

Makin' movies on the ranch

Spread out across 14,000 acres south of Santa Fe lies the Bonanza Creek Movie Ranch, where the air is thick with dust and there's a "town," where films have been shot for half a century.

Story by Brad Buck/The Free Press

Photos by Ana June/The Free Press



Imogene Hughes opens one of many gates between the movie sets. The Bonanza Creek Ranch is a working cattle ranch, and the gates are important for keeping the cattle confined.



The old roulette wheel in the Saloon.



The barn featured in "The Astronaut Farmer."



A house used in the movie "Appaloosa."



A disintegrating wagon near the "3:10 to Yuma" house.

That "town" is not just building facades, but four-sided structures that, as you approach them, look as real as any small town in a Western. You see the saloon, the sheriff's office, the general store, the barber shop.

And you can picture Clint Eastwood, John Wayne or Gary Cooper riding into town.

It's the work of Imogene Hughes and her late husband, Glenn.

They moved from Albuquerque to the Hughes family ranch more than 20 years ago, when they got a call to see about filming the 1985 Western "Silverado," starring Kevin Kline, Kevin Costner, Danny Glover and Scott Glenn.

Glenn Hughes wasn't too sure he wanted to get into the movie business, but Imogene talked him into moving to the family ranch. See, she's a self-described "country girl" from Colorado, so she wanted to move back out to a rural patch. She also wanted to see how movies were made.

"How often do you get that chance?" she asked.

After "Silverado" came a number of other films shot at Bonanza Creek: part of "Lonesome Dove," "3:10 to Yuma," "Appaloosa," "The Astronaut Farmer," "All the Pretty Horses" and "Wild Hogs," just to name a few. Parts of about 130 films have been shot at Bonanza Creek, Hughes said. Another 40 or so have been shot in their entirety there.

Hughes rents her ranch out for various events, including parties and weddings, often with 300 to 400 guests. The Buckaroo Ball was at Bonanza Creek for eight years. Because of the tough economic climate, organizers cancelled this year's ball.

Bonanza Creek ranch has electricity and running water at many of its structures, including "the town," allowing for more events. Those amenities must be hidden when a movie is in production.

Lest we forget, this is a ranch. About 200 head of cattle are bred there annually. That's part of the business as well.

Hughes jokes about the cattle: "If they don't act, we eat 'em."

Make no mistake: Imogene is the boss at Bonanza Ranch. "We're all equal," she says of her interactions with movie stars. Of course, when "Mrs. Hughes," as everyone calls her, comes around, everyone tends to be on their best behavior.

She enforces her rules with an iron fist. All gates are locked 24/7 while a movie is being shot; otherwise, criminals might get in and steal something or wreak other havoc. And crews can only park in designated areas.

But Hughes is no tyrant. She enjoys what she does, especially the fact that each day brings something new and different, and she loves to give back.

"The happiest time is when I can land a big one (movie or event) and put a lot of people to work," she said.

There were plenty of crews and actors working not long ago, when three productions, including "Wild Hogs" were shooting simultaneously at the ranch. Gov. Bill Richardson, whom Hughes calls a big film supporter, visited her ranch, and could not get over the buzz of activity.

"I'm doing my part for New Mexico," Hughes told him.

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The water tower as seen from an upstairs room in the Saloon.



Piano in the Saloon.



A vintage wheelchair on the front porch of a building called the "Clough and Plough."



The "3:10 to Yuma" house.