

## THE GRAND SCHEME

By Don Robertson



Many newcomers to the South Cariboo and the ranch may be unaware of the grandiose scheme first envisioned by the 108 Recreational Ranch developer, a vision that never came to fruition.

In 1970, the project consisted of 26,805 acres of land, including the resort complex. The present community was the major part of Phase One of the planned five-phase development. This development offered a heady mix of rural living to those tired of city living and was advertised heavily in both Alberta and BC to attract urban dwellers to enjoy country estates in a Cariboo setting.

Today, one wonders just what the then 40 square-mile ranch would look like now if some 5,000 lots had been sold and developed. What would all those new residents have done to sustain a living and support a South Cariboo lifestyle?

Some briefing notes given me by Henry Block, shortly after his announcement to the property owners that the development of Phase II was dead, explained the difficulties encountered in moving the project along due to government restrictions, the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR) 'freeze,' and market conditions. Soon after this halt to ranch development, Block Bros. sold their land interests to Olympia & York, the Reichman brothers operation.

The recreational ranch development's origins began in 1969, when Block Bros. purchased 40 square miles of working ranch from U.S. owners (the Monical family and other interests) for the purpose of developing a model recreational community.

At that time, the ranch consisted of some 8,000 acres of meadowland, 1,700 acres of water in the form of several small lakes plus 17,000 acres of rolling lands covered by light forests. "Topographically, it is a series of treed ridges overlooking valleys, meadows and small lakes," explained Blocks' promotional material. After reaching agreements and with initial approval from municipal, regional and provincial governments on the total concept, the developer, in a short span, converted the project into reality. The B.C. government also passed legislation providing for the use of a Land Use Contract to regulate, control and formalize land development. On Sept. 27, 1972, a contract covering the entire project was concluded with regional and provincial governments and subsequently, registered.

The developers' expenditures on the hub recreational facilities, in the first phase, exceeded \$10 million. The central portion of the project was the 18-hole golf course, clubhouse, motel, swimming pool, airport, riding facilities and a small commercial area (now *The Wheel Room Sports Clinic* and *Gunners Ski & Cycle*).

Many soon-to-be residents came to the 108, attracted by special road and air packages, to view and purchase lots. It wasn't long before the lot owner's numbers exceeded the 1,000 mark. At a meeting in the Red Coach Inn on Oct. 10, 1971, a memorandum of association was adopted and the 108 Property Owners' Association was born.

A major fly in the development ointment was the passage of provincial Bill 42, "the Environment and Land Use Act," providing for the designation and preservation of agricultural lands. Although the 108 was covered by the Land Use Contract, the B.C. Land Commission proposed that the ranch project be included in this land freeze. The Regional District contended that it should be excluded and 1,100 property owners, the adjacent municipalities, the regional district and the company supported that position.

In March 1973, approval was sought from the Ministry of Highways to proceed with the second phase development of some 600 lots, extending northward in the [Walker Valley](#).

Although all levels of local government backed the project, the Ministry failed to respond and a litany of bafflegab issued by the Environment and Land Use Committee added to the delay. On November 9, 1973, the Minister of Highways advised Blocks that the 108 subdivision did not come under the jurisdiction of the Land Use Committee and the project could proceed.

Reassured, the company spent another \$1.75 million on expansion of the hotel facilities, new tennis courts, playgrounds, school recreational facilities, golf course improvements, ski trails, chapel construction, amphitheatre and gardens, plus other amenities, including a move of the stables from 105 Mile to a new facility on Kitwanga Drive (adjacent to the North Entrance). The resort and recreational expansion was based on the projected population and development of the entire five-stage project.

Now, conflict occurred within the Agricultural Land Reserve, as major portions of 108 land were found to be included in that Act. Blocks fought back, pointing out that "the concept incorporates all the objectives of the ALR. It does not destroy any grazing lands; it limits development to some 5,000 wooded acres out of a total of 25,000 acres. These areas to be developed can in no way be considered agricultural from a practical point of view. The development carefully preserves the character of the Cariboo Region."

But, politics and bureaucracy prevailed and Phase II collapsed. As soon as Block Bros. gave up negotiating with the B.C. government, future development of the five-stage ranch concept was also dead. Subsequently, the company sold off the lands east of Hwy. 97 and pastureland to the northwest and the vaunted 40 square miles of recreational land to roam in was pared down to the hub facilities, namely: the motor lodge, riding stables, etc. which were put on the block in 1985, and, in 1986, the [waterworks](#) and [airport](#) became [CRD](#) functions. After 18 years of close association with the growing community, the Block Bros. link with the ranch was finally severed.

Today, the only visible link with the developer is recalled on street names, as Henry Block's original dream shrank to the original development - a far cry from the grand-style recreational ranch idea encompassing five phases. The central resort hub plus 1,500 original lots, plus a few additional lots added later in small pockets, now make up the 108 Mile Ranch community.

The recreational ranch concept has been inherited by the present growing community, which is still charged with maintaining the original ideal ... that human development can sustain a viable "partnership with nature."