



**Your on the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**The National Cowboy Symposium  
and Celebration**

## The National Cowboy Symposium and Celebration Report One

**September 7-9, 2012**

Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. This week I attended the National Cowboy Symposium and Celebration. In this report and in Report Two, I will use the word Symposium or the words Cowboy Symposium to describe this longer title.

The event was held in Lubbock, Texas, at the Lubbock Memorial Civic Center. This year marked the 24th anniversary of the event. According to a press release, “The purpose [of the Symposium] is to celebrate, preserve, and pass along our western heritage and cowboy culture for those who know and love it, and for those who have never known it.”

My primary reason for attending the event was to market my new books, especially *The Light Side of Little Texas*. My book agent rented a booth to sell my wares, as seen in Figure 1. The lovely lady doing a sale is Sylvia Gann Mahoney. She is also called a literary agent or publicist. Hmm. Sylvia is not pointing at my books. She is pointing to her book. Conflict of interest, Sylvia!

Anyway, Sylvia was responsible for reserving the booth and other administrative matters. She has attended Symposium events over the past twenty-four years and was occupied with many other matters while at the show. But as seen in the figure, she was gracious enough to help “man” the booth and relieve this aging body of standing on concrete from 9 am to 7 pm.

Another reason for attending the Symposium was to celebrate my friend Jim Harris (a museum executive director) receiving the American Cowboy Culture Award as the best Western Museum for contributing to cowboy culture and western heritage. (Jim and the Lea County Museum published *The Light Side of Little Texas*.) Later this year, I will send you a report on this museum and its extraordinary programs. For now, Figure 2 shows Jim and his well-deserved trophy.



**Figure 1. Book booth.**



**Figure 2. Number one museum executive director.**

A third reason, and more important than selling books, was to reconnect myself to my rural roots in New Mexico, to the Llano Estacado---the staked plains of eastern New Mexico and west Texas.

I will not know if my first reason for attending (selling books) was successful. I sold barely enough books to pay for my extra luggage for the airplane trip, but I made some fine contacts. Perhaps others will order my books. I do know my third goal was successful.

### **Sidebar: *Little Texas*?**

The title for my book, *The Light Side of Little Texas*, was received with mixed reviews in Lubbock, Texas. One of the visitors to my booth informed me, "There ain't nothing *little* about Texas!"

### **Ties to the Past**

I left this part of America in 1957 to attend college. As with most people, I was unknowingly influenced by my childhood. Cowboys and their fittings of boots and spurs were as natural to me as bowling bowls and baseball caps were to easterners. The semi-barren landscape of the Llano Estacado---the Spanish name for the largest level plain of its kind in the United States---became part of my mental landscape.

During my visit to this part of the country to see family and former classmates I noticed the differences here to those where I was living at the time. I was aware of the variations in dress, diction, clichés, and conduct. But I seldom succumbed to nostalgia. I had no wish to wear another pair of boots. I had put my custom-made belt buckles away.

Now, with over fifty years of little reflection about my cowboy past, this gathering brought forth memories that bordered on .... What is the right word or phrase? I think it is accurate to say this Cowboy Symposium evoked in me---for the first time in my life---a pining for my past life to the cowboy culture.

This get-together did not persuade me to buy a cowboy hat and shed my button-down collars. But this gathering left me with these thoughts: Most of the people at the Cowboy Symposium were reliving the dream of a past world: a fanciful illusion, lasting only a few years in America, yet one that captured the imagination of much of the world.

The cowboy is a part of all of us, even the "us" in other countries (Many years ago, I watched a spaghetti western movie while visiting Taiwan). The cowboy legacy...much of myth, but not all...inspires in us a modern day hero. He is stoic and strong, impervious to his enemies, and resistant to all adversities, even Texas thunderstorms and Texas stagecoach bandits.

Granted, some of the so-called cowboys and cowgirls at this event were caricatures of the real thing, some shown in Figure 3. Many of the events (and music) bore little resemblance to the cowboy's way of life during the mid 1800s to the early 1900s. It seemed that some of the

participants might have come to believe the myth of the cowboy---of accepting their own press releases.



**Figure 3. Scenes from the Cowboy Symposium and Celebration.**

This reality did not matter. As we say in this part of America, *it don't amount to a hill of beans*. As I occupied my booth and watched hundreds of people pass by---many outfitted with boots and western hats---I said to myself, *Good for them. Good for me. Good for America. We could use more of the cowboy culture in our lives*. Here are a few reasons why:

**Cowboy Culture**

For these three days (one for booth preparation, two for the show itself). I noticed this sort of dialogue:

“Thank you.”  
 “You’re welcome, sir.”

Walking outside the civic center and into the city of Lubbock, I encountered this dialogue:

“Thank you.”  
 “No problem.”

Or just as often:

“Thank you.”

With no response.

Since I began to speak, I was trained to say “sir” and “ma’am.” Upon coming to the east coast to live, I discovered this usage was considered quaint, insulting, or silly. Some people would look at me and I could read in their faces, “What a cornpone!” By virtue of being polite, in my own acculturated way, my status with them diminished.

But I also discovered this fact: My slow way of talking, my diction, my clichés; my saying “yes sir” led many of my business and sports competitors to underestimate me. Frankly, it helped me kick some ass. And I myself learned: Don’t ever judge anyone’s intelligence by their accent, even if they “talk slow.” That slow talking “fool” might just be a fast thinking “savant.”

Unlike most of the cowboy movies---which are riddled with inaccurate dialogues---the cowboy culture in which I grew up was one of politeness for and deference to others. Sure, there was (and is) the macho culture of the cowboy, sometimes one of pugnacious behavior. One that comes to mind is Clint Eastwood. We should keep in mind that this man is an actor. He even plays the piano! How many steers has he roped? How many steers has he dogged? I know of none. But he sure talks tough.

Anyway, I grew up in a culture that insisted on self reliance, independence, and resilience. Solitude and silence were respected. So was respect for another person’s space, turf, and privacy.

A hello was a must when passing anyone on the street. We had no unions, no insurance, no Medicare. Social security was a foreign concept to us. We took care of ourselves and our old ones.

We went about our business. The business of others was their business, not ours. The ideas that someone could tell us when to pray, to marry, to abort, to make love, to have or not have children---to do anything that was *personal*---was considered so far off-base that it was not even on our horizon. Sure, we might talk about it. But we took no actions to infringe on others’ actions that did not affect us.

Uncle Sam stayed away from us. But it was a good arrangement. We stayed away from Uncle Sam.

*I’ll tell you what:* we were practical. *I’ll tell you what else:* We had no taking-up with corporations. What we worked on, we owned ourselves. Our “shareholders” were us. No one else paid us anything. If we needed money, we went to the bank. If our crops or cattle dried-up, we got soaked, not a distant shareholder. The absence of corporations in our lives made us a lot more responsible about what we did.

*I’ll tell you something else:* This country could use more of the cowboy life I just described.

Your on the Street Reporter

## **The National Cowboy Symposium and Celebration Report Two**

**September 5-10, 2012**

Your on the Street Reporter was at the National Cowboy Symposium and Celebration this week, and impressed with the quality of the conference/show/exhibit.<sup>1</sup> I am not sure how to characterize it, as these three days included:

### **A Horse Parade**

A parade of scores of horses and wagons took place through the streets of downtown Lubbock. Horse clubs from several ranches and towns located on the Llano Estacado came to participate.

### **A Chuck Wagon Cook-off Contest**

This contest is said to attract one of the largest assemblages of chuck wagons in the nation. Besides the meals, part of the contest was just making it to Lubbock for the event.

- “Damn Slim! You’re a day late. You missed the pinto bean contest. All’s left now is the fruit cobbler bake-off. What happened?”
- “One of my horses broke down. Then I missed the off-ramp exit on I-25.”

How did all these wagons make it to Lubbock? Some are local. Others were transported on wagons of substantial horse power. However they arrived, as stated in the cook-off rules, “Each wagon is required to prepare a complete meal of chicken fried steak, pinto beans, potatoes, fruit cobbler, sourdough biscuits, or yeast rolls.”

### **Sidebar. A Four-Star Chuck Wagon**

Cowboys on the New Mexico flatlands of the Llano Estacado, miles away from the home house, often had a wagon that provided vittles for the cowboys. Some of my childhood experiences take me back to my times on a ranch in New Mexico. I may be incorrect in this next statement, as it happened many years ago, but I would wager a buck that those chuck wagons did not offer much more than an over-cooked piece of beef. For sure, the men ate fresh biscuits and generous plates of beans. But fancy cobbler and swanky chicken fried steak? I don’t recall such cuisine. But I could be wrong. Besides, the chuck wagon fare in Texas could have been more elaborate than the chuck wagon provisions in New Mexico. After all, Texans do it big.

Tickets were sold for the event. I regretted missing this meal. Chicken fried steak is one of my favorite western dishes, and contrary to popular thought, cooking it properly is not an easy task.

### **Music and Poetry**

The conference rooms and the exhibit halls were used throughout the day and night for poetry readings and western music performances. On Friday and Saturday alone, thirty-three separate 50-minute sessions were held during the day. In the evenings, a larger hall was reserved for bands and singers to entertain the attendees.

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<sup>1</sup> As noted in report one, I use shorten words when writing about the name of this event.

## Stories

Some of these events were interspersed with story-tellers. And a few hours were set aside for the tellers of western folklore to spin their yarns. I can attest from listening to many of these tales during my childhood that the word “yarn” is often the accurate way to characterize them.

## On-going Music in Main Hall

One of the most pleasant aspects of the Cowboy Symposium was the nearly continuous performances by western musicians in the main exhibit hall, as seen in Figure 4. The quality of the music was never shoddy and often fine. Sometimes, as good as C&W music can be. The seating arrangement provided about 100-150 chairs. As shown in the left photo in Figure 4, sometimes the attendance was sparse. For others, at least half the seats were filled.

My favorite performance was one shown in the right photo in Figure 4. Two musicians entertained the crowd. The man on the left played a one-string bass fiddle.<sup>2</sup> He picked his notes and chords by bending a pole (and strumming an attached wire) that was implanted into a wash tub. Not one for subtlety, he substituted a bow or pick with a construction glove.

## Unique, One-time Events

During the day, the Symposium guests could attend special, one-time presentations. One such event was a harmonica workshop. Another was folklore ballet (?) workshop. Yet another was a lecture on western heritage history.

I was a participant in one of these events. The topic was named “Writing Western: How to Publish.” I am not certain who came up with this title. First, I have no idea how to “write western” other than to compose sentences such as, “I’ll tell you what.” Second, I no longer use publishers, so my presentation was devoted to how to self-publish. In any case, the owner of a small publishing house, Bill Huckaby (of the Cowboy Bookworm) and I teamed-up to present the pros and cons of using a publisher, self-publishing, or doing something in between.

I warned the audience of the expenses involved in self-publishing, such as paying readers, editors, indexers, formatters, and artists to create the book. Billy offered that none of these expenses need be taken if the writer uses software packages to create the manuscript. He is correct. With three warnings: (a) The learning curve on these packages can be long and (b) using them to create the final manuscript can take many hours. (c) In addition, if a person self-publishes, marketing expenses---which can be huge if a book is to be popular---are the responsibility of the self-publishing person.

That said, I would rather spend these later years of my life writing and not doing macro-programming and micro-marketing, so I employ a cadre of contractors to help me with many of these tasks. Of course, my choice comes at a price (I will be happy to share my views of self-publishing with you if you are considering rolling your own.)

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<sup>2</sup> I learned later this gifted and witty musician is a noted scientist who works with stars, planets, and other pieces of the universe. I learned his name, but will not state it here, in deference to his privacy.



Stick

Construction  
glove

Wire

Tub

**Figure 4.**  
**Ernest Tubb?**

Figure 5 shows Billy and me speaking to an audience of about 17 people. We packed ‘em in Billy!



**Figure 5.**  
**Billy and me**  
**at the**  
**podium.**

### **Presentation Ceremonies**

The Cowboy Symposium devoted part of Thursday night to the presentation of awards, one given to my friend Jim Harris and the museum in which he is the Executive Director (as noted in Report One)

I have attended two of these sorts of awards this year. The majority of the crowd consists of relatives and friends of the award recipients, recipients of past years' awards and their relatives and friends. The recipient often cites his/her colleagues and loved ones who helped garner the honor. The virtual creators are often asked to stand. Thus, in one fashion or another, all present at these awards receive an ovation. A win-win situation if ever there was one.

Also, an award was presented to a ranch that had shown outstanding ranching operations in past years. The winner for 2012 was the OS Ranch located around Post, Texas. A member of the Dalby family accepted the award. In his acceptance speech, he said the trophy could be proudly displayed in the ranch's corporate office.

Corporate office? On a ranch? Things have changed in the wild west.

### **Cowboy, Showman. and Painter**

Across the aisle from my booth was the booth of Bruce and Vernella Brannen. Bruce is shown in the top left photo of Figure 3 in Report One. He spent much of his time performing rope and whip tricks. His wife and he also displayed his artwork at their booth. They are shown in Figure 6.



I was impressed with Bruce's agility. He could one-foot jump through twirling ropes with ease. After we became better acquainted, I asked him about his background and his athletic ability. He works out a lot, so that answered one question. He began this line of work as a working hand, roping steers and such. So, his showmanship had a genuine background behind it.

**Figure 6. Two fine examples of the West.**

Bruce told me he had to frequently practice his roping but his whip-work came naturally. As a boy, Lash LaRue was his hero. I told him I was adept with a quirt (a midget whip of about 18 inches). He was polite but unimpressed. After his gentle rebuff, I was tempted to one-up him by proclaiming (a) Whip Wilson was my idol, (b) Whip came to my home town when I was a boy and performed live on the Mesa movie theater stage, and (c) Whip could out-whip Lash's lash any day of the week.

But I held my tongue. Bruce was holding a very long whip in his hand.

## Exhibits

The Cowboy Symposium featured exhibits and wares of scores of authors, cooks, artists, candy makers, historical societies, trade associations, jewelers, charities, hat makers, publishers, museums, church groups, cancer foundations, saddle makers, and one veterinarian.



**Figure 7. Doctor Fletcher & staff.**

The veterinarian's booth was rented by Dr. Christina Fletcher, who owns a veterinarian clinic in nearby Wolfforth, Texas. Figure 7 shows Doc Christina on the right, along with some of her staff. I thought advertising her vet services at a cowboy show was a fine marketing idea. After all, cowboys love horses, and Christina fixes horse problems.

The doc is not a big woman, actually diminutive. Fixing horses is not a chore for the faint hearted or faint bodied. Christina has the strong spirit to deal with taking care of large animals. Plus, we learned neither of us gives one inch of slack to people who abuse animals and children.



**Figure 7. The Lonesome Dove wagon.**

One of the best exhibits was the display of western miniaturized models of cowboy wagons, carriages, and carts. One of these models is shown in Figure 7. It's a replica of the wagon in the movie/book titled "Lonesome Dove." Woodrow used such a wagon to take Augustus back to Texas from "up north" to be buried in a proper Lone Star State grave.<sup>3</sup>

The National Cowboy Symposium might lead the New Jersey bowler to think, because its theme was "cowboy," the event was akin to the characters and culture of the old western (contrived) movies. It was both phony and real. Bruce, again shown in Figure 6, is a real-life image of a working cowboy. Yet he has taken his talents to the stage to personify and perpetuate the myth as well as the reality of the American West.

I lingered here for three days. I discovered how much of the cowboy way of life was roped around me. I paused to think about this old cowboy saying, "You miss a lot when you travel at a gallop." For these three days, I took a slow walk through the National Cowboy Symposium and Celebration. I'm a better drugstore cowboy because of my unhurried trip this week to Lubbock, Texas.

## Your on the Street Reporter

<sup>3</sup> I was persuaded by my publicist, Sylvia, to use upper case letters for Lone Star State. I did so, only if Texans will use upper case letters for New Mexico, The Land of Enchantment.