

Annie Wilson - holidays

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

The winter nights are cold and clear. A blanket of snow covers the hills. When singer-songwriter Annie Wilson observed this winter scene, it provided the spark for her to write a Christmas song about Kansas. This is a special holiday edition of Kansas Profile.

As we have previously profiled, Annie Wilson was tabbed by the Governor of Kansas as Flint Hills Balladeer because she writes and performs songs about the Kansas Flint Hills. Annie and her husband John Wilson live in the heart of the Flint Hills in Chase County. Their ranch is located near the rural community of Elmdale, population 55 people. Now, that's rural.

Annie taught at public schools in Burlington and Madison and at Butler County Community College in El Dorado. In 2000, she was hired to teach language arts at Emporia High School where she taught until her recent retirement.

Annie had learned the guitar at age 11. She enjoyed music and had played with a duo in the 1980s, but she suffered from stage fright while performing.

The Emma Chase café in nearby Cottonwood Falls started having Friday night jam sessions. The owners, Monty and Sue Smith, encouraged Annie to give it a try. Annie found it to be a comforting environment where she could perform and overcome her fears, and she became an accomplished performer.

She and several partners formed the Tallgrass Express String Band in 2004. In 2005, the group produced its first CD called Music of the Emma Chase. In 2007, the group produced a CD called Tallgrass Express Comes Back.

At that point, Annie was doing a lot of original songwriting. The group's 2010 CD, Clean Curve of Hill Against Sky, consisted mostly of her songs, as did the group's two-CD set from 2014 called Sky and Water, Wind and Grass.

Annie has now written more than 50 Flint Hills-themed songs. Every aspect of the Flint Hills seem to provide inspiration for her. She has written about insects, wildflowers, and nocturnal animals at night. Most of her songs are about the people and culture of the Flint Hills. She has written about skillful cowboys, growing up with horses, strong women, and the Native American Indian.

Annie finds something to celebrate in every season. She has written and performed songs about the growing tallgrass prairie in the spring, the hot days of summer, and harvest in the fall. As for winter, the cold, crisp air and a blanket of new-fallen snow provided the inspiration for the following Christmas ballad:

The deep red buckbrush berries, the cedar's forest green,
The frosting of new-fallen snow in the moonlight's silver gleam.
In these grasslands half a world away from Bethlehem's far hills,
The stars still shine their light to tell of kindness and good will.

The upland pasture's empty, the yearlings shipped and gone.
The prairie grass lies dormant, asleep the winter long.
The cows are in the lowlands bedded 'neath the spreading oaks,

The whitetail doe's beside her fawn there nestled in her coat.

The horses gaze the moonlight and bend to eat some hay.
They take their winter rest and wait for rides in warmer days.
The saddles and the bridles and chaps are in the barn.
The blankets in the tack room keep the baby kittens warm.

The coyote mother lifts her head to sing her winter song.
It echoes cross the hilltops as she holds the last note long.
The parents in the ranch-house tuck their children in for night
With a story to remind them to be thankful and be kind.

God's peace lies here before us
In these gentle hills of white,
In the beauty and the comfort of
This Flint Hills Christmas night.

The winter nights are crisp, clear and cold, and a blanket of snow covers the Flint Hills. For Annie Wilson, each season has its appeal in the Kansas Flint Hills, and she will find a way to sing about it. We salute Annie Wilson and the Tallgrass Express String Band for making a difference by sharing their talents all year long – including Christmastime.

Wishing you happy holidays, for the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.