

Local man sings of tallgrass prairie in bluegrass band

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Contributing writer

From bluegrass to tallgrass.

No, I'm not talking about converting your lawn.

I'm referring to the progression of a singer, songwriter and musician who is part of an effort that is celebrating the Kansas Flint Hills.

Last week we learned about Annie Wilson of Tallgrass Express String Band.

Today we'll meet her fellow lead vocalist in the band, the talented Carl Reed of Manhattan.

Carl grew up in Michigan and studied agriculture at Michigan State. His family was musical. "We did music all the time," Carl said.

After college, Carl volunteered for the Peace Corps and was assigned to a grain laboratory in Costa Rica.

While working there, two things happened: One, he met a visiting delegation of grain science specialists from Kansas State University, and two, he bought a guitar.

The guitar was for his own pleasure and enjoyment.

But when his two-year assignment was up and he was looking for a job, he thought of Kansas State.

Dr. Charles Deyoe was the head of K-State's Grain Science Department, which was ramping up its international work at the time and which had sent the delegation to Costa Rica.

Carl wrote to Dr. Deyoe to express interest in a job, and he was ultimately hired onto the K-State Grain Science faculty where he worked in international grain programs for nearly 30 years.

After retiring, he launched a grain scout-

ing business in the rural community of Buhler, population 1,344 people. That's rural — but there's more.

Meanwhile, Carl continued to play the guitar. He got into bluegrass music, bought a stand-up bass and started writing songs.

"I had tunes buzzing around in my head," Carl said.

"I got involved with a songwriters' association out of Nashville, which helps writers get started."

His songs have now been performed by such groups as Continental Divide and Special Consensus.

Carl enjoyed the music, but when he saw Annie Wilson perform, he saw something more.

It wasn't so much a love of being on stage as much as it was a love of the Kansas Flint Hills which she was promoting through her music.

"When I saw what Annie was doing, I knew I really wanted to support this," Carl said.

"She's trying to promote the authentic Flint Hills experience."

In 2009, Carl joined Annie's band, the Tallgrass Express String Band, doing lead vocals and harmony.

"He is an amazing songwriter," Annie Wilson said.

"In addition to being a great musician, he is our Kansas historian."

In 2010, with Carl Reed as one of its members, the Tallgrass Express String Band produced a CD of 16 original Flint Hills songs.

In 2014, the band produced a two-CD set featuring 30 songs, including five by Carl.

These include Kansas Song about the state's culture and climate; "Song of Samuel Wood," a Kansas

leader of the Underground Railroad and father of Chase County; "Little Ol' Life," a song about the simple joys; and "Freedom Must Prevail," a spirited ballad about the abolitionist movement in Kansas.

It describes the history and construction of the Beecher Bible and Rifle Church in Wabaunsee.

His fifth song is the one he calls his favorite.

It is a haunting tune based on a true story about long-lost love letters that were found when an elderly lady died.

The song is titled "Letters of Long Ago."

The lady lived in Paxico, population 210 people. Now, that's rural.

In September 2013 at Cottonwood Falls, the band held a debut party to celebrate the new two-CD set which is titled "Sky & Water, Wind & Grass."

"It was a smashing success," Carl said. "The place was jam-packed."

For more information, go to Tallgrass Express String Band.

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It describes the progression of this musician from playing bluegrass to being part of a band which promotes the tallgrass prairie of the Kansas Flint Hills.

We salute Carl Reed, Annie Wilson, and the other members of the Tallgrass Express String Band for making a difference with their talents.

Whether bluegrass or tallgrass, they are making beautiful music together.

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