

NIGHTLIFE

Songs of the Flint Hills

■ Tallgrass Express String Band releases new CD at the Artichoke on Saturday.

BY JOE STUMPE
Eagle correspondent

As much as she loves playing bluegrass, Annie Wilson couldn't help noticing that Kansas rarely if ever shows up in the traditional repertoire of songs.

So Wilson decided to write her own songs, set in her beloved Flint Hills. The result is a new CD, "Clean Curve of Hill Against Sky," recorded with the Tallgrass Express String Band, the group she helped form six years ago.

The four-piece band will hold a CD release party Saturday at the Artichoke. "I just decided to write what I know about and want to celebrate — the land and the culture," Wilson said. "It didn't seem like anybody else was doing that so I just got real into it."

Wilson, who plays guitar and sings, is joined in Tallgrass Express by Charlie Laughridge on fiddle, harmonica and mandolin, Loren Ratzloff on banjo and dobro, and Carl Reed on bass.

The members met during jam sessions at the Emma Chase Cafe in Cottonwood Falls and at a barbershop in Council Grove. Wilson, Laughridge and Ratzloff have been together since the beginning. Reed joined a year ago.

For the most part, the band has played in and around the Flint Hills — community festivals, private parties, dances and a regular gig at the Emma Chase Cafe. The Artichoke gig will be their first in

If you go TALLGRASS EXPRESS STRING BAND

What: CD release concert by the band based in the Flint Hills

Where: Artichoke, 811 N. Broadway

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

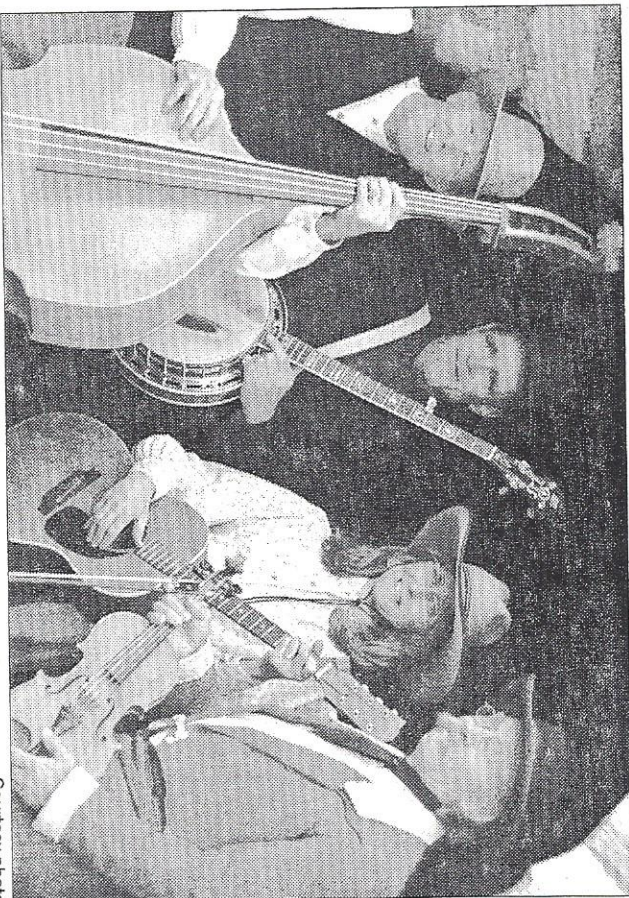
How much: \$5. Information, www.tallgrassexpress.com.

Wichita that's open to the general public.

Wilson grew up here and attended Southeast High. But her family's had a place in the Flint Hills for generations, and she's made her home there more than half her life. She teaches English at Emporia High School and is married to a full-time rancher.

Life in the Flint Hills, as seen through her eyes and via stories passed down by others, is the dominant theme of her songs. "Runaway Nell" is about "a horse that I rode as a kid that ran away with me," she said. "Chase County Courthouse Ball of 1873" is about a dance held in the gorgeous Cottonwood Falls courthouse — one of the most photographed buildings in Kansas — on the day it opened. "Getting a Count" is about keeping track of cattle that are fattening on the prairie grass.

There are songs about an Indian trail, birds that are unique to the area, and



Courtesy photo

The band Tallgrass Express consists of Carl Reed on bass, Loren Ratzloff on banjo and dobro, vocalist Annie Wilson on guitar and Charlie Laughridge on fiddle and mandolin.

the life her father lived on the land. There's even a tune about grass — "Big Bluestem."

"I just think people should learn more about grass," Wilson said.

With a laugh, she admitted that her fellow band members sometimes accuse her of hiding classroom lessons in her songs.

"They say you're being a teacher on there," she said. "But I love spreading the word."

The one instrumental on the CD, "Home From the Z-Bar," was written by Laughridge as the band returned from playing a dance at the Tallgrass Prairie Reserve.

Wilson described the band's sound as

"really traditional and not commercial or pop — (like) bluegrass and maybe some really early country and western."

Wilson hopes to pen more songs based on oral traditions of the Flint Hills, crediting Jim Hoy, an author and professor at Emporia State, with turning her on to the value of local lore. She notes that the Flint Hills are a popular destination for Kansans from every part of the state, whether drawn to picturesque Cottonwood Falls, the rodeo in Strong City or the sublime Symphony in the Flint Hills.

"I think most Kansans are starting to be more aware of the Flint Hills and value them as a pretty special place," she said.