

RANCHING SPIRIT LIVES ON

M.D. of Foothills honours its past

GERALD VANDER PYL FOR CREB NOW

Long known for its ranching roots, the Municipal District of Foothills has evolved to offer a diversity of housing choice for every taste - from condo dwellers to acreage enthusiasts.

Yet in its evolution, the region has not forsaken its past, instead choosing to celebrate it at every turn.

The M.D. of Foothills' ranching past is not just history, "it's something to be maintained," said Coon. Suzanne Oel.

"I appreciate that history, and think that the people who have chosen to live here really appreciate it, too."

Covering a sprawling rural area south of Calgary that straddles Highways 2 and 22, and surrounds the

communities of Okotoks, High River, Black Diamond, Turner Valley and Longview, the M.D.'s ranching history is regularly on full display at the Bar U Ranch National Historic Site.

Visitors are treated to seasonal activities throughout the year, as well as insight into the ranch's past, which, at its peak, included almost 64,000 hectares of divided or leased land.

In the harness repair shop, Lewis Pederson can regularly be found working on saddles and regaling visitors with stories of the Bar U and the region's cowboy culture.

On this particular day, Pederson charms two women from Quebec by speaking to them in French - then convinces one of them to climb on to a vintage 1940's saddle.

He says young and old seem willing to embrace those kind of experiences at the Bar U.

"I had a woman in her 80s get on that saddle, and she was wearing a skirt. I had to avert my eyes," he said with a chuckle.

Visitors also hear from Pederson about how Edward, Prince of Wales, first came to, and eventually fell in

love with, the area - eventually purchasing a neighboring ranch.

Or that the Sundance Kid, whose real name was Harry Longbaugh, worked at the ranch while waiting for the spread over his recent train robberies with Butch Cassidy's gang to subside; or about the arrival of John Ware, a former slave from the United States who became a legendary cowboy in Alberta.

The story of the Bar U and the development of ranching in the M.D. of Foothills was the result of an almost perfect storm of factors, said Simon Evans, author of several books including *The Bar U and Canadian Ranching History*.

Then prime minister John A. Macdonald wanted to populate areas of Alberta he felt were threatened by the United States, and also find an industry to utilize the shipping capacity of the new Canadian Pacific Railway.

Overseas in the United Kingdom, the industrial revolution was in full swing, and the greater spending power of workers led to an increase in the demand for beef, just as disease



was wiping out most herds of cattle in Europe.

So in 1881, the Canadian government introduced an incentive in Alberta, said Evans: Grazing land could be leased for a mere one cent per acre per year.

He said that caught the eye of investors from around the world, who had witnessed a similar boom in Texas during the 1860s.

There, the success stories of ranching entrepreneurs led to a modern-day equivalent of the Dot Com boom, including the publication of a book called *How to Get Rich on the Plains*.

"The basic premise was that you've got free grass, and the steer you could buy for a dollar, once fattened up, could be sold for \$30," said Evans.

Ranching companies were formed and quickly snapped up almost all suitable grazing land in what would eventually become the M.D. of Foothills, and both north and south along today's "Cowboy Trail" of Highway 22.

"Everyone wanted a piece of the action," said Evans, including the North West Cattle Company led by the Allan family of Montreal and stockman Fred Simson, who together started the Bar U Ranch in 1882.

Lewis Pederson, working in the harness repair shop at the Bar U Ranch National Historic Site.

WHERE HISTORY COMES ALIVE

Top destinations to view the M.D.'s ranching history

The Bar U Ranch National Historic Site is located south of Longview along Highway 22, and is a living history museum of the ranching past of the region. Visitors can visit the ranch buildings on the site, including a blacksmith shop, harness repair, several barns, post office, a cookhouse and dormitory and more. Interpretive staff and volunteers provide information and demonstrations, including story telling around the Round-Up campfire.

The Millarville Racing & Agricultural Society is more than 100 years old and oversees several venues and long-running events, including the popular Millarville Rodeo, Millarville Races and Millarville Market, which highlights the current agricultural industry in the region.

The Leighton Art Gallery Centre and Museum near Millarville preserves the home of artists A.C. and Barbara Leighton, and exhibits the work of past and contemporary landscape artists.

Horseback riding adventures can be booked through outfitters such as the Anchor D Ranch, Homestead Ranch and others located in the M.D., with rides exploring into the neighbouring Kananaskis Country. For more information, visit www.travelalberta.com.

Check out TheCowboyTrail.com for more information on things to see and do along the trail, considered by many to be the heart of the region.

For information on the M.D. itself, including the latest news, list of services, and other points of interest, go to www.mdfoothills.com.

