

Grant-Kohrs Ranch NHS Public Art Program

Cultural resources are showcased in an innovative public art program at Grant-Kohrs Ranch National Historic Site in Deer Lodge, Montana. Founded in 1860 by pioneer stockgrower John Grant, the ranch became headquarters of legendary 19th-century cattleman Conrad Kohrs. Its intact cultural landscape and vernacular architecture are significant to the nation's frontier cattle era, and are now becoming a mecca for some of the Northwest's finest artists.

The Frontier Montana Gathering of Artists coincides with the August 25 founding anniversaries of the National Park Service (1916) and Grant-Kohrs Ranch NHS (1972). A select group of established and up-and-coming fine arts professionals spend three days at the ranch sketching, painting, and drawing. Upon return to his or her studio, each produces artwork—in oils, watercolors, pastels, or pen and ink—which the site collectively exhibits at venues throughout western Montana.

The Gathering's purpose is two-fold: to acknowledge and sustain the historic association between artists and America's national parks, dating to Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt; and to inspire public appreciation for the nation's frontier cattle era and NPS preservation of Grant-Kohrs Ranch. While the early national park artists depicted the natural grandeur of Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Glacier, a different artistic bent became associated with Grant-Kohrs Ranch. When Conrad Kohrs added the DHS Ranch to his sprawling empire in 1883, he inherited an eastern Montana cowboy better remembered for his brush than his lasso: Charles M. Russell.

"I see myself as Kohrs's second artist in residence, after Charlie Russell," Bozeman watercolor artist Bob Barkell wryly observes. "Grant-Kohrs Ranch is a marvelous place for an artist, an artist's heaven."

Barkell first visited Grant-Kohrs Ranch following a chance invitation from its chief of interpretation at the 1998 C.M. Russell Art Exhibition in

Great Falls. Previously unfamiliar with the site, this fifth-generation Montanan was awed by its log barns, cowboy bunkhouse, and Hereford cattle grazing against a backdrop of snowcapped mountains. As a summer volunteer Barkell painted vignettes of the ranch's historic scene and traditional ranch life, which he enthusiastically interpreted to visitors clustered around his easel.

Barkell's dream of a forum where talented artists could paint and learn from each other became possible under the mantle of NPS sponsorship. Supported by Grant-Kohrs Ranch NHS, the Glacier Natural

History Association, and area businesses, Gathering participants encamped adjacent to the ranch, all meals furnished. A dozen gathered at Grant-Kohrs Ranch in August 1998; 30 will convene here in August 1999. A juried national invitation is envisioned for 2000.

"The Frontier Montana Gathering of Artists benefits everyone," says superintendent Tony Schetzle. "Artists flex their talents and talk art

around the evening campfire; the public learns about art and the Service's preservation of Grant-Kohrs Ranch through the travelling exhibit; even our staff gains insight as artists depict the ranch in new and compelling ways."

Schetzle points out two unforeseen advantages of the program. The first was Barkell's decision, after his first summer at Grant-Kohrs Ranch, to relocate his studio and gallery from Bozeman to Deer Lodge, providing a basis for cultural enrichment of this small ranching community. The second benefit is the visual record artists produce of the ongoing preservation of Grant-Kohrs Ranch—including before and after images of the reroofing of the 1862-1890 John Grant/Conrad Kohrs ranch house. While the site maintains photo files documenting cultural resource preservation, Schetzle says, works of art themselves become artifacts that continue to capture Grant-Kohrs Ranch for the enjoyment and inspiration of future audiences.

Scott Eckberg is Chief of Interpretation at Grant-Kohrs Ranch NHS.



1890 Conrad Kohrs Brick Addition painted by Bob Barkell. Photo courtesy Bob Barkell.