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In song and poem, Nebraska cowboy gives life to lore

By Wendy Navratil

On a bitterly cold winter night in western Nebraska, the echoes of Howard Parker's guitar might be heard reverberating through the otherwise silent Niobrara River Valley from a ranch 12 miles south of Gordon.

Inside what used to be a country schoolhouse, Howard, 56, might sit strumming his guitar or purposefully copying lyrics from tattered scraps of paper in the four hours before sunrise, with the heat of the wood-burning stove penetrating the brisk early morning air.

A mandolin hangs on the wall above the rather unobtrusive desk in the corner where Howard sits. His father's newly strung banjo is propped against the wall.

Across the 20 feet to the opposite side of the old schoolhouse, more than 100 guns are displayed on hooks above a workbench. Scores of tools are scattered across the surface.

And the well-worn but polished saddle of Howard's grandfather, who built his first house two miles down the road in 1885, is mounted proudly atop its wooden stand.

At first glance, only the dim electric lights hint at the evolution of the schoolhouse-turned-gunhouse.

At closer inspection, a collection of albums, 8-track tapes and cassettes, crowded into the spaces surrounding the stove, provide more clues.

And finally, a modest cassette player perched atop the desk, and an amplifier peeking out from behind the stove unmistakably dispel the antiquity of the room — the room where Howard's nearly 90-year-old father attended country school, when he and the 20th century still were in their youth.

Howard's wife, Jean, sleeps soundly in the house only a few yards away. She no longer stirs when Howard rises at 3 a.m. and treads softly out to the old schoolhouse with only his beagle trailing him.

In the familiarity of his gunhouse, Howard finds the solitude in which to record and play his poems and songs, some of which he may have composed while feeding cattle the previous day. Howard's beagle, Beauregard P. Bugleboy, who prefers to be called Bo, catches each premiere performance — sleepily and uncritically receiving Howard's latest works of Sandhills art.

THE PASSIN' OF AN ERA

He was old when I first had seen him
or at least seemed old to me.
And he never really looked
like what a cowboy ought to be.

He didn't buy no fancy outfits,
like us young guys was want to do.
Said "Hell, this ol' Hamley will last as long
as what I figure to."

His string of mounts looked as sorry
as some old "Western Horseman" joke
But he could ride 'em all day and not be a foot
and they would pull til somethin' broke.

He wasn't much for poetry, philosophy or song
Just said "It's a great country to grow old in Kid
cause it sure don't take too long."

He had that kind of loyalty
you don't see much anymore.
And you can bet he'd give his dying breath
to the brand that he rode for.

But all things have to end
and when it came his turn to go,
Folks filled that little country church
and they stood out in the snow.

And we knew just like the preacher said,
that "we'd all lost a friend."
And watched the passin' of an era
for we'll not see his likes again.

— Howard Parker

A rancher, cowboy poet and singer, Howard Parker is quietly preserving the legacy of the old-fashioned cowboy, while capturing the joys and struggles of the the modern-day one.

A better qualified historian is difficult to conceive of. Despite a few brief wanderings from the Nebraska Sandhills, the Parkers have called this land home since Howard's grandfather arrived.

"I couldn't explain it," Howard says. "I just like it here better than anywhere else I've ever lived. People have to like it somewhere. People even live in Minnesota, you know."

Howard's grandfather traveled westward to Nebraska from Iowa in 1885 to take up the federal government's offer of free land under homestead laws. After establishing a ranch and working as a well-digger for a number of years, Howard's grandfather sold his land, and moved to Missouri.

But after only a year in Missouri, he returned to work as the foreman of a large ranch 20 miles east of his original ranch in the Sandhills.

Howard's father, Allen Parker, grew up on that larger ranch. But he returned in 1943 to where Howard's grandfather had established his first ranch. Allen settled on the land two miles up the road from his father's old sod house — the house where he was born.

It is this land that Howard now ranches alone, since Allen, 86, retired about three years ago and moved into town.

But Howard, like his predecessors, strayed from the land for a time.

Straight out of high school, Howard followed a friend to California for a job exercising race horses.

"I lived in San Francisco, Berkeley, Riverside. I thought it was good for a change, but I never had an intention of living there."

When Howard returned to the Sandhills at age 25, neither the land nor the people were the same as he left them.

"I hardly recognized anybody," he said. "Not too many people stick around here anymore."

But it is those people, some of whom come and go, others who stay forever, who serve as the inspiration for his poetry and songs.

"I write about things I've seen happen, or sometimes I create characters out of my own imagination," Howard says.

"I do it because I enjoy it. You'd have to read the poems, listen to the tapes, and if you don't understand, well. . ." he trails off with a chuckle and a shake of his head.

While Howard considers himself neither a historian nor a singer, his audience is broader than just his dog, Bo. Howard's poetry has appeared in various Western magazines and newspapers. And at annual cowboy poetry gatherings in Nevada, Colorado, New

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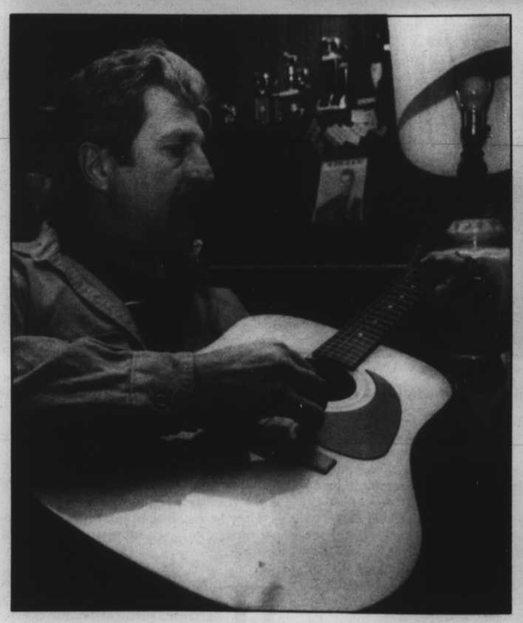

Photos by Julia Mikolajcik

Top left: Howard Parker uses his gunhouse as a place to relax and work on his music.
Top right: Parker stores his collection of guns in many place around the ranch.
Bottom left: Parker kicks back and plays his songs.
Bottom right: Howard and his father Allen take a walk around the ranch with Bo, Howard's dog.