



Perrenoud Ranche House

Preserving the Past

By Pam Asheton

On a summer's day there's no better place to be. Sunlight flickers and reflects back to the old farmhouse's wide wooden deck, layered thick with successive paint generations. Swainson's and red-tailed hawks lazily circle thermals rising atop the ridges surrounding the nearby slough. Its marsh and muskeg bedding runs thick with blackbirds, coots, mallards and small indignant wrens racketing in nearby fir and spruce trees. Whispers of hot wind sing through the six-layered shelterbelt as you crunch down the front gravel drive, and with that comes the smell of sun-baked spruce needles and that delicious smell so unique to Alberta, of hazed poplars and aspens.

It's definitely a family-rich house, this Perrenoud Ranche a bit northwest of Cochrane, two-storeyed and painted a deliciously soft yellow cream. The farmhouse began in 1910, built by the local Chapman brothers, with six loads sweated up the gruelling hill from the nearby town plus select wood and building

materials hauled over from British Columbia and where, it's guessed, thousands of accompanying insect eggs hatched the next spring with whole new expectations.

"The first few years after the house was built," Sunni Turner remarks, "they had such butterflies! Large and beautiful and a sight to

behold." Originally a teacher and schoolmistress, who then sidelined into outfitting with her husband Bobby, she seriously knows her material through many years as President (now past-president) of the Cochrane and Area Heritage Association. Take her genuine smile and warmth, and combine with

Perrenoud Ranch was an unusual two-storey building for its era; it's now gloriously restored as a showcase for local artisans and can be rented for private functions

PHOTOS BY PAM ASHETON

Top

The original stove remains immaculate and in working order

Middle

He's gotten a bit elderly and shabby these days, but the glassy eyes still peer at every visitor who wanders upstairs to admire paintings

Bottom

Rooms feature working artifacts of the period

Bobby's effortless storytelling expertise as the man settles down onto a log or chair and, after a while you know you're there until the moon goes down. They are, in fact, Sunni confides, working on their own historical writings and times spent up in the Burnt Timber and their beloved Panther River country.

These days the Perrenoud Ranche has Stan Phelps, a talented artist-in-residence (and instinctive gardener who still cultivates the original vegetable patch and pots cascading with flowers). With casual charm and an extremely astute brain, he helps the Association during art gallery openings, fundraising home-made pie and ice cream days and November's traditional local craftsmen open day. The Perrenouds' memories of a century back are wall-mounted photographs.

Charles Emile Perrenoud was born into a family of jewellers in 1863, one of eight children, from Besancon in eastern France near to the Swiss border. He spent two years in London learning diamond cutting before, interestingly, deciding to leg westwards to become a rancher. He arrived at the Winterbottom Ranch on Sheep Creek, by Fort Benton, Montana way, in 1886. The Winterbottoms took pupils in to learn horse ranching at \$600 per year and, cannily for the Winterbottoms, those young men did all their ranch work! Charles' brother Ernest came hard on his heels, and the two soon headed towards Cochrane, one towards what would become the Perrenoud Ranche, the other locating at Mortimer's Coulee, and in the process quickly buying 40 horses from a Mr. Critchley at \$100 a head.

Looking at these photographs, one can see the first Perrenoud log cabin is robust and solidly built, capped with a sod roof, with a group of well-bundled-up young men squinting into the sunlight that cold winter morning. The mous-



taches, particularly, are impressive, faces wonderfully full, rich in fact, with character.

Cochrane's historical "Big Hill Country," a compendium of meticulously researched local history and families, notes that, even then, the Perrenoud was an agreeable place to gather, with passing cowboys often dropping in for a meal. Legend goes that after one such dinner a traveller asked: "And what meat was it, Charlie?"

"Bach-er," apparently was the broken English reply. "Presumably," that writer wonders laconically with dry humour, "beef was in short supply and badger stew was a last resort."

Charles 'proved' up his homestead and bought an adjoining quarter section; originally he lived in a tent while building his log



shack. Log barns for the stallions and saddle horses also had sod roofs and apparently 'A' fences stretched everywhere. Log corrals surrounded the buildings (wolves, as recorded the buildings further south down in Longview country, could be amazingly persistent). Then the equivalent of what we know now as round penning, corrals were used for working with horses often untouched until four or five years of age.



The Perrenoud brothers were among the first to establish herds, raising Hackneys, German Coach, Clydesdales and Shires. When Charles married local girl Laura Phipps in 1902, a smart team of Hackneys with white rosettes on the bridles pulled an equally smart new buggy. She preferred to ride, elegantly, sidesaddle as did most respectable ladies of that day.

“Our parents,” happily state the accounts from the three children of that marriage—George, Emma and Agnes—that “Dad planted a garden, Emma weeded it and pulled up all the lettuce. We raised orphan colts, hunted prairie chickens, rode

for miles over open fields ... there were many children’s parties, and gatherings of family and friends.... The house is surrounded by mature trees planted by George. Cedar lining was used on the inside wall. A huge engine was used to drill the well, quite a novelty at the time when most wells were hand-dug.”

Look at those photographs again and you’ll notice a definite lack of trees. The term “bald-assed prairie” was, indeed, apt for their times. Grass fires and earlier generations of millions of bison kept tree growth in short shrift, usually small drifts around springs and creeks only—which was why native people had to go to the mountains for lodgepole pine for their teepees. Gradually, fencing crept in; many of the early encounters between Perrenoud horses and the vicious barbs caused dreadful injuries. The early 1900s were also notoriously wet, muskeg was bottomless and mosquitoes so numerous as to require ‘smudges’ lit constantly for animals maddened by the blood-sucking swarms. Flying ants appeared in clouds; haymaking teams would raise white rags on poles to lure them away. Often, though, face netting was the only answer—for both horses and humans.

The First World War provided a huge cash market for horses later shipped to Europe and France for cavalry regiments, with the heavier drafts used to pull cannons, food and ammunition supplies. Eight million horses are believed to have perished in the “war to end all wars”.

The Perrenoud Ranche Historic Site was bequeathed in the 1980s to the Province of Alberta, one of the beneficiaries George Perrenoud’s estate. The Cochrane and Area Heritage Association, which leases the building and the few surrounding acres in five-year increments, has worked diligently to maintain restoration and to encourage its use as a museum and cultural centre.

For their next project, association members are considering the restoration of the original cabin—with its centrepiece yellow brick chimney, a material and colour distinctive of the all historic houses in Cochrane. At one time, four brickyards operated in and around the town; Peter Collins’ plant produced close to 25,000 bricks a day during the summer months. This original log building sits to the east, behind the two-storey farmhouse.

The Perrenoud Ranche opened to the public in 2005 with a splendid retrospective exhibition of Agnes Perrenoud’s paintings and sketchbooks. In 2010, the distinctive cream-coloured farmhouse celebrated its own century. The Association hopes to bring down from Edmonton more of the carefully stored items from the property to once again enrich its historic interiors. *C

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Top

To the rear of the restored Perrenoud Ranche are its early original buildings. Plans are afoot for these to be restored. In one there’s still a yellow brick fireplace, a product from a period brickyard that operated nearby; all of Cochrane’s “historic” houses feature some of this distinctive yellow product.

Bottom

Each year arrives with a unique combination of colours, popped into wheelbarrows, flowerbeds or whatever’s handy