

Interpreting the Cattle Baron: Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site, Deer Lodge, Montana

by Rodd L. Wheaton

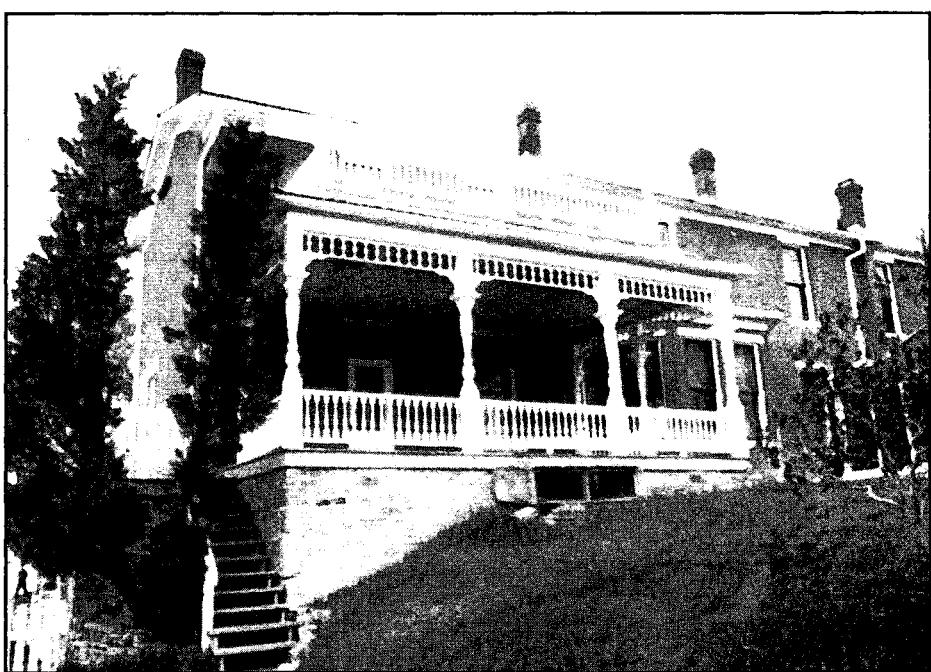
The National Park Service, since the early 1970s, has been charged with the management of the legacy of Johnny Grant and Conrad Kohrs. Grant arrived in Montana with Hudson Bay Company connections. He married into the Bannock Tribe and ran cattle between the Oregon Trail and the Deer Lodge Valley where his ranch and house were located. In 1865 he moved north to Canada selling out to Conrad Kohrs. Kohrs, a native of Schleswig-Holstein, Germany, had roamed the gold fields of the west and had ended up in Bannock City, Montana Territory. There, employed as a butcher, he soon owned the business. Marketing beef to miners was more profitable than mining. Kohrs rapidly expanded his enterprises into other communities and sought out a ranch to directly supply his butcher shops. Ultimately by 1900 Kohrs controlled, either by ownership or through water rights, over a million acres of Montana.

In 1868 Kohrs married Augusta Kruse, who had immigrated from Schleswig-Holstein, and brought her to Montana.

Almost immediately, Augusta Kohrs set about turning the house that Kohrs had bought from Grant into a home. Of French Canadian log construction, the Grant house was described in the Montana Post of December 16, 1865, as looking like "...it had been lifted by the chimneys from the bank of the St. Lawrence, and dropped down in Deer Lodge Valley." On January 27, 1871, *The New Northwest* reported that the house has "...seven finely furnished rooms...besides a magnificently furnished parlor and a spacious dining room...." In 1883 the newly constructed trans-Montana railroad delivered a shipment of furniture.

While the house and adjacent grounds rapidly became civilized, the ranch complex grew as a home ranch for the far-flung empire. Kohrs introduced Shorthorns to Montana and shipped them annually to Chicago for eastern markets. Kohrs success as an entrepreneur was realized by his survival of the disastrous winter of 1886-87. While in Chicago in 1890 the Kohrs purchased furnishings for the new wing of the ranchhouse. In 1899 the Kohrs moved permanently to Helena, Montana's capital city, and the ranch became a summer residence. Much of the empire was liquidated by 1920 when Kohrs died. His grandson, Conrad Kohrs

Warren, purchased the home ranch in the 1930s and subsequently added several new buildings. Warren operated the ranch until it was acquired by the National Park Service which received a donation of ranch equipment and household furnishings.



(Top) Ranchhouse, Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site. View of the 1865 Grant structure which was constructed in a vernacular Greek Revival style.

(Bottom) Ranchhouse. View of the 1890 Kohrs wing and the kitchen porch which was restored utilizing paint marks on the brick masonry walls and a historic photograph.

The National Park Service assumed control of a considerably diminished ranch: approximately 1200 acres abutting the city of Deer Lodge. From this base the Park Service was challenged to interpret the "open range cattle industry." The resources at hand included numerous build-

ings and structures that dated from Grant's tenure, including the bunkhouse, to Conrad Warren's additions. Subsequent purchase of scenic easement lands included buildings of the 1950s bringing the total of structures now within the

— See "Cattle Baron" next page

WASHINGTON UPDATE

by Page Putnam Miller



The National Archives announced on February 12 that the Archivist of the United States, Don W. Wilson, will be stepping down from his position as head of the National Archives on March 31. Wilson was appointed by President Reagan five and a half years ago. During the past year Congressional Committees, journalists, and professional groups have expressed considerable disappointment in the failure of the National Archives to deal effectively with many pressing issues. On January 31, the Council of the Society of American Archivists adopted a resolution noting that the National Archives has not aggressively exercised the authority it does have to ensure the preservation of important federal records and has not provided leadership in the development and implementation of a federal information policy.

Wilson is leaving the National Archives to become Research Professor of Presidential Studies and Executive Director of the George Bush Center at Texas

A&M University in College Station, Texas. Texas A&M is the site of the future George Bush Presidential Library.

The Clinton Administration is moving quickly to seek an eminently qualified person for the position of U.S. Archivist and has asked the assistance of the NCC in serving as a contact point for the White House Personnel office for this appointment. In early March I met with four members of the White House Personnel Office assigned to this task. They are a very impressive and capable group and include people experienced in conducting executive searches. We discussed desired qualifications and the search procedures. I shared with them both a 1980s NCC qualifications statement and one recently developed by the Society of American Archivists and the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators. The team from White House Personnel are developing a profile of the kind of person who could best lead the National Archives and casting the net widely in gathering names of all those who should be considered for this post. They are most interested in receiving rec-

ommendations from historians and archivists and have reached out to listen to the views of many people. They assured me that they are very aware of the legal requirement that the Archivist be a "non-partisan professional" who will be able to act independently of the White House and are seeking a person whose public record reflects balance. While they do not have a specific timetable for this nomination, the administration has made the search for a nominee for U.S. Archivist a top priority.

Since the selection process for U.S. Archivist has suddenly been put on a fast track, I have consulted frequently with members of the NCC Policy Board. The consensus at this point is that we should assist the White House in providing information about possible candidates, but that NCC should not advocate a specific short list.

We are still waiting for the President's budget and announcements of many key appointments. There are strong indications that Sheldon Hackney, a historian and President of the University of Pennsylvania, will be nominated for the National Endowment for the Humanities.

— "Cattle Baron" from previous page park to approximately 90. All have been or will be the subject of preservation/restoration efforts as all relate to cattle ranching, interpreted from open range to feed lots.

Because of the importance of each structure, interpretive planning for the ranch is difficult since the management decision was that each structure would tell its own story. Each structure was proposed for preservation to its most active use. For instance, an 1880s stallion barn that had been converted to a blacksmith shop to a garage for the Kohrs' Maxwell was restored as a garage. While this solution worked for the individual buildings, it has never lent itself well to dealing with the historic landscape around the buildings. Bunkhouse row with its extensive 1930s alterations overlooks the ranchhouse yard which is to be restored to its 1900 appearance. The resolution is that a new visitor center will be constructed in the 1950s "Big Red Barn." The visitor first will be introduced to modern feed lots and then begin a regression in time. Walking the historic access road towards the ranchhouse will put the present behind and the visitor will experience essentially the fruits of the cattle empire — the home ranch — which evolved over the years. The intent is to focus on cattle, not individual buildings.

The house, with its clapboard covered log original section and brick rear wing, is one of the most interesting historic house museums in the country. Its "finely furnished rooms" of the 1870s blossomed into 42 rooms by 1900. Nearly all the original furnishings, essentially one woman's taste, were donated to the National Park Service. The furnishings represent all of the periods of acquisition from French Antique, to Creative Revival, to Colonial Revival. The sequence of use is evident: older pieces were relegated to secondary spaces or the bunkhouse, 1880s styles were updated and juxtaposed with 1890s styles.

Room finishes, though, had not fared as well. Carpets had been replaced, wall coverings were lost or covered over, and ceilings had fallen. However, since the collection was so superb, it was determined that the house should reflect a period no later than 1920. The interiors were restored to represent their most active use, based on existing fabric and photo documentation of 1895, 1903, and 1916. This interpretation has led to some discrepancies, for example where 1930s wallpapers were preserved *in situ*.

Two additional issues continue to influence the visitor's perception. Furnishings from the Kohrs' Helena house are included in the collection and are on dis-

play in the ranchhouse. These have added other period styles that were never used in the context of the ranch. Ultimately, this dichotomy will be resolved by creating a Helena house vignette in the proposed visitor center. The second issue involves the movement of furnishings from documented positions to accommodate visitor tours. This has been instituted for security purposes as well as traffic flow and probably will never be effectively resolved as long as visitors have the ability to touch.

In reviewing this project as described very briefly above, these are probably the best solutions. The long continuum of history from the 1860s to the 1970s dictated the decisions since the interpretive story is not static. While only one family occupied the ranch, each member contributed significantly to the overall picture by adapting to changing methods of cattle production or decorative taste. Finally, while these decisions can be based on a rationale, the average visitor probably simply does not care. We do these things for our professional selves; the visitor just likes to look at old things, maybe learn something about cattle ranching, and will never know if an 1870s fence abuts a 1930s building.

Editor's note — Rodd L. Wheaton is Chief of the Division of Cultural Resources Management for the Rocky Mountain Region of the National Park Service.