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TRAVEL Thursday

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COLORADO

Guest ranch keeps traditions alive

By ANN Z. COOKE
Tribune News Service

MANITOU SPRINGS, Colo.—I was referring to a lake you can see from the Ranch at Emerald Valley, near Colorado Springs, when a cowboy walked by, leaning a nose and leading a horse.

At the same moment, a car pulled up and the driver, eyes averted behind dark sunglasses, leaned 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 horse placidly—"Texas," he muttered—looked the reins around the saddle horn and unstrapped a piece of gun.

That he pointed down the road. "That way," he said.

"Thanks," said the driver, hesitating. "Did I miss?" he asked. "No, don't know why



■ The lower lake, fed by Little Fountain Creek, is just big enough for boating at the Ranch at Emerald Valley, near Colorado Springs, Colo.

they call it Emerald Valley? What there a gold mine here? Gemstones, maybe?"

Curious myself, and still out of breath, I stopped closer, the letter to him.

"Well, no, I couldn't say," replied the cowboy, pulling a dotted neckerchief out of his belt. "You wandered on it myself. Might be for them, green trees, a lake—any day,

where a person can go away and think.

"They used to call it Camp Vesper, above that mountain there. Real special for old Mr. Peterson, Spencer Peterson. He was the man who built the first lodge up there on Cheyenne Mountain. Back in the 1920s, that was."

The cowboy paused for another long swallow. "The way they tell it," he said, "he'd go down here with his granddaddy up late, telling stories about mountain climbing and all. That's a pretty fine line, can't be had, but one they still got. It's mentioned now, with a real big old chimney up, new and right. You'll see. No rain gutter in there."

"All kind of trees shades them big cedars and your creek has a waterfall and lakes stocked regular cut trout. The cabin on the hill is a job, too. His country for working."

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Ranch

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and such. The cook's in the kitchen most days, busy with the fixins. I stop in now and then and he makes me a plate."

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

"Yes, marim," said the cowboy. "He bought the land for them animals. It's what happens in folk from the east when they get to this here west. The land took old Peterson and it's took the new owners 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 just think you've done. Then the place next door goes a side sign so you buy it, too. That's history, lawdness."

"No thanks, I'll walk," I said. "The ranch is pretty close now, down around the corner."

Alone again, I got to thinking. That cowboy was right. Going to just another word for history, especially in ranch country. In the late 1970s, the dirt track here was known as Gold Road. I'd seen the mine tailings myself, a heap of yellow dirt pushed up past the trail, where one horseback rider turned toward the corral and for all that, they never did find gold.

After the last gold strike petered out, arrivals included a senator, including an interval as a judge ranch in the 1970s.

After the Broadmoor Hotel changed hands, in 2011, the next



■ Recording artist Jeff Houston performs on Wednesday and Saturday evenings at the Ranch at Emerald Valley, Pike National Forest, Colorado Springs, Colo.

owner, Philip Asselstine, bought the property, eventually restoring and enlarging the lodge and building guest cabins, hoping to recreate the ranch and its era, 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 antiques from the reproductions. The interior furnishings, custom made, just felt relaxed the rest but added a decided touch of luxury. The 10 guest cabins—sited for two, four or eight guests—had their own chinked logs and period decor, all outfitted, of course, with modern amenities.

As for the so-called "palace," 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 uphill on a winding stone path, I thought I'd been banished to the here. Then I saw the flagstone patio—large enough for a 50-guest reception—and opened the front door. The living room, furnished with hand-stitched leather chairs, lacquered sofas and a man-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



■ Trail guide Marco keeps tabs on his riders as they pass the gate into the Ranch at Emerald Valley, Pike National Forest.

cupboards, and counters with three stoves 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 not breakfast, walk, 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 fresh-fruit salad or sandwich was followed by a game of Scrabble, a nap around the perimeter or a walk in the hammock.

Come 4 p.m., I fetched the fly rod and headed for the lake where the rainbow and brown trout were breaking the surface. Used the wrong fly and came away empty, expecting to lose the usual background thrumming, clearest music, strung, when Houston tuned the strings and tore into the "Orange Blossom Special," astonishing everyone with his lightning-fast picking and perfect rhythm. Not only did he score so well with some of the smartest flat-picking ever—and flawless ten and three-finger work—but he sang each song differently, turning the most ordinary lyrics into a drama with an ending.

As the guests called out requests,

he called on the vast repertoire he hides under that cowboy hat and performed at what Country & Western, Bluegrass, The Seger, Blue John, the Gentlest Dead—he knew them all.

Listening, I couldn't help wondering who he felt he was. Then I remembered the evening attended by "old Mr. Peterson," founded in 1904 and long gone now, a historic guest ranch and lodge tucked among the pines, beneath money peaks, in Colorado's Rocky Mountain National Park.

For many a golden summer, a worldwide procession of guests came through town's, from mountain climbers and presidents to stage celebrities, opera singers and families with kids, all sitting around the campfire together, sharing the Wors's special brand of hospitality.

Which is just how it felt that night at the Ranch at Emerald Valley, at the end of the track they once called the Gold Road. I think they've hit pay dirt after all.

The city grilly

A half-dozen hiking trails and climbs start at the ranch and explore the surrounding Pike National Forest. For guests, experiencing a visit to Colorado and to the Ranch at Emerald Valley, the 5.5-mile hike from the top of Cheyenne Mountain down to the ranch is a favorite.

For information, visit more about the Ranch at Emerald Valley; about Cloud Camp, the lodge atop Cheyenne Mountain; and about the parent property, the Broadmoor Hotel, in Colorado Springs, at www.broadmoor.com. Rates vary depending on the season and weather.

Included in the daily rates: Transportation between the Ranch at Emerald Valley and the Broadmoor Hotel; a nine-mile drive. On-site activities and equipment, trail hikes, nature walks, fishing gear, horseback rides, all meals, snacks, beverages, wine, beer and bar drinks. Because the Old Stage Riding Stable is a concession, long horseback rides, such as the popular cattle drives, are priced separately.

Getting there: Fly into Denver, then drive or fly to Colorado Springs.

Author Ann Z. Cooke saves her cowboy boots for horseback rides at Colorado's old-time ranches.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANN Z. COOKE

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