

Lawyer turned musician sings of Kansas Flint Hills, ranching

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Contributing writer

There are many balladeers in the music business, and there are many beautiful Flint Hills in eastern Kansas, but there is only one official Flint Hills Balladeer.

Annie Wilson was named a Flint Hills Balladeer by Gov. Sam Brownback in recognition of her wonderful musical talents and her love of the Kansas Flint Hills.

Annie Wilson (no relation to this author) grew up in Wichita. She spent time at her grandfather's Flint Hills ranch.

"I fell in love with the Flint Hills," Annie said. Her education took her far away, however, as she went to college at Tufts University in Massachusetts.

She came back to KU law school and then practiced law, but found that the part of the practice she enjoyed the most was working with youth.

"I wanted to do something for kids," Annie said. So she made a career change and became a teacher, earning a teaching certificate at Emporia State.

She also met and married John Wilson, who was ranching near Elmdale in the heart of the Flint Hills.

Annie also enjoyed music. She had learned to play guitar at age 11 and played with a duo in the early 1980s.

Then the Emma Chase Cafe in downtown Cottonwood Falls started having jam sessions with local musicians on Friday nights.

These went so well that they became a regular event. One of the artists who joined the jam sessions was Annie Wilson.

"I suffered from stage

fright," Annie said. "But the people here were so open and non-judgmental." Annie started playing and singing and learning from the other musicians.

In 2004, she and others formed the musical group, the Tallgrass Express String Band.

"We always played bluegrass," Annie said. "But those songs were about back in Virginia or my old Kentucky home.

I thought to myself, 'we could write songs about things right here in Kansas.'"

So, Annie began to write.

She didn't get much encouragement from the music industry. "People say, if you want to make it big, you have to write about lost loves and universal themes," Annie said.

"But I didn't care about making it big. The audience I want is local."

Annie Wilson wrote about the things she knew and loved: The tallgrass prairie, rural lifestyle, farmers and ranchers, life on the ranch and the wildlife and prairie flowers of the beautiful Flint Hills.

"My husband John has taught me so much about ranching and the land and the people of the Flint Hills," Annie said.

Annie and John know these things first-hand, living near the rural community of Elmdale, population 55 people.

Now, that's rural.

Tallgrass Express produced CDs in 2005 and 2007 which mostly included traditional songs that others had written.

But the songwriting bug had bitten Annie and she started to write and then record her original work.

In 2010, Tallgrass Express produced a new

CD of original songs of the Flint Hills, virtually all of which were written by Annie.

"The Flint Hills are worth singing about," Annie said.

In January 2013, at the annual Flint Hills visioning summit, Gov. Sam Brownback named Annie as a Flint Hills Balladeer.

True to her title, she kept writing and recorded 24 more Flint Hills songs which were featured in a two-CD set produced by Tallgrass Express in 2014.

She has now written more than 50 Flint Hills songs.

At the summit, the governor presented Annie a certificate of recognition for her "outstanding contributions to the State of Kansas ... for her endeavors to share the beauty of the Kansas Flint Hills through words and music, and to inspire an abiding love for the Kansas Flint Hills."

For more information, go to the Tallgrass Express String Band.

There are many balladeers in the music business, and there are many beautiful Flint Hills in eastern Kansas, but there is only one official Flint Hills Balladeer.

We commend Annie Wilson for making a difference with musical talent and a heart for the Flint Hills.

She makes a wonderful musical ambassador of Kansas.

And there's more. The most recent CD includes original songs by two authors: Annie Wilson and one other.

We'll meet her fellow songwriter next week.

The writer is director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.