

Iconic buildings in a monumental film, the Lonesome Ranch and the Divorce Cabin are dear to every *Brokeback* fan. After a long search for buildings which typified the extreme isolation of western prairie life, Ang Lee found his Lonesome Ranch and Divorce Cabin “way out in the middle of nowhere,” on the Hart ranch near Claresholm, Alberta.

In 2004, Kerry and John Hart had the rare opportunity to observe Ang Lee, his crew, and the cast, as they prepared these important locations, filmed there, and then returned the now-famous structures to their original states. She also participated as an extra in the filming of the Fireworks Scene at nearby Fort Macleod.

Kerry Hart generously agreed to share some of her observations and recollections with Lauren Gurney and Jim Bond.



Kerry Hart at the Lonesome Ranch near Claresholm, Alberta

Interview with Kerry Hart, Owner of the Lonesome Ranch and Divorce Cabin

July 29, 2007

How did you come to be here?

I grew up 630 miles north of here, northeast of Grande Prairie, in Heart Valley, Alberta. I worked as a trail cook up and down the eastern slope [of the Canadian Rockies], from Pincher Creek to Jasper, in the pack outfitting business. I was living in Pincher Creek in 1992 when I met my husband, but I was able to say “Wedding in Heart Valley to marry John Hart” on my wedding invitations! Since our marriage, we have made our home here in Claresholm.

Initially, we lived in a 100-year-old house [east of the Divorce Cabin]. It was a “catalog home.” It literally came in on the train, having been purchased as a kit for \$535 in 1906. The land from that place west to Willow Creek mostly belongs to the Harts. It was a big place and it supported three families when we all ranched together.

My father-in-law officially retired at age 80-something, so he says [laughter]. My husband and I did not want to continue with the purebred cattle, and my brother-in-law did, so we had a dispersal and the whole thing was split up—land, cattle, and machinery. John and I now have a section here at the Christie place, and we have some more on the creek where we live, and one other quarter elsewhere. We custom graze other

people's cattle for them, background¹ some calves in the winter, and grow some hay to sell. My husband has recently started selling real estate.

His family's roots in the area are 103 years old. They came up from the States in June of 1905, first to Meadow Creek, which is 18 miles away, then moved to where the home place is now. The Harts have been down here on the flats since 1926.

The Lonesome Ranch?

We call it the "Christie place." Bob Christie owned it in the 1980s. At that time, my father-in-law, my husband, and his brother purchased it from him.

It was built in 1932 by the Enticknap family, who were pioneers in the area. Evelyn [Enticknap] lives at the Lodge; she is now 101. She is the daughter, and the niece, of the two men who built it.



The Lonesome Ranch (Christie Place)

The cabin closest to the driveway [to the left in the picture] is the one that Evelyn was raised in. This older cabin was originally out by the road to the west, and was skidded to its present site and placed on a foundation. It was at that time that the logs were reconfigured into a bigger house, and framed up with studs and planking on top. The logs only go up about four feet.

¹ To "background calves" means to put them on a high-forage ration to increase their weight to between 800 and 900 pounds, before placing them on finishing rations and selling them.

The Christies came later?

There have been several people there. The McLeods lived there for a while. And there was a fellow, Slavic of some description; he was hunting gophers and got his gun caught in the barbed wire fence, and he died from the bullet wound. But the Christies owned it just before the Harts.

And the Divorce Cabin?

I believe his name was Harry Enticknap, the fellow who owned it. He was a bachelor brother of Evelyn's dad. They built that cabin for him in the mid- to late-1920s, which is why it has a cement foundation under it.



The Divorce Cabin (Harry Enticknap Home)

In the mid 70s, I know there was a couple living there who had a folk band. "Back to the land," the whole nine yards, doing the hippie thing. She baked loaves of bread for my in-laws. At first they said, "How wonderful, fresh bread!" until they cut into them and saw little brown chunks. It was mouse turds [laughter]. She has a lovely voice and she is still recording music.

And then, later, it was rented out for a while to a pair of brothers. They are two 6-foot tall red-headed guys who are locals here. I am not entirely sure what they do for a living. Carpenters and handymen, I think.

The filmmakers approached you?

Well, I understand that Ang Lee, [locations manager] Darryl Solly, and [executive producer] Michael Hausman were out searching for sites and at some point said, "Look at that building [the Divorce Cabin]; that looks pretty good. Find out who owns it."

They found John's phone number and called him, and then, after looking at the cabin, they drove around and said, "What is that?" Then they started looking at the Christie place [Lonesome Ranch]. That is how we encountered them.

What was that like?

A little surreal. John phoned me and said, "A movie company wants to film out on the Christie place," and I said, "Get out of here. The Christie place?!" [laughter] I did not want to live there; I certainly did not see why they wanted to *film* it.

Then Darryl Solly came by. "We are sure hoping that you'll agree to let us use it, because we have been searching for a long time." He was very anxious for us to agree. We talked for a while about arrangements.

The next thing we knew, there were crews of carpenters and scenery people doing their thing. Then they came rolling down the road with all of the equipment, costuming, and scenery, and whatever else. Eventually the actors showed up, about two weeks after that.



Ang Lee and James Schamus at the Lonesome Ranch

Did they tell you what the film was about?

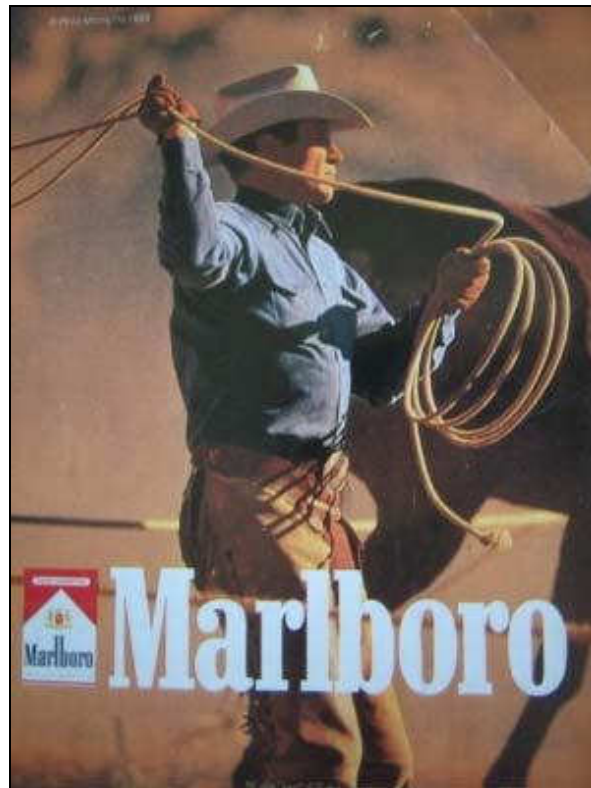
No, not initially. Then, finally, Darryl looked a bit uncomfortable and he told us. This is conservative rancher country, you know. We had experienced drought, we have had BSE ["Mad Cow Disease"] in Canada, "...and you're gonna pay us *how much* a day? *Sure!* We don't have any problem with that!" [laughter]

Did you fear that neighbors or friends might feel differently about you if you participated?

Not really. It was a business deal. There were several other locals who had dealings with the movie.

Had you had any prior exposure to the movie business?

Not with the movie business, but with the “Marlboro Man.” The Marlboro ad agency people came to a ranch I worked on in British Columbia, to photograph print ads. We had four of the “Marlboro Men” there. It was also interesting to watch the photographer. Two guys came out of New York just to load his cameras, hold his cameras, hand him his cameras! Snapped his fingers and a camera would appear.



“Marlboro Man” Print Advertisement

The Marlboro cowboys were roping full grown Charolais bulls, which was impressive. These are not just pretty faces; these guys can really rope! Marlboro prides itself on this, and all of the “Marlboro Men” are actual cowboys and ranchers.

At some point, things started to heat up.

They had a lot of questions about where to find different things. “Do you know anyone who has any cattle?” “Do you know where we can get a load of gravel?” “Do you know where we can get porta-potties?”

We helped them as much as we could, and it was great that they wanted to use local businesses and props. The Leeds have their pickups in the movie. The people on the other side of the hill have their sheep in the movie.

What can you recall about the modifications they made to the Lonesome Ranch?

They desiccated the yard to make it look dry. Of course, when the lady looked at it in February it was desolate, but by May it was getting green.

(Production designer) Judy Becker, perhaps?

Yes, I believe that was her. She decided they needed to desiccate the yard, and that was of some concern to us because it has been a hundred years getting those trees to look as good as they do. That is not great soil to begin with, and they were spraying them just as they were coming into leaf.

Did you raise that issue?

Yes, we did, and there was actually a contract drawn up talking about damages if the trees did not come back. They did, for the most part. The desiccation did not work well everywhere; in some areas they hand-stripped the caraganas. They chewed up a couple pairs of leather gloves doing that. It is brutal work. Anyway, those are the trees that did not come back well.

There were other changes?

They painted the outside of the Christie house. It was a cream color, now it is that dingy gray color. They took down a stovepipe “T” up there [galvanized roof vent] because it was not rustic enough. They changed the kitchen window. The one in the bedroom was changed to make it look like a multi-paned window.



The Girls' Room

The wallpaper?

No, that was original wallpaper, as lovely as it was in 1963.



Lonesome Ranch Wallpaper

There are a few oil pumps nearby.

They were not yet there in 2004 when they filmed. For one of them, we suggested Darryl Solly contact the oil company and see if they would wait until the filming was

done, because when an oil rig is drilling it is noisy. There is another one over the hill to east that was put in later.

The Divorce Cabin?

Before the pre-production people got started, we all thought it looked desolate and nasty enough. But they made it look worse! [laughter] They sprayed watered-down paint on the shingles and plywood. They took some machinery and cars and old tires out of sight.

They actually sent someone to the most expensive place on the planet to buy bundled firewood, the Kananaskis Junction Store. Then they set that guy and his helper to cutting the strapping off and piling it up. They filmed Heath Ledger chopping wood on the north side of the cabin, and we ended up with a lovely pile of expensive firewood.



“Before” View of the Divorce Cabin

The Windcharger tower?

That Windcharger tower was original; they did have a well. The outhouse is original, too; no plumbing. There is a spring below, just south of the cabin.

Nothing was filmed inside the Divorce Cabin?

I know some of the advance people took pictures inside of it, but they never filmed inside.

At some point, the preparations were complete.

Yes, Darryl Solly contacted us and told us when they planned to start filming. The entire thing was interesting to watch.

When a fellow appeared on my husband's elbow and started following us around everywhere, he said, "OK, this is kinda odd. I know it is *that kind* of movie, but this is too weird." [laughter] Later, the fellow introduced himself. Hal, I think, was his name. He was the landowner liaison, and a very nice guy. He made sure we found our way to the hospitality tent, and got pastries and drinks. He made sure that all of our questions were answered, and introduced us to everyone.

Of course, we got introduced to Heath Ledger because he was the big star. But Michelle Williams was a nobody actress then, so we did not get introduced to her, which I thought was rather funny because she went on to be Heath's main squeeze and to have his child.

The actors were [at the Lonesome Ranch] for two days, and then they came back to do the scene at the [Divorce] Cabin. Jake Gyllenhaal showed up on the second day of shooting.



Heath Ledger and Ang Lee at the Lonesome Ranch

Heath Ledger?

He was very busy working with his voice coach, trying to lose the Aussie accent and sound "downtown Wyoming." He shook our hands and just moved on. His uncle [assistant to Mr. Ledger, Neil Bell], was very interesting to talk to. He is a well traveled man, very articulate and well spoken.

[For more on Neil Bell, see: <http://www.gaywired.com/article.cfm?section=10&id=8142>]

Did you meet Jake Gyllenhaal?

No.

Filming began?

Yes. As you drove in [the Lonesome Ranch driveway] there was a caravan to the west, a whole trailer city: hairdressers, food services, technicians, everybody and their dog! There were at least 80 people here, dogs as well, during filming, to support two actors.

These are Hollywood and Canadian film people. They had no idea about how to behave around livestock, and they tended to treat them like extras. The wranglers were the models of patience. The wind was howling, and one of the production people was wearing windpants. They were nylon, like parachute cloth. Snapping in the wind! Thank God it was Jack Norgard's Hereford cows [in the Ennis Feeds Cattle Scene]. Those quiet old Herefords did well, because most cattle would have been bothered by the loud noise and said, "I don't think so, I'm outta here!"

That scene was shot at the end of the driveway, by the caragana trees. Since the cows had already been on green pasture, they weren't interested in the hay that he was throwing to them until grain was thrown down and the hay was thrown on top of it. They made those cows do that scene five times. Those cows should have gotten awards!

The kitchen sink and clothes line are prominent in the film.

The day they were filming here, in early June, the clothes were being whipped to pieces. They flew off and they had to keep putting them back on.



The First of Alma's Sinks

She [Alma] washed diapers in the sink with a scrub board. That was beyond belief. Even in 1960s Wyoming that was too much for me to accept. I grew up in northern Alberta, and we had washing machines. A scrub board was a bit much.

I understand you participated in the fireworks scene.

Yes, that was interesting. They sure had enough fireworks! They shot the fireworks off five times. When they finally were ready they did it rather quickly, because the sun was coming up. It waits for no man, no filmmaker, whatever; it was quickly done.

They had those twin babies for those scenes. The baby handler would take one baby from Alma and trot back to where the mother was with the other twin, then take the other baby out. Babies are only allowed to be on camera for very short periods of time. Anyway, during a break the mother comes out, and one of the babies was fussing. When Heath Ledger picked the baby up it quieted down right away. I guess he would make a good dad.

There were problems with the scene?

They did a lot of retakes and changed the angle of the shot a few times. Thankfully, the bikers were mouthing off when my kids were asleep. I am glad we had quilts along because it was cold that night. It was a very interesting experience.



Filming the Fireworks Scene
Fort Macleod, Alberta

There were some concerns in Fort Macleod afterwards.

Yes, Fort Macleod has a strong Dutch Reform Church following. Some of those people who had businesses on the Main Street and signed up for a cowboy movie, and then found out they were going to be in a gay cowboy movie, were not happy. That was quite

a bone of contention. At that time, the mayor was trying to keep everything together, because a production of that size means a lot of money to these small towns.

After the production was finished, what kind of activity took place here?

They cleaned up, and put things back. They said, "Do you want this door here, or that one put back on?" We would check the work from time to time, and when we saw something that needed doing we would convey it to the head carpenter fellow. That was the person we dealt with for that. After that, we dealt directly with Darryl Solly.

Were you satisfied?

Yes. Basically, yes. You know, if you found a Styrofoam cup stuck in something you weren't too concerned. It is not our primary living place.

After that, there was a long period during which you heard nothing.

With any movie you know it is going to take a couple of years for them to get it on the screen. When *Brokeback Mountain* finally came out, we went to the premier in Fort Macleod, at the Empress Theatre.



Fort Macleod Premiere of *Brokeback Mountain*
January 19, 2006

Of course, there were scenes there that most heterosexual males are not comfortable with, to put it mildly.

No?

The squirm factor was major. Four hundred per cent! [laughter] There were all kinds of people there. Some of the production people from Calgary were there. People from various places came to see it. There was an older couple from Claresholm waiting in

line. In the paper they had listed *Walk the Line*, the Johnny Cash movie, not realizing that it had been preempted. As soon as they discovered it was *Brokeback*, all we saw was dust; they were not sticking around to watch!

Are there gay cowboys?

Yes. The difference between the 1960s and now is so radical that if they are living that today it is not the same. I mean, during the 1960s in Wyoming a lot of people were poor. They were not going to be traveling to L. A. (Los Angeles) for an encounter of some description. A fifty mile circle was their world. Today people travel, and they meet people on the Internet. I can think of at least three, if not four, gay men that I know.

Did you imagine that the film would become an epic motion picture?

After seeing what they did here, we decided that *Brokeback Mountain* would either go whole-hog like it did or that it would never be heard from again.

What we didn't anticipate was all of this! You guys coming along, and believe me, you are not the first to show up. Why, we have had people from all over the world come here.

My husband was an agricultural exchange student to Australia in the late 1970s, where he became friends with a Danish fellow. This fellow came to visit us and brought his seventeen-year-old daughter with him. And this girl came to life like nothing you've ever seen, once she realized that *Brokeback* had been filmed on our place. "You have that film location on your property!?" She had such cachet when she went home, because before the movie was out she had been able to visit one of the sites.

Two little English women showed up and scared the life out of the hired men from the neighbor's farm by telling them, "You look just like the men from *Brokeback Mountain*." They were mortified. You see, Kenny is the shyest old ranching guy you ever saw. He was like, "OK, I think I must go chase a cow now"!

We originally thought, "OK, they have filmed and packed up and gone away, now we will see it in the theatre, end of story." No, it was not the end of the story!

Your property is now a part of motion picture history. A hundred years from now people will continue to appreciate these sites. *Brokeback Mountain* may be your brush with fame.

It has been interesting to have a peripheral association with it. But it is far removed from our day-to-day life. It is kind of like going to Yosemite. You saw it, you did it, you got pictures to prove it, but you are not going to be changed by it. It is not that important, not to us.

After the movie had been shot and done, we had had a drought. Even in the best of weather this is not the most productive land we own. There are a lot of rocks, and it is poor soil. After several hot, dry months it looked very bleak.

My grandmother is this little Ukrainian woman, about 4-foot-10-inches. So, she comes to visit and gets out of the truck and she looks at the dusty dirt and sticks her toe in the soil and says, "Not very good dirt," eyeing John and implying, "Are you taking care of my granddaughter the way you should be?" I knew where her mind was, so I said, "Grandma, last year this land made us more money than all the rest of our land put together!" [laughter]

You have been very kind. Thank you for your time and insights!