles (16-19 km) a day, the cowboys made up poems and songs to calm the cattle and to entertain each other 'round the campfire. Trail drives continued moving cattle northward as cattlemen took advantage of the free grass on the open range. Along the way longhorns were crossed with other heavier breeds.

By the end of the 1800's, the trail drives crossed the border and were the beginning of the ranching industry in Southern Alberta. Essential on every cattle trail or ranch roundup was the chuckwagon and its "Cookie".

The Medicine Hat Exhibition and Stampede is proud to preserve this part of our Canadian and Western Heritage.

The Seed of an Idea:

Cory Schiebelbein is co-chair with Justin Watson on the Pioneer Village committee, and currently teaching at Eagle Butte High School. His interest in the cattle trail and its history can be attributed to his other interests and activities. Cory tells us how the idea of Cowboy Camp started:

“After volunteering for two years in the Blacksmith shop in Pioneer Village, it was noticed that besides parading horse drawn wagons through Pioneer Village, there wasn’t much related to the ranching and cowboy history of Southern Alberta being showcased.

Once on the committee, the idea of starting a Cowboy Camp in Pioneer Village was brought forward. The original idea was something along the lines of something you would see in movies like Lonesome Dove or Open Range; just a simple wagon, tarp, bedrolls and a campfire. Since having hands-on activities is important to draw people in and give them an experience they will remember, roping dummies were made as an obvious addition with some future plans for other activities.

Having been to the Bar U ranch in western Alberta years ago and experiencing Cowboy Poetry around the campfire, the idea of finding some local poets was also a priority. Through a chance meeting at a songwriting workshop with Jen, the connection was made that brought the whole plan to fruition. Jen’s connections and insight made the Cowboy Camp in 2026 a true success.”

Click here to read the story in the Medicine Hat News:

<https://medicinehatnews.com/news/local-news/2026/07/24/cowboys-set-up-camp-at-pioneer-village/>

Cowboy Camp

The first relic was a refurbished pioneer wagon, lent to us by the MH Stampede and rolled into place thanks to volunteer 'manpower'.

Thanks guys.

Next on the scene was a chuckwagon, a miniature version of one that would be found at a cowboy camp. The hoops and 'tarp' are to protect food supplies as well as the things Cookie needs in order to do his many duties (besides cooking).

On the back of the little chuckwagon is a table that, when folded down, reveals a cupboard loaded with cooking supplies (and labelled with the colourful names cowhands gave them). For example they called honey "bee sweetner".

Of course there is a campfire; thanks to Jim Koch for such a realistic looking prop. Items are strewn around the chuckwagon: pails to get water from a nearby stream, cotton and burlap sacks with things like unbolted flour and roasted coffee beans, metal coffee cups, enamel plates and silverware (eatin' irons) in metal containers. Notice there is no such thing as plastic and glass would break on the rough wagon rides.

A rusting washbasin is beside a pail of water with a paint-chip dipper, ready for cowhands to wash up for supper, but only when Cookie rings the triangle, signalling them to "come and get it".

At the real wagon, a tarp was attached to the side and stretched out to poles with ropes tied to the ground. In true camping fashion, it formed a roof for shade or shelter in case of rain. It was where the poets and musicians at our camp shared their talent in the mid 30 degree heat. The audience was able to sit on benches, 2 by 6's with log legs, thanks to the workmanship of Corinne Watson and Diane Veley. Real cowboy camps would have had the 12 to 15 cowhands that are trailing the 2000 to 3000 cattle, and they would be sitting down, but it would be on the grass. They would be the ones taking turns telling stories, reciting poems or singing.

The various plaques on display are not characteristic of a cowboy camp, but have information the audience might be interested in. Outside the camp enclosure, ropes and roping dummies were set up.

Thanks to Cory and his students who made them.



Cowboy Camp at Medicine Hat Stampede 2026

Photo: Randy Feere



Cowboy Camp Meetup

Chuckwagon Cupboard in background

Photo: Linda Pierson



Friday Foursome

Western Entertainment

Poets and musicians weathered the heat at Cowboy Camp, much like the cowhands would have done on the trail drives. Well-known poets were from Cochrane (Bill Skene), Esther, AB (Del Pratt) and our own Phyllis Rathwell.

We're proud of the two 'new' poets, one from Ft. Saskatchewan (Jackie Hiebert) and Lorna Williams, a resident of the city now. Emma Rougeux from Bindloss was the young singer/songwriter; Robbie Shields (Oyen) and Ivan Wigemyr (MH) favoured the oldies. Fiddlers joined us: a local resident, Darlene Peters and a surprise visit from Michael Kulyk from Buffalo.

Every day there were two poets and two musicians providing ninety minutes of true western entertainment. And it was free. It was heartening to see folks experiencing cowboy poetry at its best; impressed by their ability to tell one story after the other, all in rhyme, no notes and with the casual ease of a conversation. I especially watched how two little girls were mesmerized, thinking it's something they'll never forget.

Pioneer Village was open from noon to 9:00 from the Wednesday to Saturday. Folks from near and as far as Sweden, Halifax, Newfoundland and Thunder Bay visited us and the rest of Pioneer Village.

Roping Skills

Even though the days of open range cattle drives are gone, the spirit lives on in rodeos and in teaching youngsters the art of roping. The roping dummies were a hit with folks of all ages. Cory wasn't the only one showing kids how.



Cory teaching Roping Skills



Alisha had preschoolers giving it a try



Young couple learn to rope



Karlee roped the head every time

Karlee was intent on helping others do it too. A husband and wife had a competition going. Alisha even had preschoolers giving it a try. Thanks girls for actively inviting folks to visit our camp; and a sincere thank you to Jess and Lorna and Rylie Schiebelbein for also cheerfully welcoming them. The many signatures in the guest book proves these girls kept busy.

Did You Know?

Medicine Hat Cowboy Poetry has a number of information posters that could be used at Cowboy Camp. However, they aren't weatherproof for outdoor display, so to adapt we made ample use of MacTac and 3/4" plywood pieces. Information on the boards included: brands/how to read them, wages/costs during the cattle trail days and the recipe for SOB stew (using everything but the horns, the hair and the holler).



Jen Zollner showcasing Jim Koch's wood work.

Jim Koch made a frame to enclose the poster listing the "Challenges the Cowboys Faced". His workmanship was also appreciated for the "Cavan Ranch History" collage frame. It may be the first in an upcoming series. Thanks Lorna for the creative ideas and help for making these. Comments in the Guest Book indicated that visitors appreciated the learning they provided.

Loading In and Loading Out

Here's my appreciation to those who set up at the beginning and took down at the end:
Justin, Corinne, Diane, Cory, Jim.



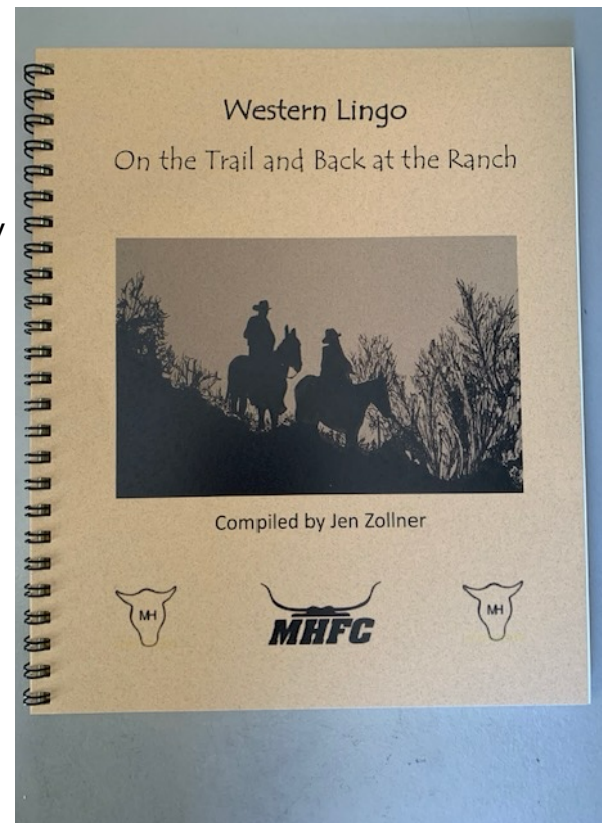
Justin can always count on the help
of his Mom and his Gramma.

Cowboy Food Lingo

- Adam's ale: water
- airtight: canned goods
- brown gargle: weak coffee
- canned cow: canned milk
- cow juice: milk
- mysteries: sausages (because it was a mystery what was in them)

Western Wisdom

- annoying the cook is like standing behind a mule
- the dinner bell is always in tune
- don't throw your tack in a wagon with a skinny cook
- lonesome brings on ailments that only company can cure
- trust your neighbour but brand your calves
- always drink upstream from the herd



Western Lingo

Western Lingo, On the Trail and Back at the Ranch

It's a booklet with many more unexpected and refreshing names cowboys gave foods, clothing, people, etc. It's an effort to describe the duties, dangers and daily living of cowhands on the original cattle trails and the early ranches. It uses terms, explanations and additional details of interest about life back then. The \$15 per book helps fund the Cowboy Poetry and Western Music event MHCP hosts every year (**Oct 16-18 in 2026**). Thanks to the Medicine Hat Feeding Company for being our print sponsor.

Cowboy Coffee

Coffee was served as water at every meal and lots in between. Their coffee supply was as precious as gold, and cowboys had names for the different strengths. Weak coffee was “dehorned belly wash” or “brown gargle”, while their strong coffee was “black strap”.

The poem is by Roger Turner.

Wind is coming in, sun is just showing,
Horses are watered, fire is glowing.

Movement is starting, the camp is awake,
Cookie is working, there's breakfast to make.

No fancy croissants or drinks laced with toffee,
Just good solid food and strong cowboy coffee.

It gets the job done, it ain't always nice,
Later on in the day, it gets served by the slice.

Mud, java, joe, it's got lots of names,
And at each cowboy camp it still tastes the same.

Grounds at the bottom, thick as cola tar,
Without cowboy coffee you will not go far.

Eggs, beans and bacon and bread Texas thick
To wipe up what's left and get every lick.

Here out on the trail you won't find any toffee,
We eat solid grub and we drink cowboy coffee.



Campfire Coffee Pot

Parting Thoughts

Working for something we don't care about is called stress,
Working for something we love is called passion.
Benjamin Franklin has a word of caution about that:
“If passion drives you, let reason hold the reins.”

Have a good rest of the summer!

Jen