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"Cowboy Heaven: What's the Music Like There? (And Who's Playing It?)"

John Kendrick

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Gene DeGruson Memorial Lecture Twelfth Annual - October 8th, 2009

"Cowboy Heaven: What's the Music Like There? (And Who's Playing It?)"

John Kendrick, speaker

and performer Alva McNeely, Board Member, Marmaton Chapter, Kansas Old Time Fiddlers and Pickers

Sometimes called the "Granddaddy of the Hillbillies," Carson Robison was a fundamental influence in establishing the bases of Country Music. Born in 1890 in Oswego, KS, he learned the basics of playing fiddle and square dance music from his father, a champion fiddler in Chanute, KS, where the family had moved. Stints at farming and work in the oil fields supplemented income from playing dances and play parties around the area, and his musical skills improved to the point that he began to perform on radio by the early 1920s. On the basis of his spectacular whistling skills, Robison landed an on-air job at Kansas City's WDAF as a performer and sideman. In 1924, he joined forces with Vernon Dalhart, a 1920s Victor recording artist, moved to New York, and proceeded with a wide-ranging and successful career as musical arranger, solo performer, and key interpreter of an emerging rural vernacular music, and cut hundreds of sides for various record companies while touring and broadcasting. Though he escaped super stardom by later standards, some of his compositions realized great success and were recorded by other artists, including "Little Green Valley," written in 1928, and 1948's "Life Gets Tee-Jus, Don't It." He wrote more than 300 songs and remained active in the music business until the time of his death in 1957 at the age of 66. In 1983, the Country Music Foundation recognized Robison's contributions as a pioneer singer and songwriter of country music by inducting him into the museum's Walkway of the Stars.

One of the favorite topics of research in our Special Collections Department has always been the life and music of Carson Robison. People from all over the United States, as well as England, Australia, the Scandinavian countries; just about anywhere there is an interest in square dancing or Western American music, write to us via e-mail, regular mail and instant messaging asking us about him and our collection of his sheet music and recordings. Carson was also a talented writer of patriotic music during World War II, prompting many members of the "Greatest Generation" to enquire about him when they want to organize a reunion and need to track down their regimental theme song.



John Kendrick, our lecturer and expert on the life and career of Oswego's celebrated poet and singer, received his master's degree in communication from PSU in Spring, 2009. His thesis, entitled *Cowboy poetry as social text: Home on the range*, was an in-depth study of the popular Kansas state song. He found variants in melody and text which gave rise to questions of the factual origins of a work that has come to be universally embraced. More recently, Kendrick's work has centered on Carson Robison and his role in the development of our state song. Kendrick has long been involved in the study of early popular music and performers, and is co-founder of *Echoes of the Trails Cowboy Poetry Gathering* in Fort Scott. He frequently presents thematic songs, poems, and relevant background information at similar gatherings around the country.



Our audience will, of course, hear some recorded music of Carson Robison himself, but we also have some traditional local talent to showcase. Mr. Alva McNeely, longtime resident of Pittsburg, KS and former employee of USD 250 (retired) was born in Morgan Camp, MO. on January 17th, 1930. He taught himself to play guitar, violin and mandolin by listening to recordings, radio and to other performers at musical get-togethers. He practices at home and has enjoyed playing for dances for a good number of years. Although he likes all kinds of music, he grew up with country music and that genre remains his favorite. Besides Carson Robison, his favorite artists are Ernest Tubb and Hank Williams, Sr. He is a Board Representative for the Marmaton Chapter of Kansas Old Time Fiddlers and Pickers, which is based in Ft. Scott, and has several chapters through the state. On a personal note, on June 9th, 2009, Alva and his lovely wife Virginia celebrated their 58th wedding anniversary. He and Virginia have four children, all of whom play or have played music.