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Arts & Culture

Colorado Springs guest ranch keeps traditions alive



MANTHOUS SPRINGS: I was returning from a hike up Mount Vigil, the peak you can see from the Ranch at Emerald Valley, near Colorado Springs, when a slender-faced cowboy walked by humming a tune and leading a horse.

At the same moment, a car pulled up and the driver, wearing mask and dark sunglasses, headed out and asked for directions to the ranch, which just happened to be where I was staying.

I would have answered, but at that moment the old cowboy stopped dead, looked at the license plate — "Texas," he muttered — looped the reins around the saddle horn and snatched a piece of gum. Then he pointed down the road. "That way," he said.

"Thanks," said the driver, hesitating. "I'm sorry," he added. "Say, do you know who they call Emerald Valley? Was there a gold mine here? Generators, maybe?"

Curious myself, and all out of breath, I stepped closer, the better to hear.

"Hell no, I couldn't say," replied the cowboy, pulling a dented army canteen off his belt. "I've wandered on myself. Might be for them green trees, a hideaway-like, where a person can get away and think."

"They used to call it Camp Vigil, after that mountain there. Real special to old Penrose, Spencer Penrose was the man who built the first lodge up there on Cheyenne Mountain. Back in the 1890s, that was."

The cowboy paused for another long swallow. "The way they tell it is," he said, "he'd get down here with his friends, sitter up late,

telling stories about mountain climbing and all that. That's a punny fine log cabin he had, the one they still got. It's renovated now, with a red bob, all chrome up, nice and tight. You'll see. No rain gutter in the roof."

All kind of trees shades them log cabins, and your creek has a waterfall and it takes stacked regular with trout. The cabin on the hill is a copious, big enough for weddings and such. The cook's in the kitchen most days, handy with the food. I stop in here and then he makes me a plate."

When the cowboy took another swallow I spoke up. "Is Spencer Penrose the one who built the zoo at the bottom of the mountain, and every time there was a parade he rode the elephants through town?"

"Yes, ma'am," said the cowboy. "He brought the land for these animals. It's what happens to folks from the east when they get to this here west. The land took old Penrose and it took the new owner, too. The rocks, the hills and your meadows, they call you to put down roots."

"You buy an acre, build a cabin, get some chickens and you think you're done. Then the place next door gets a side sign so you buy it, get a rail fence and a cow and call it a ranch. Then that horse dead down by the creek, well, you need another in these parts, so you buy it, too. That's history, remember?"

With that, the old cowboy tipped his hat, nodded to both of us, tucked to the horse and he disappeared down the road.

"Guess I'll see for myself," said the driver, adjusting his sunglasses and revving

the engine. "Can I give you a ride?"

"No thanks, if you'll load," the rancher pretty close now, down around the corner."

Alone again, I got to thinking. That cowboy was right. Gossip is just another word for history, especially in ranch country. In the late 1870s, the dirt track here was known as Gold Road. I'd seen the mine tailings myself, a heap of yellow dirt pushed up just the trail, where our horseback ride turned toward the corral. And for all that, they never did find gold.

After the last gold strike period ended, or riders included a settler, a Girl Scout Camp and finally Spencer Penrose, who leased the 10-acre parcel from the Pike National Forest for his newly created social club, the Pike Peak

Comingo and Mountain Trails Association. The club didn't last, but the cabin survived the years, including an interval as a date ranch, in the 1920s.

After the Broadmoor Hotel changed hands, in 2011, the new owner Philip Anschutz bought the property, eventually restoring and enlarging the lodge and building guest cabins, hoping to create the ranch and its inn, along with an authentic touch of wilderness.

When the work was finished, it was so accurate that I couldn't tell the old walls from the new ones, or the original from the reproductions. The interior furnishings, custom made, not only echoed the era but added a detached touch of luxury. The 10 guest cabins — lined for two, four or eight guests — had their own chimney logs and period decor; all outfitted, of course, with modern amenities.

As for the so-called "police," that's where I stayed. By the time I tried to make a reservation, every cabin was booked, except that one up the hill. Climbing up on a winding stone path, I thought I'd been banished to the barn. Then I saw the flagstone patio — large enough for a 50-guest reception, and opened the front door. The living room, furnished with hand-toued leather chairs, luxurious sofas and a main-sized fireplace, begged me to sit down; the walls, hung with western and Native American art, insisted that I take a closer look.

The kitchen, large-party sized, included a long counter island, surrounded by walls covered with upboards, and counters with three sinks and the latest appliances. With

bedrooms upstairs and down and bathrooms for each there was room for eight.

"After that, no day was like another. You could sleep late, or eat breakfast early, then climb the ridge to see the views. Five or six other trails climbed peaks or crossed through the forest, or you could ride horseback. A hot lunch and farm-fresh salad or sandwich was followed by a game of Scrabble, or walk around the perimeter or a nap in the hammock.

Came 4pm, I fetched the fly rod and headed for the lake where the rainbow and brown trout were breaking the surface. Used the evening fly and came away empty. Cocktail hour followed, inspired by the chef's hors d'oeuvres. Dinner time lasted as long as you could eat or talk, in the dining room or stargazing around the campfire.

Wednesday and Saturday evening campfires, when recording artist and cowboy singer Jeff Houston entertained, were the biggest surprise of all. Come, you're thinking? "No, he, but don't laugh yet."

I was watching the fire two top sparks and sipping a smoothie, expect to hear the usual background thumping, elevator music, usually when Houston tuned the strings and tore into the "Orange Blossom Special," entertaining everyone with his lightning-fast picking and perfect rhythm. Not only did he wow us with some of the smartest fast picking ever — and he had two and three finger work — but he sang each song differently, turning the ordinary lyrics into a drama with an ending.

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