

Rewriting the script

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Movie just the newest chapter in Gallagher Ranch's long history

The storied Gallagher Ranch north of San Antonio is different things to different people.

To Mexico's Gen. Santa Anna, it was a military supply depot he commissioned Irish immigrant Peter Gallagher to establish. To thousands of Texans in the decades from the 1920's to the 1980's, it was a fabulously fun dude ranch – Texas' first.

To the producers of "All the Pretty Horses," it was the ideal set - with some changes – for a movie.

But to present owner Chris Hill it is something else again.

"It's a great big old fixer-upper," say the genial architect/developer as he roams the ground of the rustic, U-shaped, native stone ranch headquarters, which has two large living rooms, a restaurant size kitchen and 19 – count them, 19 - bedrooms

Hill bought the place, which had been out of use for a decade, two years ago after having developed some property nearby.

"Someone said 'Do you want to see some more property? There's a great house on it,' "recalls Hill the scion of several prominent old San Antonio families, discussing how he came to buy a portion of the Gallagher Ranch along with its headquarters.

"When I saw it, I went, 'Uh-oh. I like this.'"

That despite the fact that each bedroom "has its own bad plumbing, its own rotten floors, its own missing windows."

But for a man who collects what he downplays as "beat up old furniture," the place was a perfect fit, and soon Hill had furnished the large living rooms with 18th - and 19th - century pieces he had found in Santa Fe, Europe and especially Mexico.

Then Hollywood came calling.

The money was good, so he decided to allow filming at the Gallagher headquarters, which have been transformed into a Mexican hacienda in part by painting the white

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exterior walls a dark terracotta and draping them with artificial bougainvillea and wisteria.

When the moviemakers asked Hill to empty the two large living rooms so their set decorators could refurnish them, he chose to move his own things himself. And he found he liked it better once he got everything arranged in the side wing where he and avid horseman Alfred Robinson now stay when they are not at their Terrell Hills home.

There, using the furniture he has moved, Hill has transformed two adjoining bedrooms into small sitting and dining rooms. Dominating the dining room is an old Spanish revival-style table once owned by a great-uncle, the late Martin Giesecke. A collection of Mexican pottery, including brown glazed barro de luz pieces from Michoacan is displayed in an antique European wooden cabinet.

The small sitting room is graced with a pair of Louis XVI glided-wood armchairs “straight from the Paris flea market” and a well-worn oriental rug that once belonged to Hill’s great-grandmother. Anna Groos Giesecke, daughter of the founder of the Groos Bank.

The master bedroom next door features an 18th - century bookcase and some renderings of saints on parchment come from Portugal.

Yet another bedroom in the wing features a pair of metal beds from the old Ursuline Academy. Off-white fabrics are hung in place of mosquito netting. An antique painted Mexican chest sits alongside.

Hill suggest that his preference for Mexican and European antique furnishing, rather than the expected Western style, probably stems from the two years he spent working on the lavish Hyder home in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

The overriding theme that ties all Hill’s rooms together is a religious one. Glancing at a 19th -century Mexican retablo hanging on one of the bedroom walls, he muses, “I like religious artwork. It’s so fervent, so emotional. The most interesting is the most naïve.”

Arranged on walls, mantels (each bedroom has its own fireplace) and other surfaces are carved wooden crucifixes and saints, and religious paintings on canvas, tin and wood. Several, such as one of a pair of cruces de animas (wooden crosses painted with faces representing souls in Purgatory) have black smudges reflecting their earlier proximity to candles.

“I got those in Queretaro in a little junk store,” he says of the pair that sits on a mantel atop a gray striped serape and under a Veronica retablo rendering of Jesus, so named because the image of his face appears to be on a piece of cloth.

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When Hollywood bids the Gallagher adieu, Hill does not plan to put the furniture he moved from the larger main living rooms back. But not to worry. “I’ve got plenty more furniture to put in them,” he says with a smile.

Once that is accomplished, he will be ready to open the ranch once again to the public for parties, commercials and weddings. But brides beware: The only two he has hosted there have coincided with record rainfalls.

During last October’s deluge, he recalls, a bride and groom had made it to the house by the time San Geronimo creek rose above the road. But the groomsmen had to remove their tuxedo pants and wade through waist-deep water holding their pants and shoes.

At a wedding a year before, the groom had not yet made the flood-swollen crossing, which was deemed impossible. Hence, says Hill, the bride was airlifted from the ranch and the wedding took place at a neighboring home.

But high water or no, Hill has hitched his future to the venerable old place, which is replete with legends and legendary visitors ranging from Will Rogers to Matt Damon, star of “All the Pretty Horses.” (Yes, he has met Damon as well as Henry Thomas another star in the movie-to-be, both of whom he calls “really nice guys”)

“It’s been fun having a movie crew in residence,” Hill says, “and they’ve helped clean out the trees and put electrical wires underground.”

The crew left late last month, and Hill estimates it will take six weeks to get the place back in shape. First on his to-do list is to “go straight back to white” walls.

Then, he says with a smile, undaunted by the demands of his fabled fixer-upper. “I’ve kind of decided I’ll do one room a year. By the time I’ve finished, it’ll be time to start over again.”