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Alberta's Porter Ranch

Under the Spell of the Buffalo Ground

by Pam Asheton

The skyline is vast, stunning cobalt blue skies, prairie cloud patterns that have no break for the odd thousand miles or so. The ranches in this southeastern corner of Alberta are huge, running 40 to 50 to 60 sections (a section is 640 acres) and where they commonly talk of grazing leases that are the sizes of townships (36 square miles). Bob Porter, whose family has ranched here since the 1880s in one form or another, tells me that to graze a cow here needs roundabout 55 acres a year (the average yearly rainfall is 13 to 14 inches) and you begin to appreciate the stewardship needed to ranch in this ecologically fragile environment.

The Porters came first from Ireland, a sideways result of the Irish Potato Famine. Its grim failure took as many as one million lives; Irish landowners had, in desperation, paid their tenant farmers to emigrate (and where over a third perished in the appalling conditions of the 'coffin' ships as they sailed westwards across the Atlantic).

James Porter - Bob Porter's great-grandfather - was born to Irish parents affected by that decision and who had settled in Ontario. His son Robert, one of three boys born to that family, legged it west at the time the railway lines were being laid into Maple Creek. By 1883, the Canadian Pacific

Railway was edging into Medicine Hat and with it came Robert, as keen as any of his forebears to forge a new life. These were the years of the open range and where the big American cattle corporations edged north across the border and ran their operations.

It was, Bob recalls, "the fashion to have a home quarter section surrounded by open range and in consequence there was very little deeded land. Your quarter section would be 160 acres, and you had 'to prove it up.' The registration was \$10 and 40 acres had to be farmed or broken, and buildings on it, as proof of living upon for three years."

According to the loquacious, charming

and extremely well-informed curator of Medicine Hat's museum, Donny White, the government of that day didn't get past issuing leases as they weren't sure what direction agriculture and ranching and farming would take. Basically, he implies, the political parties were sitting on the fence until they had a clearer picture.

"A lot of ranchers," explains Bob, "would only have a homestead of deeded land." Historian Hugh Dempsey elaborates further. "The earlier settlers went with this situation from 1881. Then in 1897 the Liberals came into power and on top of that in 1905 the big leases [cattle companies, often American] couldn't survive that extremely bad winter and the losses they'd incurred."

"In the 1880s," he adds, "they would have leased 100,000 acres at 1 cent an acre, for 25 years. Those leases, though, could still allow an outside homesteader to come in and claim a quarter section within that

There's an old and apt adage in ranching circles: Never buy a ranch bigger than your wife can run.

He describes reading part of Palliser's journals that mention seeing millions of buffalo just north of here "and I had this idea in my head of them at sunset, westwards over the brow of the hills."

Modern day grazing leases operate a little differently, says rangeland agroecologist Greg McAndrew who works for Calgary's Sustainable Resource Development. Leases run for ten years then are renewable, providing the conditions of proper fencing, that the leaseholder is running his own livestock and, finally, that the cattle capacity allowed is correct. The rancher will be allocated 7200 animal units per year, which translates to 600 (or one animal) units per leaseholder. Leaseholders, though, may purchase another leaseholder's lease, thus increasing their cow capacity, which is called buying another lease by assignment.

lease, although to my knowledge that only became contentious with one situation in Fort McLeod."

With the railways providing access and immigrants flooding in, homesteaders (and fencing) were moving in by the 1900s onwards, and where open range as a concept finished.

The Porter's ranch, known as the RP ranch (and also their brand), was established under precisely those conditions in 1883. That long ago date is stamped on one of three signs that modestly mark their ranch entrance straight off the Trans Canada highway a few miles to the east of Irwine.

The fence line's second sign, "Kalan is the Idol" refers to Bob and Donna-Lee's (his

wife of 49 years) grandson, better known as winner of the Canadian Idol competition in late 2004. "Irvine also has a sign," explains Bob, his eyes smiling, "and both of them keep getting stolen." He's accepting if a little incredulous of the measures teenagers will go to appropriate suitable souvenirs. Times, he recalls, were a little different when he partnered up with Donna-Lee. "When we first married we had electricity, and running cold water and an outdoor privy. There were hordes of grasshoppers that year, they even ate the fringe on my buckskin coat I'd left outside that day." Later in the conversation, he recalls years in the 50s and cattle prices ricocheting downwards from 35 to 16 cents a pound. He remembers his dad in desperation selling everything but the breeding stock in the dustbowls of the 20s and having \$900 left to run the entire ranch's operations for the next year. He recounts telling his sons that just recently, before BSE, and who said at the time, "Dad, things like that don't happen any more."



Don't try this one at home! Bob Porter up close and personal with one of his buffalo.



Bob and Donna-Lee Porter, who met on a blind date are still going strong 49 years later. That they still mightily enjoy each other's company is obvious.



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It is, though, the third sign, the Sundance Buffalo Ranch sign has been displayed since 1994 that is also significant in their lives. The Porters decided to move into buffalo; their ranch is blessed with prairie wool laid overtop hills ground smooth by receding glaciers and with the Cypress Hills only 18 miles to the south. From the huge amounts of artifacts and skulls and bones, the ranch was obviously the site of buffalo jumps predating the era when the Blackfoot and Cree began using horses.

The name Cypress Hills originates from an incorrect translation of the French 'montagne aux cypres' ... 'Cypres' was used by the French Canadians and Métis to refer to the jack pine and the lodgepole pine. "There are," remarks Bob with relish, "no cypress trees for a thousand miles. Really, it's the first experience of Canadian bilingualism gone wrong."

With every sale they make from their buffalo breeding stock, the Porters include memento work from Ross Miller along with their invoices. Ross's work is seen worldwide, and exhibited in 23 Canadian exhibitions including Calgary's Micah Gallery. Additionally his craftsmanship is used for museum replica work and for movie picture film authenticity, including – most recently – *The Dreamcatcher*. He reproduces up to 150 variations of native artifacts and can spend up to 30 or 40 hours on special pieces such as peace pipes, which, he says, are often bought by First Nations' buyers.

Bob Porter went into federal politics in 1984 for a decade, another contribution to community. For those 10 years he commuted to Ottawa on a weekly basis, a bruising schedule that left his wife and two sons, (Robert) Lee and Rick (Richard) to run the ranch, and his daughter Marni also away training in graphic design. "The boys were in their early 20s then, they had to grow up fairly quickly," remarks Donna-Lee, and her smile is ever present - a woman who concentrates on the bright side and who downplays nonchalantly midnight calving memories in atrocious weather conditions.

Coming back homewards at the end of Ottawa's sojourn, and driving into the coulee where Stony Creek runs through and the three family houses shelter, her husband glanced up at the west hillside and an image drifted across his mind.

Of buffalo, as they had originally foraged, up on that ridgeline, grazing and part of a timeless landscape. He describes reading part of Palliser's journals that mention seeing millions of buffalo just north of here "and I had this idea in my head of them at sunset, westwards over the brow of the hills."

With typical Porter practicality they researched buffalo, breeding lines and bought stock from North Dakota. Buffalo, he grins ruefully, gave them more of a learning curve than perhaps they had originally anticipated. "They're extremely herd bound," he emphasizes, smiling, remembering, casting back for memories, "for buffalo, think cattle on a video and put every movement into fast forward." The Porters have an intriguing feedlot, – octagonal, set



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up high and well isolated as part of pastures that stretch, fence free, for miles and miles and miles. Buffalo don't like moving independently from the herd and when you run them through chutes, he says, you have to think like they do and build accordingly, or they'll just smash through everything.

"Buffalo," he adds, "you have to go and look at a herd that perhaps you want moving, and they'll tell you if it's a good day to consider such a thing." By now pink is cascading across the horizon, dusk slanting long shadows. Bob climbs into his ranch utility vehicle and drives homewards; over the retreating engine rattle I can hear his grandson's CD blaring out and then it's quiet. Dead still. Just the quiet crunch crunch crunch of buffalo grazing around me.

Overhead the stars are white-bright in a sky that is dark and where no city orange light diffuses their brilliance. I drive down the four miles of dirt and gravel to the ranch gate entrance, think of three generations of Porters living back there in a coulee fashioned by ancient glaciers grinding, and how this family have honoured the balance of wildlife, and cattle, and eco-diversity of prairie wool. And I hope this government will acknowledge in practical terms – financially and otherwise – these ranchers' impact and applaud their stewardship. 

Born an Easterner, transplanted to France and England, freelance writer Pam Asheton has since migrated steadily westwards and now lives NW of Cochrane which is, she says "close enough to satisfy a serious addiction to backcountry and high wild places."