

# Friends & Neighbours

## A legacy of ranching in the Valley

By Katie Sanders

For over 100 years the Guichon family has been ranching in the Nicola Valley.

They were among the first to take advantage of the abundant grazing lands surrounding Merritt and the Nicola lake, and have remained active members of the community since the 1860's.

The founding members of the Guichon empire, Charles, Laurent, Pierre and Joseph left France, arriving in British Columbia in 1859, taking up gold claims along the banks of the Fraser river. After moderate success in mining the brothers developed one of the largest pack trains in the district, hauling mining supplies, people and general merchandise from Yale to Barkerville and other parts of the Cariboo. In 1865 Charles returned to France, leaving his three brothers behind to develop what would become one of British Columbia's oldest and most respected cattle companies.

What is now known as the Gerard Guichon Ranch LTD, was built from humble beginnings with the purchase of a small parcel of land at the north end of Mamit Lake. In 1894 Joseph Guichon brought the first Hereford cattle to the Nicola Valley. He purchased three heifers with calf from Hillhurst, Que. One of these heifers, named Frances, delivered a bull calf who was registered in the Hereford Herd Book as Nicola.

Over the years the ranch grew in size, encompassing land at Chapparon Lake, Nicola Lake, Quilchena and along the Nicola River. By the time the ranch was named The Guichon Ranch Limited in 1933, it had grown to include some 30,000 deeded acres, 4,000 head of beef cattle and over 500 horses. At that point the ranch was owned and operated by seven children of Joseph Guichon.

The eldest of Joseph's children, Lawrence, became the managing partner of the family enterprise in 1918. Up until his take over, Lawrence had worked tirelessly alongside his father to expand the ranch's land holdings and to improve the quality of their livestock. He had little in the way of formal education but possessed a deep and thorough understanding of livestock and range management practices. He maintained management of the ranch until 1947 when his son Gerard – father-in-law to the present owner and operator – Judy Guichon, took over.

During the years leading up to



*The Gerard Guichon Ranch Ltd. is just a part of the Guichon family's century-long history of ranching in the Nicola Valley. Their humble grasp extends to the famous Quilchena Hotel and Resort and the Quilchena Cattle Company.*

Photo by Katie Sanders

Lawrence's takeover as manager, the ranch had grown significantly and now boasted a general store, post office and hotel. The hotel, known today as the Quilchena Hotel and Resort, was run successfully until the implementation of prohibition laws at the end of the First World War. The new laws prevented the sale of alcohol and severely damaged the hotel's income. Also affecting business was the increasingly frequent use of motor vehicles for travel, which lessened the need for an overnight stop en-route to Kamloops. Although the store remained a lucrative business, the hotel saw a significant decline in patronage and was eventually closed to the public in 1919. It remained closed until 1958 when it was re-opened by Joseph's grandson Guy Rose. The hotel has remained a popular tourist destination ever since, and is an integral part of local history and legend.

In 1957 the assets of the ranch were divided and sold. Guy Rose purchased the southern portion of the ranch properties along with the hotel, this included the general store and the machinery business. The operation was incorporated as the Quilchena Cattle Company.

Gerard Guichon, second son of Lawrence and grandson of Joseph, purchased

the northern portion of the ranch assets. The name of this operation remains the Gerard Guichon Ranch Limited. Gerard ran this company together with his wife Ruth and became a well respected member of the community.

He was active locally, provincially and federally in the Cattlemen's association, as well as various range and grass management associations. Ruth and Gerard had eight children, the eldest of which took over the ranch from his father in 1979.

Lawrence (Laurie) Guichon, and his wife Judy successfully ran the ranch together for 20-years until his untimely death in 1999.

Laurie and Judy worked hard to develop a holistic approach to resource management. They implemented irrigation and water developments, along with the use of electric fencing to allow for more efficient use of smaller pastures for grazing. They were also careful to adjust their herd size based on the amount of water and grass available, ensuring their ability to graze cattle throughout the year and requiring less hay and winter feeding.

In 2002 the ranch was awarded the Environmental Stewardship Award for cow-calf producers by the Canadian Cattlemen's Association. This award is given annually

in recognition of ranchers who provide a healthy example in managing their herds, their range and the environment.

Judy has carried on with the work she started with her first husband. She still owns and operates the ranch with two of her four children by her side.

She has become increasingly involved with various initiatives and task forces geared towards protecting the agricultural industry in coming years.

The changing environment, social and political pressure, aging infrastructure and dwindling resources are making life difficult for many of B.C.'s cattle producers. They are having to diversify their operations, outsource many of their needs and make do with less and less these days just to break even.

"The composition of our communities has changed dramatically," Judy comments. "There used to be so many more agriculturally supported families, but now it's all becoming so urbanized. We don't feel as valued as we once did. It was resource producers who built these communities, and now we're being pushed out through simple lack of support."

She is adamant that maintaining a foothold in the industry is crucial because with the cost of running an operation it would be nearly impossible to start from scratch the way her ranch's founding fathers did. Judy hopes to see her family thrive on the land that supported so many before them, but is nervous that the cost will soon outweigh the benefit.

While land remains relatively cheap, necessities like fencing, labour and fuel are swiftly driving the cost of business to unreasonable levels. Add to that limited governmental support and you have a recipe for disaster facing many local ranchers.

She believes that part of the solution lies in education, and that if more people understood what it takes to produce and maintain resources, many of the problems she is presented with would be lessened.

"We need to start addressing our problems now, before it's too late," she says. Examples of this include water management, efficient land use, alternative forms of fencing and re-evaluating regulations affecting the slaughter and transportation of animals.

She believes there is hope for the industry, but that it will take support from communities, individuals and all levels of government, to see success.

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