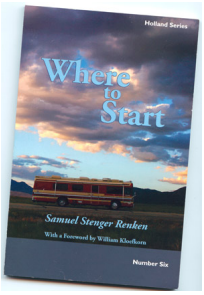

By Carolyn Lee
The Imperial Republican

Former Imperial resident Samuel Stenger Renken wants everyone to be able to read his poetry. "They might not get out of it what I do," but that's OK. It's grounded in the Sandhills, family and horses.

Renken, who lives south of Atlanta, Ga. with his wife and daughters, now sells security and insurance for Mutual of Omaha.

He's not very far away from one of his first loves, horses. He owns a barn and trains horses for others. "Horses won't ever be separate from my life. I spend quite a bit of time with them. They feed my poetry."

As a matter of fact, many of Renken's poems in "Where to Start," a book that won him the Holland Prize, deal with horses and the life of a cowboy.

They also touch on his life with wife Maggie and daughters Zuri, 5, and Ella, 3.

Published in 2011 by Logan House Press, the book contains a forward by the late Nebraska Poet Laureate William Kloefkorn.

Renken was thinking of becoming a veterinarian when he attended Nebraska Wesleyan University, but was unsure about his calling. He said Kloefkorn said, "I've been waiting for you to come and talk to me. You can be a cowboy and have poetry."

Renken finished a Bachelor of Arts degree and a minor in philosophy from Wesleyan, then "on a whim" entered the Master's program in Literature at Clemson University.

He then obtained his Masters of Fine Arts in poetry from the University of Wyoming in 2009.

The Renkens had landed in Laramie when Maggie was accepted into a doctoral program at UW. "Wyoming was a hard place to leave," Renken stated.

One reason was his work with a residential treatment facility for youth who had been abused. Renken would lead them out to the mountains above the tree line. He taught them to ride and write poetry. "We'd try to ride out underneath their problems," he explained. He tried to be a good example to them.

Renken, 35, and his parents Sue and Mike Renken and two sisters left Imperial in 1991, when he was in the sixth grade. He retains great respect for teacher Paula Pralle. "She changed my life. She was an amazing teacher."

He explained that she gave him extended credit for reading advanced books, firing his enthusiasm for poetry.

In college, he realized, "I need to devote a large chunk of my life to writing poetry," and that's when Kloefkorn came in.

Renken said his best poems pour out of him with no revision, such as "Trail Riding." Some need editing, or "more meaning and fewer words," he said.

Riding feeds his poetry. "You don't have to think on a horse and I can get my best ideas" while

riding.

He’s working with a publisher now on “First Pony Out,” a book about the Pony Express of the 1860s and the similarity of the pack trips he took with the youth he worked with in Wyoming.

“Fill the Well,” a book of his poetry, reflects his work as a salesman meeting amazing people in America.

He’s also writing a biography of Kail Greg, a cowboy who “followed his dream and is an excellent storyteller,” who is due to be inducted into the Cowboy Hall of Fame.

Renken’s come a long way since he rode his horse to Lowell Ferrel’s arena on the south side of Imperial.

But, a little part of that remains. He says Zuri is a budding poet and Ella is a cowgirl at heart.