



Living the TV legend 20 years later

By Hunter Drohojowska

"Dum-di-di-dum-di-di-dum-di-di-dum- Bonanza!"

Every Sunday night at 9 p.m., my heart thrilled to that theme song, inspired as it was by the pounding of hoofbeats on the wide open plains.

"Here in the West, we're living the best, Bonanza!"

The flickering flame ate away at the center of the map, licking away the words: Ponderosa, Virginia City, Lake Tahoe. Then, through the charred hole in the center of the map would gallop my favorite foursome, the Cartwrights: Ben, Adam, Hoss and Little Joe. I sat there with a bowl of peanuts, a glass of Hawaiian punch, and an unbearable sense of anticipation. I grew up with these guys. I started watching the series in 1957 and followed their progress loyally until 1966, though "Bonanza" continued to be on the air until 1972. In all that time, however, I never thought of the Ponderosa as a real place. I was in upstate New York where cowboys were merely fiction.

Years pass. I forgot about Little Joe and his pinto; I stopped yearning for the sexy and serious Adam. Occasionally, I might read about Michael Landon's divorce, or see Loren Greene's dog food commercials, but these events had no connection with my memories of the "Bonanza" years.

Then, last summer, I was driving along the north shore of Lake Tahoe and saw this sign: Ponde-

WELCOME TO THE

PONDEROSA



ing along the north shore of Lake Tahoe and saw this sign: Ponderosa Ranch, next left.

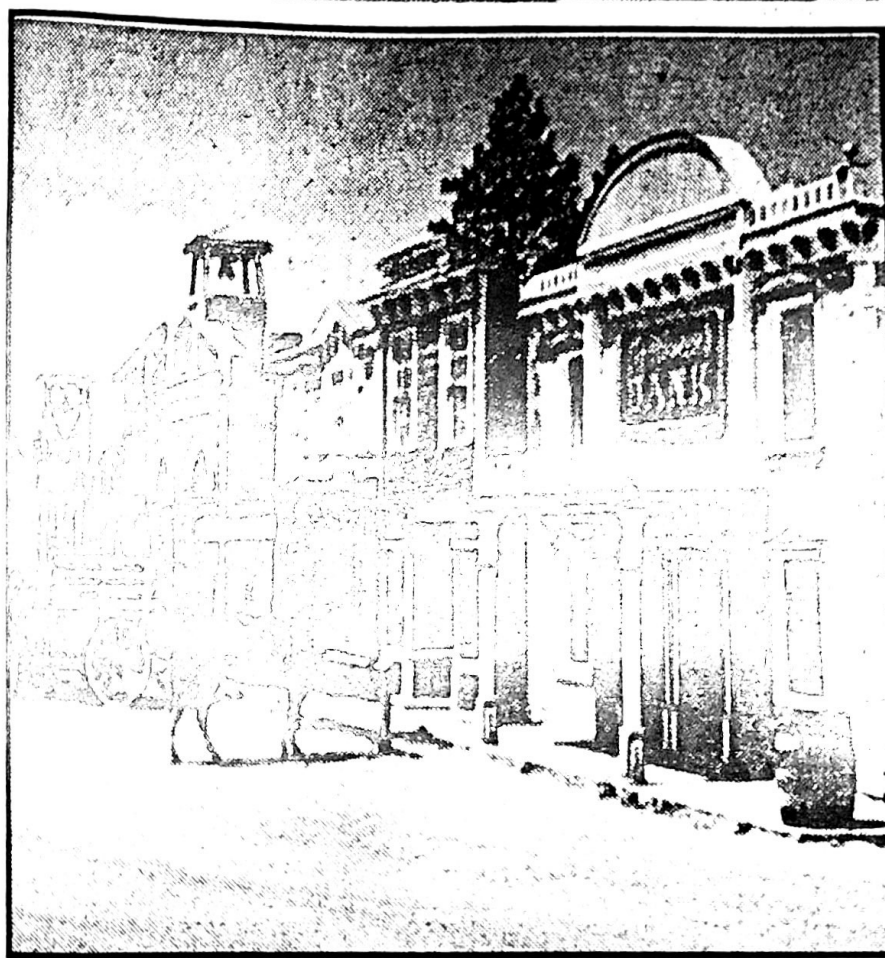
I assumed that the sign was pure coincidence, some middle class retirees who'd named their trailer park after my favorite fantasy. Casually, I inquired of friends and was blown away to discover that the the Ponderosa exists, all 600 acres, along with the Cartwright family home, the general store, saloon, blacksmith shop, wedding chapel and restaurant. Mixing reality with fantasy can concoct poisonous brews, but I plunged ahead.

For me, the most enduring of the "Bonanza" dreams had to do with riding the range. I drafted several reluctant friends for the breakfast ride at the Ponderosa stables. At dawn we gathered sleepily in a line to pay \$17.50 each. The horses, who were also not awake, walked, rather than galloped, along the dusty pine-lined paths. Yet, I was content. At the summit, a wrangler with an Australian accent greeted us with "G'Day" and encouraged us to try second helpings of scrambled eggs, sausage and pancakes, as if we'd been roping and branding since sunrise. They even offered a cowboy-style shot of bourbon in the morning coffee to ward off the barely noticeable chill.

The mists were burning off the lake in the distance and nervy blue jays dove among the picnic tables to carry off leftovers. I kicked a pinecone through the furrows of soft dirt and stared helplessly at the friends who were all sort of wondering what they were doing here, avoiding bourbon at 8:30 in the morning. We stretched, scratched, then mounted up and dawdled back down the trail until, predictably, a plodding steed called Mr. White decided to take off at a gallop with the one friend who was afraid of horses. There was no



Everyone is all smiles as three of the four fictional Cartwrights survey the countryside, above. Pictured left, are Bill and Joyce Anderson, who built the ranch in cooperation with NBC Television and opened it to the public in 1967. At right, some of the other Old West buildings, bell towers and horses on the 600-odd acres.



Hoss to rescue her but she seemed satisfied with the wrangler. (Maybe this cowboy mystique is contagious; anyone at the Ponderosa is imbued with its mythic properties.)

At the foot of the trail, there

were clapboard and gingerbread stores, the stage-set village where the TV series was shot. The place crawled with pot-bellied guys in Bermuda shorts, women in the spandex pants (synonymous with nearby Reno) and undisciplined

children. I was upset to find the restaurant serving Hossburgers and sarsaparilla in tin cups adorned with the faces of the Ben and his boys. Wasn't that sacred?

My bored friends devoted themselves to buying moccasins.

Many of them were teenage children who knew Michael Landon only as the angel on "Highway to Heaven." (One looked at the souvenir program cover with Ben and his boys. Landon was posed with his thumbs hooked

into his gun belt, his rakish Stetson shoved to the side of the head. Dumbstruck, she said, "Gee, he looks so young!")

While the others were shopping, I followed the signs to the Cartwright ranch house. I walked right into Hop Sing's kitchen with its old iron stove, dishes and spice racks. It didn't look too familiar, but my friend pointed out that the room was too narrow to shoot for television. The tour guide said, "This kitchen was only used once in the series, it was too small to shoot in."

The dining room with the long table and carved wood chairs, however, was immediately familiar. But the real chill of recognition came when faced by the massive stone fireplace and the overstuffed red leather furniture in the living room, where so many impassioned Cartwright speeches took place. I was mulling the implications of all this, as a projection screen descended from the stone mantle. The lights dimmed and a celluloid ranch hand named Obie welcomed us on behalf of the Cartwrights to the 'onderosa. The theme music throbbed through the air and I felt goose bumps creep up my neck. There were the burning map, Ben galloping on his buckskin, Adam in his sexy black outfit, and Hoss, "the gentle giant," as they called him. The film proceeded to "de-

California/Nevada



mystify" my favorite TV show, revealing the staircase that leads to a non-existent second floor, the removable walls and trapdoors for taping. I knew I was in for this sort of confrontation with the reality of making TV, but I didn't like any of it. I turned around and saw a stuffed manikin of Ben seated at his desk, his rifles and a map of his ranch pinned to the wall. It was depressing.

If I had to accept the Ponderosa as a tourist trap, then I had to buy souvenirs: Twenty laminated placemats of the Cartwright boys, tin cups, 50 postcards, the official "Living Legend of Bonanza ... Ponderosa Ranch Story," with full color postcards inside ... I had my arms full of salt and pepper shakers, aprons, ashtrays, toothpick holders, diaper pins, t-shirts, scarves, shot glasses, even a fifth of Ponderosa brand bourbon, when my friend rescued me from the reverie. All these purchases couldn't ease the poignant longing produced by this inconquerable nostalgia. I yearned for the days when the Ponderosa was real and the Cartwright men seemed as noble to me as the mythic figures of Hercules and Ulysses.

Hunter Drohojowska writes frequently for the Herald.