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'Bonanza' ranch rides into pop culture sunset

INCLINE VILLAGE, Nevada (Reuters) -- A great symbol of the rugged old West, or at least as it was portrayed by Hollywood, is riding off into the sunset.

The Ponderosa Ranch, an American West theme park where the television show "Bonanza" was filmed, closed Sunday after its sale to a financier whose plans for the property are unclear. The show, which ran on NBC from 1959 to 1973, was the top-rated U.S. program in the mid-1960s.

Before the park closed, it was easy with a little imagination to feel transported there to a time when the American West was still a place to be tamed. Wranglers and a Stetson were proper attire. A sign outside the Silver Dollar Saloon welcomed ladies and not just the ones who earn a living upstairs.

Fans of the long-running "Bonanza," which still airs on cable television, may recall Little Joe and Hoss getting the horses ready while Ben Cartwright yells from his office to see if the boys were doing what they were told in the 1860s West.

"The house is the part I recognize -- the fireplace, the dining room, his office, the kitchen," said Oliver Barmann, 38, from Hessen, Germany, who visited the 570-acre grounds a week before the Ponderosa Ranch closed.

"It's a pity it is closing," he said as his wife, Silvia, nodded in agreement.

The property with postcard views of Lake Tahoe along Nevada's border with California became a theme park in the late 1960s, after the color-filmed scenes of "Bonanza"-- a first for a Western TV show in its day -- became part of American television lore.

"Hollywood needed horses, buggies and stables," owner David Geddes, whose father-in-law was the original owner, said in explaining how the show's producers came to the location.

After the show became successful, "people came up wanting to know where the Cartwrights lived. They did a joint venture with NBC and built the house and barn," he said.

Those were the two primary buildings used for filming during the show's 13-year run. Two television movies -- "Bonanza, The Return" in 1992 and "Bonanza Under Attack" in 1994 -- were shot on location. Pernell Roberts, who played eldest son Adam, is the only living member of the original main cast.

"Bonanza" fans even held an annual convention here. Even after the show's following lessened over the years, more than 300,000 people a year were still coming to the ranch, which was open from mid-April through October, and paying \$12.50 per adult to visit.

"When it first opened, the crowds were larger than they are today," Geddes said.

The lure of cowboy culture

The ranch also marketed itself to visitors with little knowledge of the television show.

"One of the things we find overseas, in Asia in particular, is the interest in the cowboy culture so we marketed (the Ponderosa) in the past," said Bruce Bommarito, executive-director of the Nevada Commission on Tourism.

The end of this version of the old West may have been signaled when David Duffield, the billionaire founder of software firm PeopleSoft, bought the place in a deal expected to be finalized by the end of September.

Duffield, who lives within walking distance of the ranch, has declined to reveal his plans for the property. Locals speculate it will be developed into something other than a television theme park -- perhaps buildable lots with a view of the lake that will be hard to come by.

"It's the only theme park here at the lake. For that reason alone it is irreplaceable. With the premium on land here and the environmental impacts, the likelihood of another theme park here is nil," said Bill Hoffman, executive director of the Incline Village Crystal Bay Visitors Bureau.

"We have known for a long time there are a lot international fans, a lot of people from Germany and the British Isles who come here looking for the Ponderosa Ranch."


"We look at all the other things this area has to offer -- the outdoor recreation. We hope those things will fill that void." Nonetheless, for die-hard "Bonanza" fans like Allen Green, 54, and Pam Webb, 63, who still watch the nightly reruns, the closing of the ranch is bittersweet. They traveled from Little Rock, Arkansas, to gaze upon the house the Cartwrights called home.

"They don't make shows like that anymore," Webb said as she searched in the General Store for a trinket to buy.

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