

By Jan Biles
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EMPORIA — When Annie Wilson and her dog go hiking in the Flint Hills, she takes along index cards and a pen.

TALLGRASS EXPRESS STRING BAND

To learn more about the Tallgrass Express String Band, its CDs and performance schedule, go to www.tallgrassexpress.com.

As she hears the killdeer calling, sees the bluestem blowing in a gentle wind or smells the spring burning, she jots down her thoughts and feelings. Once home, she begins to write the poetry that will eventually become lyrics for the songs she performs with the Tallgrass Express String Band.

Wilson, who co-owns Five Oaks Ranch near Elmdale and teaches language arts at Emporia High School, recently received a certificate from Gov. Sam Brownback recognizing her as a Flint Hills Balladeer for her efforts to share the beauty of the Flint Hills through words and music.

"I was surprised," Wilson said of the recognition. "I am just totally amazed by it, and it's a dream come true."

The Flint Hills Balladeer concept originated with Cottonwood Falls residents Jim and Elaine Adkins and Sue and Mority Smith, owners of the Emma Chase Cafe in Cottonwood Falls, where Wilson and the others members of Tallgrass Express — Charlie Laughridge, fiddle, Carl Reed, bass, and Jim Versch, mandolin — often perform.

Wilson, who grew up in Wichita, said she was introduced to the Flint Hills as a child when she would spend summers at her grandparents' ranch west of Madison.

"I was so enchanted with the Flint Hills," she said.

After high school, Wilson left Kansas to complete an undergraduate degree at Tufts University in Massachusetts and then returned to earn a law degree from The University of Kansas School of Law. She and her husband, John Wilson, moved in 1978 to the Browning Ranch near Madison. She joined Shewmaker Law Offices, a law firm practicing in Eureka and Madison.

It was during her appointment as a guardian ad litem that she decided she wanted to work with young people. She enrolled at Emporia State University to complete requirements for a teaching degree. In 1993, she and her husband moved to Five Oaks Ranch, where they raised three daughters.

After teaching at public schools in Burlington and Madison and Butler County Community College in El Dorado and working as business manager for Tallgrass Beef in Elmdale, she was hired in 2000 to teach language arts at Emporia High School.

Wilson, who doesn't read sheet music, began playing guitar when she was 11. However, she didn't perform professionally until her late 20s because she suffered from stage fright.

At the Emma Chase Cafe's Friday night jam sessions, she said she found a "nurturing atmosphere" where she could overcome her stage fright and



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develop her skills.

"I've been doing (the jam sessions) for 10 years," she said.

Wilson said she began writing poetry in the early 1980s after she enrolled in a Kansas literature class taught by Washburn University English professor and author Tom Averill. Kansas poet Steven Hind also has mentored her through the years.

She began using the poems inspired by her hikes in the Flint Hills as song lyrics about eight years ago, when she joined Tallgrass Express. Her topics range from ranching to the weather to wildflowers to American Indians.

"I don't write the typical song about love, but I have endless material," she said. "I try to get a melody that fits the mood. I write simple folk melodies that anyone can follow or play."

Since 2004, Wilson and Tallgrass Express have delivered more than 200 performances of Flint Hills music. Wilson has written more than 40 songs about life in the Flint Hills, many of which have been recorded on the band's three CDs: "Music of the Emma Chase" (2005), "Tallgrass Express Comes Back" (2007) and "Clean Curve of Hill Against the Sky: Songs of the Kansas Flint Hills" (2010).

For the most recent CD, Wilson contributed 15 original songs and helped create a 20-page booklet of Flint Hills photographs and song notes for it. The CD was selected to promote the annual Symphony in the Flint Hills.

Wilson said she hopes her music helps to celebrate and create awareness of the Flint Hills.

"The Flint Hills — the land and the people — is a good thing in a troubled world," she said.