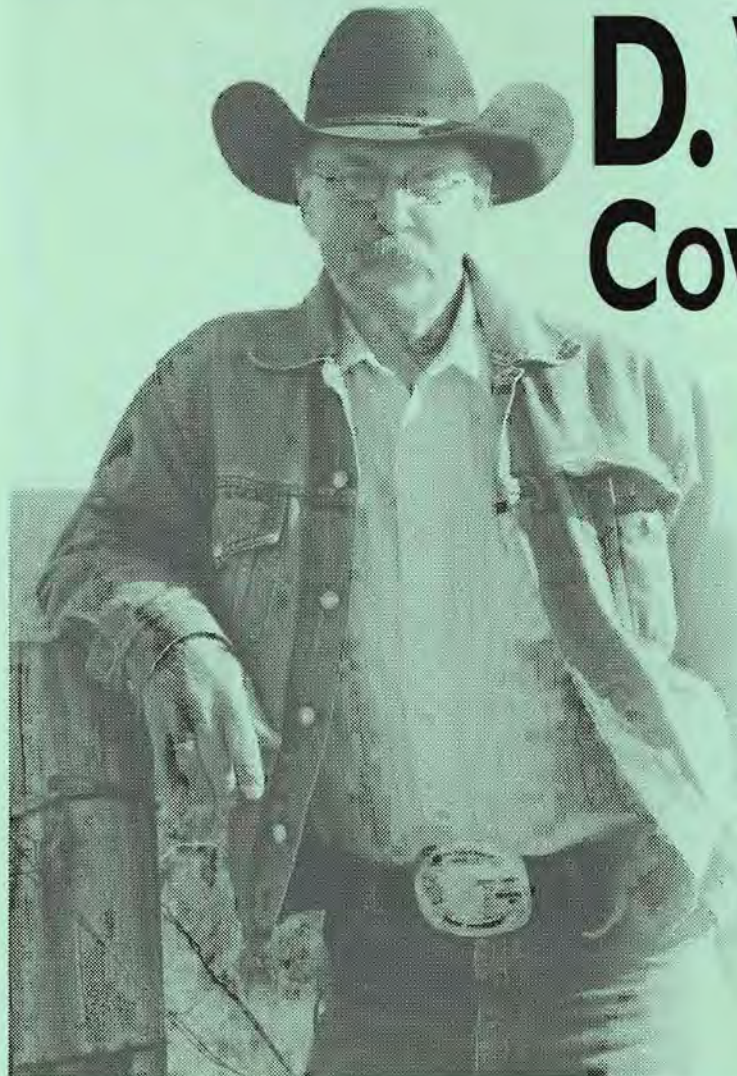


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D. W. GROETHE

COWBOY SONGS AND POETRY FROM MONTANA

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D.W. GROETHE: MONDAK ORIGINAL

D.W. Groethe is a singer and writer of cowboy songs and poetry, a MonDak original. He lives in Bainville, in northeastern Montana, six miles from the North Dakota border. That part of the Great Plains is called MonDak by some, referring to the fact that eastern Montana and western North Dakota are more like each other than like the other parts of those states. To people who live there, MonDak means they experience a different regional, environmental and cultural reality than the rest of the states of Montana or North Dakota. Prairie and badlands underlie the big sky, and there are fewer people, with more quiet, longer distances and fewer four-lane highways. There are several Indian Reservations in this part of the world, and it is definitely cowboy country. D.W. is one. His original tunes and stories of life on the range and warm, dryly-textured voice evoke the feeling of life on the prairie.

D.W. is also a Norski, a Norwegian whose family settled to ranch in the badlands area of Western North Dakota. He was born on the family farm, just across the line in North Dakota, where his grandfather, who came from Norway, established a homestead in 1903. He came by his musician ability through his grandfather, who played the organ in church, and his father, who was a fiddle player and singer. It was his mother, however, who facilitated his musical training, buying D.W. a piano when he was young. He started piano lessons in the first week of second grade and took them for ten years.

After graduating from high school, back in the "long-hair, hippie days," he worked as a keyboard player in several successful country-folk-rock bands and studied off and on for a theater degree from the University of North Dakota. His theater training helped him to learn how to perform and sing, but realizing that he sounded like every other man who sang theater music, he decided to go back to cigarettes and folk music. He did a lot of hitchhiking in those days and noticed that it was easier to travel with a guitar than a piano. He bought a Peter, Paul and Mary book, learned Travis-style guitar picking and immersed himself in Dylan and old style country music (not country-western). "I was in some good bands," he says, but "I never got to do my own music. Because I write in an old style." He says Hank Williams is maybe his biggest influence.

After his mom and dad died, in the estate he found some boxes of poems he'd written in grade and high school. Taking the advice, "Write about what you know"

he decided he could write songs about his life on the plains. He has been doing it ever since.

These days, the Groethe family place in western North Dakota is leased out to another member of the family so DW works as a ranch hand on three different ranches, which he says is economically efficient for ranch owners and the ranch hand alike. He says he likes being out fixing fence, where he can experience the natural world and a lot of quiet, which lends itself to song and poetry making. He says, "I love fencing, I get out there, I am by myself, I can sit and holler and yodel. It is kind of like learning to fiddle. You gotta be out in the middle of nowhere." He has at least four CDs released and was a big hit at the Western Folklife Center's Cowboy Poetry Gathering in 2003. His poetry and songwriting have developed into a unique and witty take on the life of a single man who works on the range in the early 21st century.

D.W. moved over to Montana in 1991. The Montana side of the border suited him and he stayed, accompanied by a faithful dog. D.W. says, "I am a bachelor and I got a dog for a roommate. Things are working out just fine. If he had opposable thumbs, I'd have a clean house." Folklorist Jens Lund, who interviewed D.W. while doing fieldwork for the Missouri River Traditions, says, "this guy is the real deal." He is, and Montana is glad to have him.

Alexandra Swaney

Director of Folklife Programs Montana Arts Council

Alexandra Swaney received her Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Colorado in 1975, based on fieldwork in Mexico, where she interviewed elders in the city of Saltillo, Coahuila to discover cultural attitudes toward aging, and found that their stories were far more interesting than her dissertation topic. She has been Director of Folklife Programs at the Montana Arts Council for the last nine years.

The American Folklife Center was created by Congress in 1976 and placed at the Library of Congress to "preserve and present American Folklife" through programs of research, documentation, archival presentation, reference service, live performance, exhibition, public programs, and training. The Folklife Center includes the Archive of Folk Culture, which was established in 1928 and is now one of the largest collections of ethnographic material from the United States and around the world. Check out our web site www.loc.gov/folklife

