

Historic Kansas cabin part of state song's history

Kansas to celebrate state's sesquicentennial on Jan. 29

By Beccy Tanner

The Wichita Eagle

As the sun dips below the skyline and the bone-chilling cold of a long winter's night settles over Brewster Higley's cabin, all signs of the 21st century disappear. No neon lights. No electricity. No whirring motors. No sounds but hooting owls and howling coyotes from somewhere upstream on Beaver Creek.



Higley

It was from this postage-stamp-size patch of land nearly 140 years ago a frontier doctor penned a six-verse poem he called simply "My Western Home."

It spoke volumes about his tiny home along the creek, of seeing animals on the ever-changing prairie and of a sky that often overtook and overwhelmed the bowl-shaped horizon.

Oh, give me a home where the buffalo roam,

Where the deer and the antelope play;
Where never is heard a discouraging word

And the sky is not clouded all day.

In time, those words became a famous song.

Each month, about 100 visitors from across the country drive down the dusty lane in Smith County to walk in Brewster Higley's footsteps.

The guest register includes names from Florida, Tennessee, Colorado, Nebraska and Iowa.

But the fame of the song stretches far beyond the United States and far beyond this tiny cabin.

Go anywhere — Ireland, Africa, Russia and China — and people know the song.

"That song is the most famous cowboy song in the world," said Orin Friesen at the Prairie Rose Chuckwagon Supper near Benton.

"When the Wranglers played in China, we played 'Home on the Range' and sang it in Chinese. If you look at the songs other states have — like the 'Tennessee Waltz' — and put all the state songs on a list and ask people from across the world which ones they recognize, I bet 'Home on the Range' would be No. 1. It's the most famous state song of all."

But in the fall of 1872, Brewster Higley's thoughts were simply written in poem form on a scrap of paper.

He tucked it away in one of his books.

The doctor

Brewster Higley was down on his luck. At the end of his fourth marriage, Higley was seeking refuge and a little solace when he left Ohio in 1871 and homesteaded on the banks of Beaver Creek in Smith County.

His first three wives had died from illness and injury. The fourth, Mercy Ann McPherson, a woman from Indiana, was temperamental, at best. He quickly left his three children with relatives in Illinois and moved far away from the matrimonial discord.

On the Kansas prairie, he found peace. To pass the time, Higley often played the violin and wrote poetry.

His first home was a simple dugout — dirt floors, roof and walls.

A year later, he built a cabin with three limestone walls; on the south wall, he put in logs.

He kept the dirt floor and added two small rectangular windows on the south and north walls and built a door with a latchstring lock.

Oh, give me the gale of the Solomon vale

Where life streams with buoyancy flow,
On the banks of the Beaver, where seldom if ever

Any poisonous herbage doth grow.

Two years later, Higley was treating a patient for a gunshot wound while another man waited — Trube Reese of Smith Center.

Reese began thumbing through Higley's books and came upon the poem.

He reportedly told Higley: "This is plumb good, you should have it printed in the paper."

So, in 1873, the Smith County Pioneer printed the poem with verses such as this one:

How often at night, when the heavens are bright

By the light of the glittering stars,
Have I stood there amazed and asked as

I gazed

If their beauty exceeds this of ours.

That same year, Higley presented the poem to Dan Kelley of nearby Gaylord who'd been a bugler during the Civil War and had enough background in music to give it a distinctive melody.

Kelley then gave the song to Judge John Harlan and his family, who first played and sang it publicly.

The Harlans added a chorus to the song:

A Home — A Home — Where the deer and the antelope play — where seldom is heard a discouraging word — and the sky is not cloudy all day.

None of the men attempted to copyright the song.

How Kansas almost lost out

The song spread like wildfire throughout the West.

It gained popularity along the cattle trails and in small-town dance halls where its melody and heartfelt words about home were quickly learned.

By then, with the cowboy influence, the chorus of the song had shifted to "Home, Home on the Range..."

Jim Gray, cowboy historian from Ellsworth and publisher of the Kansas Cowboy newspaper, said the song was simply the voice of the prairie.

"That song is stuck in our DNA," he said. "It is in the spirit of what it represents — it is not only the spirit of Kansas but the spirit of the Old West."

Kansas historian Thomas Averill said that sense of a home is interchangeable with Kansas.

"The word home is important to our identity," Averill said. "When Frank Baum wrote 'The Wizard of Oz' in 1900, Dorothy said 'There is no place like home.' Brewster Higley wrote 'Home on the Range' before that. By the 1930s, people were identifying Kansas as the home place — it was the center of the heartland."

Still, at the turn of the 20th century, that sense of identity — that sense of home — had come to mean almost anywhere "out there" in the Old West. And "Home on the Range" gained folk song status.

In 1910 it was published for the first time by John Lomax, a Texas college professor researching folk music of the Old West.

He labeled it "Home on the Range" and published it in the book, "Cowboy Songs and Frontier Ballads."

It was published as sheet music and the refrains of the song were heard everywhere from pianos and pump organs in home parlors to recording artists who recorded it for phonographs and sang it over radio airwaves.

And still, the song's popularity continued to grow, along with a number of variations — each claiming home ties with Texas, Colorado and other states.

In 1934 William and Mary Goodwin of Arizona claimed they wrote the song, "An Arizona Home," and filed a lawsuit against radio giant NBC and various publishing houses demanding damages and prohibiting the song from being played in public.

It was only after Samuel Moanfeldt, an investigative lawyer for NBC and the publishing houses, was hired to track down the roots of the song the lawsuit was resolved and the melody could once again be sung in public.

Moanfeldt traced the song back to Kansas — to Higley publishing the poem in the Smith County Pioneer.

Moanfeldt interviewed an elderly Trube Reese, who told him about the Harlan family. Moanfeldt then asked Clarence Harlan, then 86, to sing the song. He sang it perfectly from memory — word for word as Higley had written it.

Since then, the song has been sung around the world and was popular enough for President Franklin D. Roosevelt to declare it his favorite song.

In 1947, the Kansas Legislature declared "Home on the Range" the official song of Kansas.

The inspiration for Higley's poem, though, remains uncertain.

A cabin's fate

In the early 1950s, the Smith County Rotary Club revamped Higley's cabin, putting in 1870s vintage logs where rotted logs once stood. In 1980, area farmers braced the stone walls with maintainer blades and rebar.

They were farmers' fixes.

"The good news was they didn't sell it; the

bad news is they didn't maintain it very well," said El Dean Holthus.

Holthus, whose aunt and uncle, Ellen and Pete Rust, owned the property for nearly 75 years, credits them for saving the cabin and keeping it standing in Kansas. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The land and cabin is now maintained by the Rust Family Trust.

Holthus, 78, remembers playing around the cabin as a small child: "We knew it only as a chicken house. It was a chicken house until 1947."

"It was general knowledge Higley had built the cabin," Holthus said. "It was a known fact. But it did not become significant until the lawsuit."

The Rusts, Holthus said, recognized the significance of the cabin but were farmers, practical folk who often were just getting by.

At least twice, people offered to buy and move the cabin from Kansas.

"You hear of Harold Warp, owner of Pioneer Village in Minden? He came down one night and talked to them about it. He signed a blank check and pushed it across the table," Holthus said.

"Uncle Pete said 'What are you going to do with it?'"

Warp said "Move it to Pioneer Village."

The blank check was pushed back across the table.

Reportedly, Holthus said, Knotts Berry Farm in Buena Park, Calif., made a similar offer.

Still, the Rusts held firm and the cabin remains in Kansas, privately owned, but open to the public.

In the past two years, the Rust Family Trust repaired the roof on the cabin and removed dead trees that threatened to fall on the building. The trust is trying to raise money to restore the cabin.

Holthus estimates it may cost as much \$100,000 to restore it to its original integrity.

He's hoping the people of Kansas will want to help save the iconic cabin.

But even beyond Kansas, there are others who care about the cabin's future.

"The song is a treasure of American heritage," said cowboy singer Michael Murphey, who lives in Colorado. "Native-born



Inside of Higley's cabin (above) as restored by Smith County Rotary and Rust Family Trust. Higley's cabin (below) as it looks today with the log wall on the south and three rock walls. Photos by Wichita Eagle



Stone sign for direction to the Higley cabin.

Westerners like me consider it the anthem of the West, just as "The Star-Spangled Banner" is the national anthem of America."

How much 'Home on the Range' is left?

When Brewster Higley wrote his poem, the prairie was already rapidly disappearing.

James Butler "Wild Bill" Hickok was marshal of Abilene; buffalo herds were being slaughtered by the thousands and the animals' carcasses left to rot on the prairie.

Tiny colonies of settlers sprung up across the state, carving chunks out of the prairie into farms and towns as American Indians were displaced. And although there is some question whether Higley himself wrote this verse, which is part of the state song:

The Red man was pressed from this part of the west,

He's likely no more to return,
To the banks of the Red River where seldom if ever

Their flickering campfires burn.

That verse, Murphey said, "shows nostalgic sadness at the disappearing of Native Americans at a time when the Indian Wars were still going on, revealing settlers were not always at odds with their Native American neighbors, and many pioneers

felt fondness for some Indians."

Karen Panter's house is within a stone's throw of the cabin. She's lived at the site for more than two decades.

She's seen white tail and mule deer along with flocks of turkey wander across her yard. There are signs of bob cats, pheasants, quail and owls.

"There's a feeling of pride that goes with living here," she said. "It represents the state. No matter where you go, people are familiar with the song."

Go to the cabin, she says, and the silence is calming.

As far as state symbols go, it rates right up there with the John Brown painting in the state capital building, said Jim Gray.

It is iconic enough for artists and singers to make pilgrimages.

Dave Zerfas, a western balladeer from Manhattan, is one of those people.

"It paints the hopes of people who came here searching for a new life," Zerfas said. "It is a snapshot of the idyllic prairie before the buffalo were all gone."

"To me, that song is the dream of Kansas."

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Study next step in power discussion

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base load of about 12 mega watts, and would have about 5 mega watts of excess capacity if the city has 7 mega watts to cover an emergency level.

"You could sell extra now to Sunflower," he said. "If you were in the EMP you could be in a position to produce and sell power. An example is Russell or Beloit. They can be called on depending on the load. It is

sold within the EMP foot print."

He said a couple of times in the summer when they had an emergency situation they had to have everyone running.

He asked if that was the way the city contract with Sunflower works now.

Rod Blake, city power plant superintendent, said if Sunflower asks the city to run they will pay for the power based on the highest peak of the month.

Saitta said that was a little differ-

ent than what KMEA has.

Dechant asked both Blake and Gerber if they agreed with going ahead with the transmission study and both said it was a good step.

Daniels made a motion to do the transmission study, saying he felt the city needs to look at every option. Fairbanks seconded and the vote was unanimous 3-0 with Dechant voting in favor. Commissioner John Garcia was absent from this part of the meeting.

GHS Cowboys of the Week

Based on positive academic performance, attendance improvement, positive attitude or random acts of kindness, the student nominees this week are: Jeniffer Hernandez and Brooke Lockhart.



Jeniffer Hernandez, Senior
Nominated by: Mrs. Reed
Parents: Frank & Dalia Hernandez
Activities: Softball



Brooke Lockhart, Sophomore
Nominated by: Mrs. Susan Hall
Parents: Scott & Elizabeth Lockhart
Activities: Vocal

These students receive an Activity Period Pass. These students were randomly selected from all nominees and will receive a local food gift certificate, special parking, first in lunch line and recognized throughout the community!

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