

By Rachel Reigh  
SPECIAL TO THE HERALD NEWS

MORRIS - Guitar always at the ready, Chris Vallillo charmed a local audience as he's done thousands of times before.

Warm and witty vignettes introduced each of his "Midwestern-style" songs. Then, a rich, baritone voice shared the carefully chosen words he had set to music.

The first-time audience of more than 60 didn't have a chance. Vallillo had them swaying in their seats and singing along before the concert ended.

"I'd rather have these smaller audiences. I can see their faces and reactions to what I'm saying and singing," he said after the show.

Large concerts are nice, but it's the intimate links with people and unearthing stories that celebrate the culture of rural folks that inspires Vallillo.

While he packed up stage gear, a guitar case zipper snagged a half dozen times before he chuckled and said, "I'm going to replace that when I get rich."

He expects to be working with that zipper for a long time.

I'm not doing this to get rich and famous. I do this because I enjoy it... I'd rather have it my way."

For 20 years, he has.

## Travelin' Man

He plays his down-home music most days or evenings to audiences at festivals, parks, coffeehouses, libraries, historical events - even funerals. He rolls over roads leading to gigs as far away as nebraska and as close as Morris.

When he played recently at the Morris Library, Wes, Scott and Debbie Steffes waited to hear a song Vallillo wrote

about their brother, father, and brother-in-law, respectively.

"I had read the story about Gerald Steffes in a newspaper back in 1991." Vallillo said. "It was overwhelming powerful and I knew I had to write about it."

The bittersweet story tells of a 55 year-old husband and father who farmed hundreds of acres each year and was known for miles around as never too weary to lend a hand to others. The sudden



Chris Vallillo

crush of thousands of pounds of tractor steel took his life in August 1991.

Within weeks, poignant proof of his life lumbered through his 1,200 acre farm of soybeans and corn in the rumbling of 34 combines.

Farmers came from all over the county to help. Two hundred farm family members came together to work and share a

picnic. And, to the Steffes came compassion and Gerald's final harvest.

Vallillo tucked that article into a desk and didn't forget about it.

"It came to mind pretty often and I would wonder from what perspective to tell that story. I know it wouldn't be like any other I'd written. And I wanted my part in telling his story to do justice to him and his family."

Six months juggling lyrics, another two months plucking out the melody, and Vallillo's questions were answered. He named it *Final Harvest*."

Wes said, "I feel honored about it. That anyone would recognize how wonderful my brother was is a very nice thing."

"(My dad) knew the importance of family and friends and hard work, too. He believed that people should give 100 percent to all of them," Scott added.

## Weaving words

It is that spirit that Vallillo snatches from subjects throughout the Midwest for his poetic lyrics. Using images both real and imaginary, he snared them in a web of simple melodies with guitar, dulcimer and harmonica.

"The idea is to capture things of worth," he said.

Vallillo has evidence that he has done just that. More than \$13,000 worth of his compact discs have been sold at appearances and through the internet.

The CD, *Best of All Possible Worlds*, reflects an effective word-smith who uses precise description with firm bonds to emotions to tell a good story. Then, he supports those moods with "the power of music."

Vallillo says he always knew he wanted to play the guitar and perform. "I knew I had to try anyway. And see where it took me."

To order Vallillo's CD, or for more information, call (217) 3222-4838.