

## Creative Creatures

*The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.*

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### **#1 / Annie Wilson, poet, musician, Elmdale, Kansas**

*Let's slip into our evening wear of hiking boots and jeans  
And walk up to the hills to make the prairie night life scene  
This night out on the prairie, it's just the place to be  
It's a walk out on the wild side, and the tickets in are free*

She is a songwriter, a guitarist and a vocalist. She is a poet. She is also a fulltime high school teacher and, coming from a Kansas ranchers' dynasty and being married to full-time rancher John Wilson, she is a part-time cattle woman as well. Two of her three daughters are creative creatures, too, and one of them is the partner of expressionist painter Zak Barnes.

Annie Wilson is soft spoken, almost shy, with a girlish figure, yet she's a gutsy performer with a voice that comfortingly caresses. Also when she doesn't sing but talks. Enriched with a dry sense of humor, she appears only with hesitation to demand for the ear of the listener who, if not immediately swayed

by the directness of what she is saying, wakes up dazed two minutes later wondering what the heck it was that hit him. For Annie always hammers it right on the head.

She writes and sings of the tallgrass prairie, about the life of a ranch woman—about the Flint Hills of Kansas. She couldn't help noticing that Kansas rarely if ever shows up in the traditional repertoire of songs. So she decided to write her own: "I just decided to write what I know about and want to celebrate—the land and the culture," Annie says. "It didn't seem like anybody else was doing that so I just got real into it."

The opening lyrics are from her song 'Night Out on the Prairie'. Annie: "It is a kind of a tongue-in-cheek children's song dedicated to all 'young and old' who love to get out on foot and experience the prairie. They know that especially at evening time it is a thoroughly entertaining place to be and a great way to cleanse your mind of the day's worries. To the occasional dismayed urbanite who asks, 'What do you do out there?' this is an attempt to explain."

*Whose stones these were I'll never know  
That built this homestead long ago  
Who tried to farm this high plateau  
Of soil too thin for crops to grow*

*Would they ever guess us stopping here  
Close neighbors in a hundred years  
To wonder how could time erase  
The dreams that filled their old home place*

These lines are from Annie's 'Stopping by the Homestead Ruins'. She and her Tallgrass Express String Band (with Charlie Laughridge, Loren Ratzloff and Carl Reed) perform here and there and everywhere, but each third Saturday evening of the month they can be found at the Emma Chase Café in Cottonwood Falls, where they join the jam session and invite a devoted if not addicted audience to share their unique brand of "roots music" written by Annie. "Their concerts take you to a world of stunning landscapes, working cowboys, runaway horses, Indian buffalo hunts, Victorian balls, ranch romance, and prairie walks among native birds and grasses," wrote The Emporia Gazette. In addition, they share a variety of entertaining bluegrass, old-time, western, and folk songs. Blended harmonies complement the group's style with their instrumental skills on most strings of the world, such as guitar, fiddle, mandolin, banjo, and bass, as well as on harmonica and concertina.

"Annie's words and melodies embody the landscape," says author Jim Hoy and he, a rancher as well as the leading prairie scholar, knows best. Listen to Annie at [www.tallgrassexpress.com](http://www.tallgrassexpress.com).

*Ton Haak, May 2012*

*Photo: Elaine Shea Jones*