Sandhills rancher, poet grew up near Etna.

With his gift of jokes and humor, it should be no surprise that Jack Ostergard was born on April 1.

It should also be no revelation that the long-time rancher was initiated into the Dawson County Cattlemen'sHall of Fame Monday night in Lexington.

"I was extremely surprised but I wa s worried all day that I wouldn't have a voice," said Jack who shared cowboy poetry at the banquet while battling the stomach flu.

Born in 1929 to Harry and Ilene Ostergard who Jack describes as "100% Danish/American pioneer stock," he was the second of six boys who grew up on a ranch with easy access to horses.

Even in the midst of the Great Depression, Jack said childhood was a happy time.

The ranch was in Custer County, a few miles from the Etna store.

In 2003, Ostergard compiled a history of Etna and its people into a book he published.

As children, Jack said he and his brothers were convinced that going on cattle drives was "one of the most wonderful things a boy could ever do."

"You had to be at least 9 years old the first year you went and it wasn't just any cattle drive," he explained. "It was a 35-mile, two-day drive."

Because there were no horse trailers, one more day was required to ride the horses home.

"We got up between 3:30 and 4 a.m. to get the chores done, eat breakfast and get rolling," Ostergard said. "The first year you got to walk all the way because Grandpa felt if you learned to drive cattle on foot, you learned not to make mistakes."

In the late 1970s, a road was installed through the Sandhills and the Ostergards could make a round trip in two hours with a truck, hauling 50 cows per trip.

Growing up around livestock helped hone Ostergard for rodeo.

When he was 6, his parents took him to the Burwell rodeo which, at the time, was one of the top three rodeos in the nation.

Ostergard said he caught the bug early and never looked for a cure.

"On the ranch, cowboys were held up as sports heros and there was more than a little glamour associated with rodeo cowboys," he said.

As a teenager, Ostergard's dad encouraged him to break horses and solicited horses from other people for his son.

During an August 1952 rodeo in Gothenburg, he drew a good bucking horse named "Joe Louis" and made enough of a ride for second-place money which paid for his honeymoon the following week.

Ostergard married Mary Norsworthy of Gothenburg and they had three children: Greg, who passed away at 2 months, Ann and Ross.

The children grew up on horses and were often in a pick-up truck, riding the calving pastures with their dad before school.

Ann (Ostergard) Weekley said they were proud their mom was a teacher and their dad was a cowboy,

In fact, Ann said she wondered how cows had ever given birth without her dad's help.

Jack relates a story about calving when a heifer appeared to be in trouble.

He got her into the confinement chute and got out his obstetrics chain.

Since the calf was positioned normally, he attached the chain to the calf's front feet and stepped inside it.

By placing his feet up on the cow's thighs, he exerted tremendous pressure.

"As the calf's head came through the pelvis, there was an explosion of green grass and water," he said. "I was in the direct line of fire and I took it head on."

As a rancher, Jack was an early innovator in performance testing of cattle.

"For the kids, this meant great fun going to bull sales at Ft. Robinson but for the grown-ups it was a little more serious," Ann said.

Detailed evaluations required a lot more hours and elbow grease in the days before computers, she said.

Jack said bulls were chosen for their EPD (expected progeny differences), their frame scores and birth weights of their calves.

"Extensive record keeping was a family affair but the hard work of weights and measures (for both cattle genders) belonged to the adults," Ann said.

Because of Jack's innovations, the OJ brand of cattle must have worn every kind of ear tag known to man, she said.

"Jack even experimented with freeze branding numbers onto his herd with liquid nitrogen," she

said.

Although Jack had a number of exceptional horses in his life Ming—short for Donamingo—was the only horse he ever asked his daughter to help him name.

"Despite her cumbersome name, Ming and Jack worked as one," Ann explained. "In cutting and roping cattle, they were a perfect team."

Later there was a buckskin mare named Skeeter who was never quite broke but Jack continued to ride her until he retired.

"She continued to buck, with no warning, but only threw him once," Ann said.

She describes her father as a dally roper which he talks about in one of his poetry books, Ruminations.

During branding, calves are roped—usually by the hind legs—by a man on horseback and then dragged to the branding fire where a hot iron mark of ownership was applied.

This requires either a "tie-hard-and-fast man" or a "dally man."

"A tie-hard-and-fast man would have the end of his rope tied to the saddle horn," Jack explained. "He would have to let the rope run through his hand, keeping it tight enough that the calf didn't kick out of the loop."

However a dally roper moves his horse up quickly and gives enough slack in the rope to take a couple of quick turns or dallys around the saddle horn.

Although the tie-hard-man would burn off a bit of skin as he let the rope slide over his fingers, the dally roper would sometimes lose a finger by "dallying" it into the wraps.

"To this day, Jack—a dally roper—has all 10 fingers," Ann said.

As he approached retirement Jack estimated the miles he rode horseback.

With cattle drives four times a year plus his riding of the calving pasture, a minimum of 10 miles a day for 60 days adds up to 600 miles a year.

Helping neighbors with routine branding and roundups puts the total at a minimum of 25,000 miles or the equivalent of traveling around the world on horseback.

In the late 1990s, Jack and Mary sold the cows, rented the ranch and moved to Gothenburg.

Jack became a real estate agent, specializing in agricultural land, and started public readings and publishing books of his cowboy poetry—much of what he wrote while ranching.

His works range from the humorous Old Blue and Mountain Oysters to lyrical Spring and Sandhill Symphony that share the glory of Nebraska's sandhills.

One More Horse to Ride combines verse with the compassion he learned from his mother, Ann said.

She said her father has written several books and has shared his poetry and humor in seven states.

Jack played on Gothenburg's 1945 All-Class State Championship football team that was inducted into the Nebraska High School Sports Hall of Fame.

He also enlisted in the Navy in 1950 during the Korean War.

Through the years, Jack has been honored through the years as Outstanding Young Farmer/Rancher for Custer County, second in the state in Outstanding Young Farmer/Rancher competition and was Custer County Extension board president, a school board member, co-organizer of the Area 20 Nebraska Stock Growers, Cow/Calf Council chair, Nebraska Cattleman of the Year, director of the Nebraska Education and Economic Development Committee, Agricultural Land Valuation Advisory board member and the Nebraska Cattlemen's board member.

He's a long-time Mason, member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion and was active as a Custer County 4-H leader and in the Democratic Party.

In his spare time, Jack continues the battle against what he calls noxious weeds like musk thistle, cedar and leafy spurge

Jack, Mary and Ross live in Gothenburg and belong to the First United Methodist Church.

Jack and Mary are avid bridge players and voracious readers.

Ross is active as a storm spotter during tornado season and Ann lives with botanist husband Carl Weekley in what she said passes for Cow Country in Florida where the cows have "a 'lil more ear on 'em."

Editor's note: The information for the story was provided by Jack Ostergard's daughter Ann Weekley.