

# THIS RANCHER TALKS THE TALK IN RHYME, AND VERY QUICKLY!

Story and Photos by Mark McMillan

If you've ever been to an event where Frank Gleeson was entertaining then you'll know what I mean here. If you haven't, and you like humour, then I'd suggest you go any chance you get. I had heard Frank on stage several times but the first time I got a chance to sit and talk to him was at the Williams Lake Bull Sale over ten years ago. It was here that I realized that he really does talk like that - I thought it was just for stage shows! If you do take in a show all I can say is keep up, or lose out on some pretty fun and interesting stories!

Frank Gleeson was born in Northern Saskatchewan where he grew up with horses and cattle. He moved to the Kootenays at an early age and took up a job as a faller in the forestry industry to earn a living. In the back of his mind there was always the idea he would someday run his own ranch.

It was in 1959 that he made this dream come true when he moved to the Williams Lake area. He bought a good size spread, married a good wife, Betty in 1961, and had four great children; Danny, Kelly, John, and Colleen. They still live on the Lone Birch Ranch where they've been since 1984.

They worked at building up the place together, and Frank says, "It was a struggle, but we did finally own it, instead of the bank". They always calved in early February in order to have big calves to sell at the fall sales, which meant lots of cold, hard, days and nights and a lot of hard work but they enjoyed it. They had a commercial herd of cows, running bulls to suit the market - mostly Charolais cross, as the buyers were looking for big yellow calves. Frank said, "The cows were mostly Char cross, so most were blonde! I had always heard that Blondes had more fun! Not sure if they had more fun than the Herefords, but they sure did raise good calves!"

They didn't have a big range so until they put in irrigation they were always short of grass. To protect the hay fields they had to move cattle to summer pastures. Betty would drive the truck and open the gates. Frank would round up the cattle and head them out. He says he had a good wife, a good saddle horse, and a good dog, but not so good a truck - but it always made it back home.

Even when he was young Frank wrote poetry. Cliff Claggett, a chuck wagon racer, used to tell Frank at the chuck wagon banquets to "do those recitations for us". Although pretty shy in those days, and thinking that those guys didn't want to listen to some kid, Frank was pretty hesitant, but in the end they would talk him into it and the crowd loved him - he had no idea that he was doing what is now called cowboy poetry.

He started seriously entertaining in 1994 when his oldest son and a local vet, signed him up with a poetry crew at a local hometown fall fair. The audience seemed to like his stuff, and it was then that he became hooked. The only problem was he got talking so fast that people couldn't keep up. The other enter-

tainers tried to slow Frank down. They gave him a stool to perch on and that did seem to slow him down ... well a little bit anyway - on his first recorded tape folks that knew him said he was talking about half speed. Man I just can't imagine what he was like before!

When he started writing cowboy poetry he used the library of experiences that they had gathered on the ranch - the backwards calves, snotty cows, and cold nights. As the years went by there were more and more stories to put to rhyme ... stories like the girl that got her bra caught on the saddle horn, and the night he came home drunk and had to duck the frying pan, or when he sent his girl friend out to the outhouse ... but forgot to tell her that he had cut it up for firewood. Or there was the time he tried to ease the pain for his saddle horse and the horse got drunk and wrecked the place - even drove the boat up on the dock... well...most of Frank's poems come from happenings around the ranch anyway. One thing for sure - all his material is original.

Soon he started getting invited to more and more events further away from home, so he started performing on the road. He learned humor would get you on most anywhere, and as most of his material was humorous, it made it easy.

Frank was asked numerous times to write poems for special people and special events. He has written poems about; The Classics Rodeo Drill Team, rodeo cowboy Bud McKague, ranching pioneer Dick Ardill, his friends Dick and Eunice Threlkeld, Randolph Mulvahill, Ray Pigeon, and Ray Curtis, a few of which are also in the BC Cowboy Hall of Fame. He has also written poems for several 50th wedding anniversaries, and a poem called "Ranchland in Heaven" has been requested at numerous memorial services.

Frank has entertained far and wide on both sides of the 49th Parallel. He was declared the "Official Poet of Williams Lake" by City Council in 2003. He was nominated for male cowboy poet of the year for the Academy of Western Artists on several occasions. Frank is the only Canadian to have performed at the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada, for five consecutive years. Over the years he has become well known as one of the funniest cowboy poets in the west, and definitely



Frank giving acceptance speech.



Mike Puhallo presents Frank with the Hall of Fame plaque.



*Frank with Hall of Fame plaque.*

the fastest cowboy poet in the west, for his rapid-fire delivery. Frank has entertained many dignitaries too, Mayors, Councils, the Lieutenant Governor, the Premier of BC, Gordon Campbell, and numerous others. He has four CDs of poems and songs, and five books of poetry, all original material.

Frank is also known for his "Little Jig" - and this proves that he loves performing and entertaining, even when others are on stage - at least if there's a fast moving guitar, banjo, or fiddle player involved. As soon as he hears the right beat, he'll hop up out of the audience, or from back stage, and do a little jig. The audience loves it - it's short and sweet, and doesn't take away from the musician on stage. It started when Dick Threlkeld played his banjo and people would say "Frank - go do that little step thing you do!" Frank says he used to be a pretty good step dancer, but over the years it's dwindled to the form of a jig.

Frank Gleeson loved ranching. When asked he said, "We wouldn't trade it for anything. It was a great feeling to see little calves or colts bucking around in early spring." He loves entertaining too, and loves telling people the stories of the life he loved ... in rhyme. Frank was inducted into the BC Cowboy Hall of Fame in the Artist Achievements Category at the Kamloops Cowboy Festival, March 12th, 2010.

If you're attending the 82nd Annual BCCA Convention and AGM (see [www.bccaagm.com](http://www.bccaagm.com) for registration info and convention details) May 27th - 29th in Williams Lake, then you're in luck, as Frank will be part of the entertainment line-up Friday night. The Williams Lake Fiddlers, Vern Mulvahill, and Ken Emery will also be part of the pre-supper show through cocktail hour from 6:00 to 7:00 pm. When Frank gets on the stage, grab your chair, hang on tight, and try to keep up - ha ha - good luck! Don't forget a hanky as you'll most likely be laughing so hard that you'll have to wipe the tears away.