

## 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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### # 32 / Dr Jim Hoy, historian, educator, writer, rancher, Emporia, Kansas

His mind is as lean as his body. He is as balanced a thinker as a horseman. He knows and understands the history of the Midwest as few others, and teaches and writes about it with as much devotion as he raises and cherishes the longhorn cattle on his ranch. “By the time I was six years old, I was helping my father drive cattle ...” Born in Cassoday, just south of Matfield Green, he studied English literature at KSU in Manhattan and at Emporia State University, and received his Ph.D. from the University of Missouri-Columbia (his thesis, how amazing for a Kansas cowboy, was: ‘Records of Drama in Medieval York’). Meanwhile he continued to work cattle on the family stock ranch, which—later—he expanded and still later he shared with his son Josh.

Josh and his wife Gwen now run a successful working guest ranch; their ‘Flying W’ is an 1890 homestead with a historic three-story red barn nestled in the Cottonwood River Valley, where the work is done old style, on horseback, not on the fast-racing, easy-to-handle 4WD Kawasakis some contemporary ranchers call “mules,” and where one can of course find Jim Hoy and his wife, Cathy, on horseback helping out with cowboying during round-ups. The ranch normally has 50 horses, 250 cow-calf pairs, and 2,000 stocker cattle. All Hoys cherish tradition and heritage; they don’t let nostalgia get involved, though. Their devotion to the land is pure and their fascination with cows and calves as well as horses and dogs, and all other animal life on the prairie, is sincere. It is the joy of doing things the old way that keeps them going. And who can deny the beauty of the calm confrontation of men and their animals out in the endless grasslands?

Jim is a cowboy at heart. Some of his academic interests reflect this passion: Western American literature, Australian Outback folk life and literature, Great Plains folklore. His actual field is “The folk life of ranching both historical and contemporary in different parts of the world, with emphasis on the Great Plains and particularly

the Flint Hills.” Other subjects keep him attached to his all-time love, English medieval and renaissance history, and include various Chaucer projects. Yet most of his contemporary writings, lectures and speeches—and his performances at many different academic and popular events—have to do with, for instance, the history of early rodeo; his study of the buckaroo; or his much loved subject, the cattle guard, its history, its lore. Jim was a rodeo judge as well as the founder of ESU’s Great Plains Studies. His bio shows more public functions than I think is healthy for one man, and hundreds, many hundreds of scholarly and journalistic publications. Plus nine books, although it’s possible I missed a few when counting. Oh, I forgot to mention Jim plays a sensitive guitar while singing folk songs from Down Under and the Great Plains as well as a few places in between.

Jim’s ranch has been in his family for five generations; he boasts roots “as deep as those of bluestem grass in black-soil bottomland.” He draws on the prairie’s rich cowboy lore—as well as on his own experience working cattle, breaking horses, and rodeoing—for example to write his recently published folk history of the Flint Hills spanning a century and a half, titled ‘Flint Hills Cowboys: Tales of the Tallgrass Prairie’. Jim blends history, folklore, and memoir to conjure for readers the prairie of his boyhood in this book that richly recalls the ranching life and the people who lived it. “Here are cowboys and outlaws, rodeo stars and runaway horses, ordinary folks and the stuff of legends. Jim introduces readers to the likes of Lou Hart, a top hand with the Crocker Brothers from 1906 to 1910, whose poetic paean to ranch life circulated orally for fifty years before seeing print. And he tracks down the legend of Bud Gillette, considered by his neighbors the world’s fastest man until he fell in with an unscrupulous promoter. He even unravels the mystery of a lone grave supposed to be that of the first cowboy in the Flint Hills. Jim also explains why a good horse makes up for having to work with exasperating cattle—and why not all horses are created (or trained) equal. And he traces Flint Hills cattle culture from the days of the trail drive through the railroad years to today’s trucking era, with most railroad stockyards torn down and only one section house left standing” (which is the one in Matfield Green known as Matfield Station, owned and restored by my friends Bill and Julia McBride and rented out for weekends and vacations).

Writes Jim, “I feed on the stories of the Flint Hills and the characters who tell them as the cattle feed on the grasses.” His love of the land shines throughout a book so real that readers will swear they hear the click of horseshoes on flint rock with every turn of the page, as wrote one critic. “The Flint Hills are rife with the lore, legend, and reality of cowboy life, and no one’s better suited to tell the tales than Jim Hoy ... Reading him is akin to sitting at a nearby restaurant and listening to the locals introducing an out-of-town guest to their community in the most amusing, appealing way possible” (*Western Horseman*). Jim is writing from roots that are “as deep as those of bluestem grass in black-soil bottomland.” He is, “Grounded. Real. There are only a few cowboy-scholars of the Great Plains who manage to wear the Stetson and the mortar board with equal grace. E.E. Dale comes to mind, and so does Jim Hoy,” wrote Thomas Isern.

A storyteller *extraordinaire*, Jim (who is also a board member of Pioneer Bluffs Foundation), different than the land he ranches on, never runs dry. Just a few quotes from ‘Flint Hills Cowboys’: “When I was growing up, my dad would sometimes say, ‘Let’s drive down into the Hills and see so-and-so,’ or ‘Let’s drive up to the Valley and see so-and-so.’ Now where in the world would anyone drive *down* into the hills and *up* into a valley? ... But the Flint Hills were formed by erosion, not upheaval ... so you do drive down into them.” The annual spring burn-off of the dead grass from the previous year is “a colorful ritual that was carried over by ranchers from the Kaw (Indian) practice of wrapping rawhide thongs around a large ball of dead grass, setting it afire, then dragging it horseback at full run across the prairie.” One of Jim’s sayings is: “Unlike towering mountains, sight of the Hills doesn’t take your breath away—their beauty inspires rather a contemplative awe—it allows you to catch your breath.”