

Douglas Lake Cattle Company is a town of itself. It has a store, post office, school and church. It's also the largest ranch in Canada, and now it's the latest ranch to be awarded the AQHA-Bayer Best Remuda Award.

Article and photos by Jim Jennings

THE RADIO IS TURNED OFF IN THE TRUCK, BUT THE digital clock on the dial reads 3:30. It doesn't have to say "a.m." The fact that nothing is visible outside the range of the headlights says it's not afternoon. But we don't need a reminder. We had gotten that when the bedside alarm had gone off an hour before. It was then we questioned why exactly we were getting up at that time of the day.

Or night. Technically, it's still night when we reach the cowboy camp – the Dry Farm Camp – on the south end of the ranch. Dark, anyway. But light spills from the window in the little cookhouse, and there is movement in and around the various cabins. Movement, but little noise. Almost no conversation penetrates the cool morning air, as horses are led into the semi-light of the interior of the camp and saddled.



The aroma of breakfast hits us as we step into the small cookhouse. A young woman stands at a large black stove that monopolizes one wall; huge cast-iron skillets of eggs, potatoes and bacon cover the burners. A long table, surrounded by benches, fills the other half of the room. The cowboys come through the door single file and fill their plates from the skillets. The eggs are seasoned with the various sauces and jellies on the table, and washed down with coffee and juice. But there is no time wasted over second cups. A few minutes later, the boys from the Dry Farm Camp trot their horses out of camp and into the blackness. It's still dark, but the day has begun.

## The Ranch

LYING IN THE ROLLING GRASSLANDS OF BRITISH COLUMBIA, ABOUT 200 miles east of Vancouver and 30 miles east of the little town of Merritt, Douglas Lake Ranch is the largest cattle ranch in Canada. Encompassing 164,000 deeded acres and another 350,000 acres of government grazing land, its borders stretch 60 miles from top to bottom, 35 miles side to side.

The ranch traces its history back to 1872, when John Douglas happened onto a pretty little lake, named it for himself, and then homesteaded 320 acres alongside it. Douglas later sold the land to Charles Beak, who, with



some partners, founded Douglas Lake Cattle Company in 1886. The ranch expanded as it went through a couple of other owners through the years, until 1959, when Charles "Chunky" Woodward and John West bought the property. West died in 1968, and Woodward became the sole owner.

It was under Chunky Woodward's ownership that the ranch came to prominence in the Quarter Horse industry. However, Woodward died in 1990, and his family sold the property in 1998 to Bernard Ebbers, who sold it to its present owner, businessman Stan Kroenke, in 2003. Through all

the owners, the original purpose of the ranch never wavered. Douglas Lake is probably the No. 1 producer of beef cattle in Canada.

"We are what you would call a yearling ranch," says general manager Joe Gardner. "We take calves that are weaned in the fall, and background them on feed all winter. Then we put them back on grass in the spring and sell them as grass yearlings that fall."

The 350,000 acres of government land that the ranch has leased – known as Crown grazing land, which is similar to BLM land in the United States – is used from May to the middle of October. All the cattle are brought back to the ranch-owned land during the winter months. At any one time, cattle owned by the ranch will include about 7,000 mother cows – both Hereford and black baldies – 450 bulls, some 4,500 yearlings on grass and maybe 1,500 yearling heifers that will be used as replacements for the cow herd.

"That's what brings the horse into the picture," says Joe. "Horses are the only way we handle our cattle. This grassland is very delicate. We don't allow any kind of four-wheelers or motorbikes. With our low annual rainfall, any kind of disturbance like that will result in erosion and an influx of weeds, and we can't stand that."

Joe has been manger of the ranch for 25 years. He says that the managers before him had a very strict policy toward trespassers, and he has maintained that policy. "We're not running a popularity contest," he says. "We feel that the single most important asset we have is grassland, so we protect it at all costs."

The predominant grass on the ranch is bluebunch wheatgrass, which is native to the northwestern United States and western Canada. It is resistant to cold winters and dry summers, but is easily destroyed by overgrazing or traffic, a fact Douglas Lake employees are very cognizant of. Even ranch vehicles don't get off the pasture roads.

During the summer, the cattle subsist very well on the native grass, without supplements. However, when winter snow covers all the pastures, everything has to be fed.

Winters can be extreme, but not really, by Canadian standards. The average lows are around 18 degrees Fahrenheit, although 20-30 below zero is not uncommon. Highs in the summer average about 80 degrees, but there are days that are much hotter. The ranch headquarters sits at only 2,600 feet, so temperatures there are more moderate than they are in other areas of the ranch, which go as high as 6,000 feet.

The headquarters is visible for miles. Literally sitting on the shores of Douglas Lake, every building is painted white with a red roof. More a company town than a ranch headquarters, most of the employees live there, and due to the remoteness of the location, the ranch tries to service their needs. A general store handles most daily necessities, and a church offers services every Sunday evening. A ranch-owned school takes care of the educational needs of employees' children.

"The government ran a school out here for years," Joe says, "but the numbers got so low that they had to close it. Then our kids had to travel an hour and a half each way into Merritt to school. This all happened while Chunky owned the ranch. He and I knew it would be hard to keep young families if wedidn't have a school, so we started our own. We set up a program that followed the provincial curriculum, got approved for funding for an independent school and hired a teacher."



There are 35 broodmares on the ranch today, many of which still carry the Peppy San breeding. All mares are pasture bred, and they foal outside as well.

Actually, there are two teachers, one for the lower grades and one for high school. Several students have graduated from the school, but two have gone all the way through, kindergarten to graduation. Both of them are now in college.

"We only have 10 or 11 children in the school right now," Joe says, "but our kids are getting a wonderful education. They do lots of extracurricular activities — maybe not the same ones they would do if they were in town, but they don't have to waste that three hours a day on the bus. They can spend that time at home, riding their horses or doing other activities they like."

## The Horses

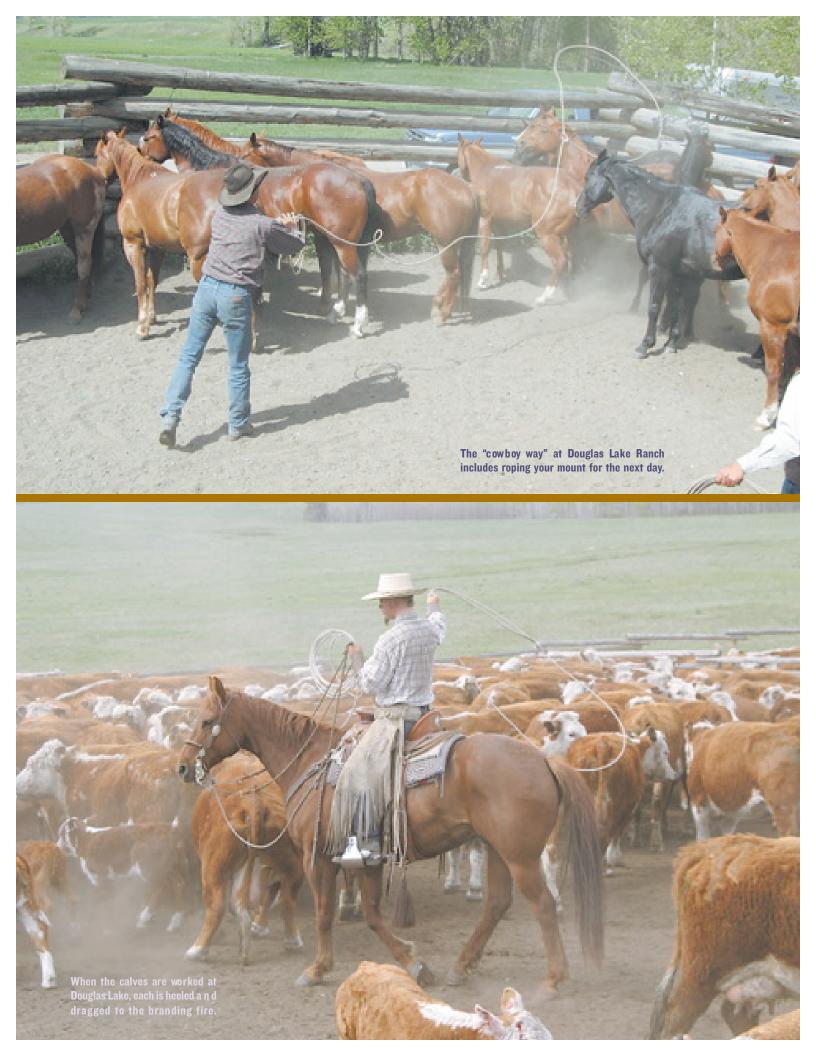
ALTHOUGH DOUGLAS LAKE RANCH HAS ALWAYS HAD HORSES, IT wasn't until ranch owner Chunky Woodward became interested in cutting horses in the early 1960s that there was a particular breeding program. Woodward began with the purchase, in 1963, of Peppy San, a 4-year-old son of Leo San out of Peppy Belle by Pep Up. Peppy San was bred and owned by G.B. Howell of Texas. The year before, the horse had won second in the first NCHA Futurity under the saddle of trainer Matlock Rose. Woodward brought Peppy San back to Douglas Lake, used him occasionally for ranch work and turned him out with some mares. But in 1966, Rose asked Woodward if he could campaign Peppy San for the NCHA world championship. Woodward agreed, and in 1967, Peppy San was the world champion, earning \$20,000, more money than had ever before been won in one year by a cutting horse.

Woodward also bought the mare Stardust Desire, which Rose had made world champion in 1966. Breeding her and some other Douglas Lake mares to Peppy San resulted in the NCHA and AQHA world champions Peppy's Desire, Sonita's Last, Peponita and Royal Santana, plus Canadian champions Peppy Isle, Peppycali, Tip It San, Booger San, Chunky's Monkey, Popular Peppy and Bonita San. Never before had one horse sired as many champions, all bred by one ranch.

Today, Douglas Lake owns approximately 35 broodmares, many of which carry Peppy San breeding. The ranch is currently using three stallions, one of which is Fritzi Badger, a son of Peppy San Badger, who is by Mr San Peppy, a full brother to Peppy San. Another is a son of Fritzi Badger that the ranch raised, and the other is by Mr San Storm by Peppy San. A few of the Peppy San-bred mares are being bred to some outside stallions, principally Massasuta and Drifts Chip – both standing at the Four Sixes Ranch in Texas – to get some outside blood. Massasuta is by Dash For Cash, and Drifts Chip is by Double Drift.

There are almost 200 geldings in the saddle horse remuda. "Our Quarter Horse program today is to sustain mounts for the cowboy crew," says Stan Jacobs, Douglas Lake cow boss. Stan is a cowboy himself and has been with the ranch 17 years. "At one time we had a cutting horse division, but that came to an end with the passing of Mr. Woodward. But the bloodlines and the foundation work that he did remains here today in these horses.

"I have had guys ask us why we have horses bred like that when all we do is cowboy on them," Stan continues. "I say, 'Well, jeez, isn't that terrible. Taking horses that have been bred to work a cow, and actually use them for ranch work. Shame on us.' The guys working in our cowboy crew really appreciate the caliber of horses they get to ride."





When a cowboy hires on at Douglas Lake, he's knows he's going to be horseback every day.

Each cowboy on the ranch is allowed 10 horses in his string. These will include some young horses, and some older horses that he will use in the weaning pen or for doctoring in the feedlot during the winter. Everyone will have special horses that they can use to rope a big cow and not get themselves in trouble, and they'll have three or four horses that they'll ride in the branding pen. The horses they use for calving usually have the summer off, so by fall, they are ready to come in and do some weaning and sorting.

All horses being ridden are shod, and from late December until early February, everyone will keep at least two horses "sharp shod" for work on the frozen ground. A horse that is sharp shod will have small, sharp projections on the bottom of its shoes.

Foals are normally weaned by early October. In January, all the yearlings are brought in, halter broke, tied up and played with for about two weeks. The colts are gelded, and everything is branded. In the spring, they are turned back out until the following spring, when the cowboys all come together to get their pick of the now 2-year-olds.

After the selections are made, the cowboys will spend about 10 days working with their new horses, and then they are turned back out. They are brought in again as 3s.

"We'll use those 3-year-olds in the fall when we start to gather the high country," says Stan. "The days are longer, but they are not real demanding, and we don't want to ask a whole lot of those horses just yet. We want to bring them along slow. Then, in the spring, when the horses are 4, some of the cowboys will have them in the branding pens. That fall, they'll go to the high country again, and that next spring, when they are 5, they are ready to go to work."

Douglas Lake is more than a cow ranch. The company has dealerships for farming and construction equipment and Sooner trailers in area towns, and a recreational business – fishing, hiking and horseback riding – on parts of the ranch. However, it's a cow ranch first and foremost, and that part of the ranch has changed very little over the years.

Cow boss Stan Jacobs grinned under his drooping moustache. He

was watching almost 500 cows with calves pour through the gate of a wooden corral back onto the rolling grassland. A group of cowboys sat on their horses in front of the cattle, preventing them from running. Turning, Stan says, "We do it the traditional way here, the cowboy way. We do everything horseback.

"Like this herd of cows and calves. We gathered them this morning and branded the calves, 487 of them in a little over four hours. Every one of them was roped and dragged to

the branding fire. When we move cattle, it's all done horseback. When we wean, there's a cowboy on a horse sitting in the gate, letting the cows out. When we sort steers, it's done horseback, and when we ship cattle, someone on a horse drives those cattle all the way into the truck."

"The first thing the boys on the cowboy crew do every morning is saddle a horse," Stan continues. "When you hire on this cowboy crew, you know you're going to be horseback."

Then he grinned again. "It's the cowboy way."



General manager Joe Gardner has been with the ranch 25 years. He says that the grassland is so delicate that the only way they handle their cattle is horseback.