

Hoofin' it: Wild West ways are alive and kicking at Champêtre County. Where's Clint? (inset): The multi-event resort just 20 minutes out of Saskatoon has served as a backdrop for movies and TV shows.



By Dave Yanko

Locked Up

and other frontier capers

at this little *Bonanza* on the prairies

PUT YOURSELF IN THE BOSS'S SHOES.

It's the summer staff party and the whole gang is on a bus to

Champêtre County, a celebrations venue

with a Wild West flavour some 20 min-

utes east of Saskatoon. You're just about

to arrive when an excited murmur rolls

like a wave from the front to the back of the

decelerating bus. Through the windshield,

you spy two cowboys on horses. "Nice touch,"

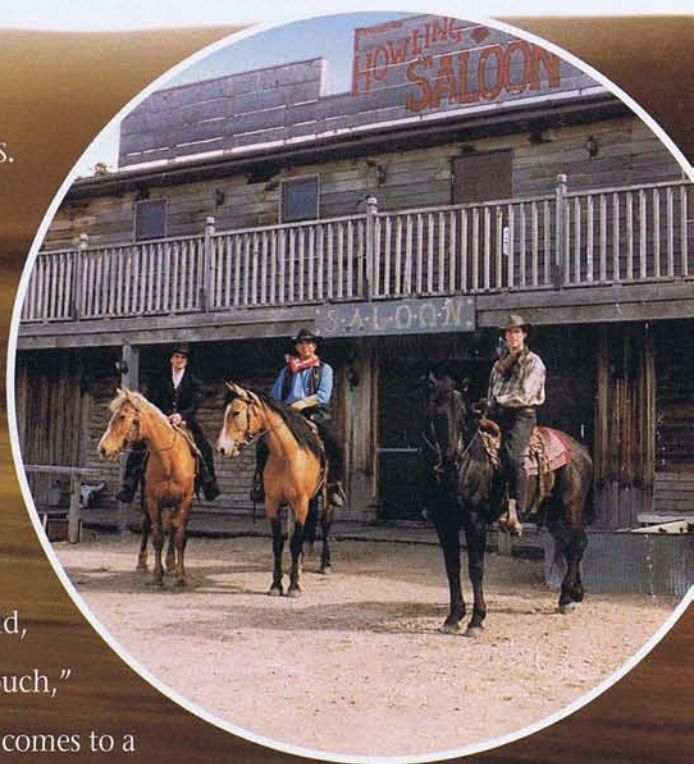
you say to yourself, smiling. Then the bus comes to a

halt, everyone pours out, the badge-bearing cowboys dismount

and one unfurls a poster that reads: "Wanted: Dead or Alive." And your face is on the

poster. "Anybody here seen this man?" one of the lawmen drawls. Uh-oh.

• You're soon ushered through the swinging doors of the Howling Coyote Saloon, up the stairs to the second-storey balcony that's almost level with the wagon-wheel chandeliers and straight into a jail cell, where you're made to don prisoner's garb before ▶



the deputy sheriff locks you up behind bars. Gales of laughter rise up from the floor of the saloon, where all the staffers have now gathered to watch the show. Yep, you've just been punked by Champêtre County.

It's an easy scenario for me to imagine, as Deputy Sheriff Keith Gerwing locks me into that cell during a tour of the resort. Typically what happens in these circumstances, he explains, is that Champêtre asks the employees arranging the party if they'd like to play a joke on the boss. The staffers then send out a photo of him or her, and Champêtre has it blown up and made into a poster. It's all in good fun – who doesn't enjoy a good laugh at the boss's expense? – and it adds to the jovial atmosphere.

"Really, the whole experience starts on the bus," says Gerwing. "That 20-minute drive out from Saskatoon is like a bridge back 100 years. By the time you get out here, you're almost expecting to see cowboys and Indians."

Located in rolling farmland punctuated by stands of aspen, Champêtre (*/shom-pay/tr/*

adj. having to do with the countryside, nature, outdoors, literally "to be in the field") County is a hard place to define. When Arthur and Thérèse Denis started the resort enterprise back in 1989, their intention was to find something to fill the time Arthur had spent travelling the province during his stint as president of a Saskatchewan French cultural association. So, at first, activities comprised farm tours and hay rides for French immersion students. "And then one of the parents came along on one of these school tours and said,

'Hey, we should bring our staff out here for a party,'" says Gerwing, who is Arthur's son-in-law as well as his deputy. "That's where we got into the corporate side and then the next thing was a wedding . . ."

Gerwing entered the scene when he landed a summer job here as a university student in 1993 – he just happened to be at the Saskatoon employment centre when Arthur was posting the job. By that time, Champêtre was hosting tours and parties, but it was still operating as the farm it had been for many years. When the original



Gales of laughter rise up from the floor of the saloon. Yep, you've just been punked by Champêtre County.



Down on the farm (clockwise from top left): play time at the Tumbleweed Town Hall; "quiet on the set" of a CBC production; hitting the hay, Champêtre style.

saloon burned down in 1995, Arthur and Thérèse had to decide between going back to farming or rebuilding the saloon and focusing their attention on this increasingly popular spot for a growing variety of events. Today, few would question their decision to rent out the farmland and concentrate on their all-occasions venue.

Champêtre is now a busy, year-round facility for conventions, weddings, ecology tours, sleigh rides, hay rides, school tours, banquets, barbecues and just about every other kind of social gathering you can think of. For example, during a summer weekend it hosts an annual French cultural party that attracts 800 guests who stay in tents, RVs and various fixed-roof accommodations, including a couple of country guest homes (both Eaton's catalogue structures), a honeymoon suite and guest room above the Howling Coyote Saloon, as well as several old granaries converted to bunkhouses. But Champêtre can go small too, Gerwing says, and will happily arrange a dinner for two on a Wednesday evening, for instance. All events, large and small, are customized affairs requiring reservations. Menus are tailored to fit the occasion, with some of the popular staples being bison burgers, bison steaks and locally grown vegetables. Their popular pitchfork fondues feature steaks skewered onto the blades of a pitchfork then plunged into a vat of hot oil and cooked to perfection according to each guest's taste.

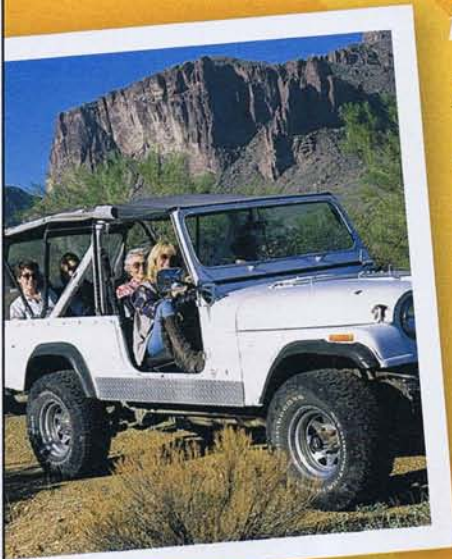
Physically, the Champêtre "townsite" is a cluster of old weathered buildings that resemble a set from a Sergio Leone's spaghetti western; cue that beautifully haunting theme from *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. In fact, the site has been used as a backdrop for film and television programs.

As we tour around the grounds, Gerwing leads me into the photo studio at the back of the general store. Here, visitors can dress up in late 19th-century garb and sit (or stand) for an Old West-style photograph to show their friends. There's an ornate pot-belly stove in the corner, and the studio walls are lined with period artifacts, including rifles and revolvers. Sitting on a small dais is a photo album of some of the "cowboys and ladies" who have passed through here. I flip through the pages, pausing at a picture of a rifle-toting Sheriff Arthur with Thérèse and their five fetching daughters. "Five daughters!" says I. "No wonder he has a gun."

"Well, he doesn't have to worry about that anymore," says Deputy Gerwing.

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BREAKFAST OF CHAMPIONS

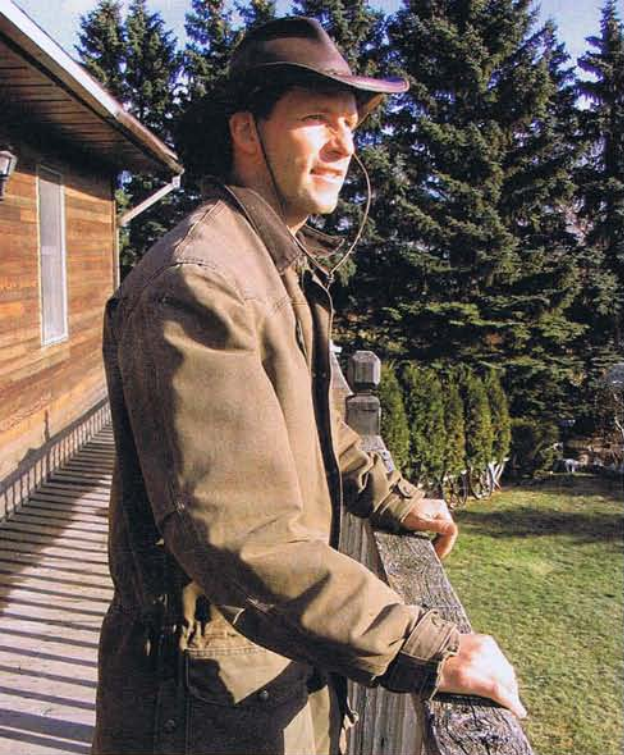
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Law and order (far left): "Out here, men are men and ladies are ladies," says Champêtre's "Deputy Sheriff" Keith Gerwing. The wood fence maze (above); an Eaton's catalogue country guest house.

"They're all hitched now." One of the daughters in the picture is Gerwing's wife, Issa, whom he met when he was working at that first summer job in 1993. It was Issa, with infant in arms and a couple of young children in tow, who greeted me when I first arrived at Champêtre and knocked on

the door of the house with the incongruous van parked out front.

"Hi, is Keith around?" I asked.

"He's likely at the saloon," said Issa, adjusting the baby in her arms.

"Um, that's OK with you?" I quipped, nodding to the youngsters.

"Yes," she replied politely, in a tone that suggested I wasn't the first to make such comments.

In hindsight, my attempt at humour in the Gerwing doorway underscores Champêtre's Old West approach to hospitality. At Champêtre, men and women are treated

Champêtre County, (left) Dave Yanko

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as they were in 1895, says Gerwing. And while most visitors play along and have fun with that, it doesn't suit everyone. He talks of a staff party where he intercepted the guests as they drove their cars up the approach road. In one car, a woman was driving and her male partner was seated on the passenger's side.

"Well, we stopped them at the half mile and made her get out, 'cause her place is on the other side and he's supposed to be driving," explains Gerwing. "Some take offense to that. But most everybody else just loves it because we make the man get out and open the door for the lady. Out here, men are men and ladies are ladies. We really push that quite a bit."

Guests are also encouraged to get out and explore the property. On an adjacent field's perimeter, the walking maze is particularly popular at nighttime among those celebrating weddings or reunions. For others, the clutch of old farm machinery – the "Rust in Peace" antiques graveyard – is compelling and, sometimes, equally interactive.

"I came out of my house [this summer] and saw this old guy coming out of the shop with a handful of tools," Gerwing recalls. "I thought his truck must be broken. But no, he was heading out [to the farm machinery graveyard] to fix an arm on the mower or something."

He goes on to tell me about other frontier pastimes kept alive at the resort, from campfire singsongs and learning to make wild-berry pie from scratch, from overnight campouts under the stars to dream-catcher-making. Still, while Champêtre takes pride and pleasure in its 19th-century setting, the 21st century is knocking on the door. Kids' programming at the resort today includes ecotourism camps aimed at creating greater understanding of Prairie ecosystems. "The kids sleep outside one night, we show them around. They learn about the edible plants."

Branching out into ecotourism comes naturally to Gerwing, who has a degree in land use and environmental studies. In a way, it's lent legitimacy to what's become his new lifestyle.

"It allows me to be a cowboy," says Gerwing. ▣

i To get to Champêtre County, drive 35 kilometres east of Saskatoon on Highway 5, 6.5 km north past St. Denis and .8 km west. 306-258-4635; www.champetrecounty.com

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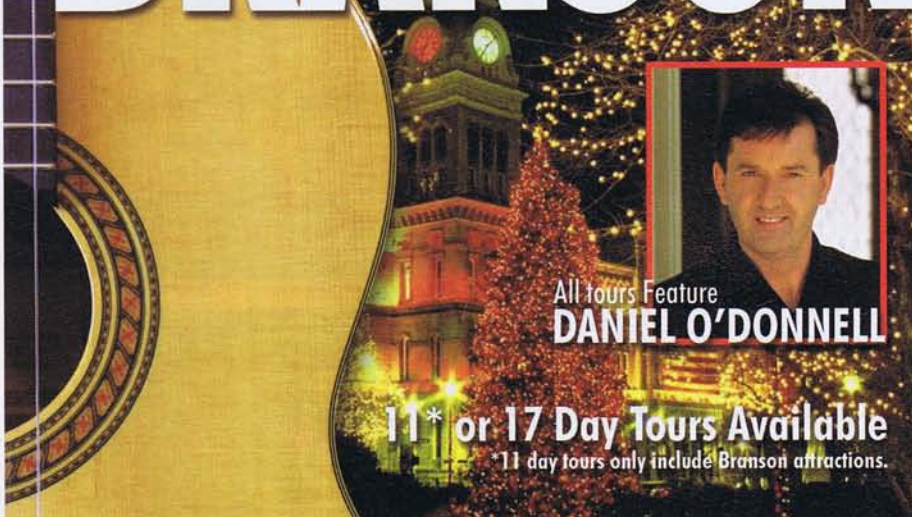


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