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Copy: Photographers Who Get It
Canadian Cowboy Country

Alberta's hot with Hollywood this year. "Go west ten minutes down the road," drawls rancher Marty Edge who's worked on film sets for the odd decade or two and who right now is tilting thoughtfully backwards dangerously close to the fall line in his old pine kitchen chair. "They're supposedly filming Colorado, go east and it's Mexico, south and it's somewhere else. Directors love this province."

Photographers too. Three feature here and prying them out from behind the safety of their cameras proved one in particular right elusive. Ask those same three to explain what makes the prairie light, the Alberta foothills and rangeland special, unique or – particularly – nail what makes the cowboy way of life, of its life affirming connections that grab hearts worldwide - and they all go quiet and introspective and thoughtful.

Each individually in the super-successful bracket, Todd Korol, Kim Taylor and Pat Price are supremely expert at sliding seamlessly into Alberta's landscapes. From pasture, to log cabins, to hand-tooled chaps noticed perched atop an old corral rail...wherever the different personalities of their subject material reside, these photographers into the mind frame unique to each location. It's pure pleasure spending time in their company.

Kim Taylor is a women shape-shifting into becoming supremely at ease with her talent and capabilities and, I'd guess, who's worked hard at that goal. Tall, slim, fiercely elegant, here is a face that will look beautiful at a hundred with timeless bone structure-to-die-for. Her yearly daytimers and calendars are knockout bestsellers, jumbling days of the year together with high-gloss ranch life photographs often accompanied by wonderful quotations. Horse whisperer Ray Hunt reminds us that horses can teach us forever, Doris Bircham dispatches home truths with Saskatchewan firmness. This year Kim's captured a ranch branding absolutely on one page by downsizing ten different photographs and overlaid them over one big shot; the different angles, a day captured in different stages simply accentuate the action kaleidoscope.

Every single order mailed out gets a scribbled note included, personal connection is important to this lady. Her office may look piled high with slides (she's thinking about digital) and storage CDs in what look like chaotic jumbles but interestingly she finds a particular one from a cattle drive of two years back I've asked about in minutes. About eighty per cent, she reckons, of her photographs she shoots

on horseback, these days with a specially adapted camera harness. I ask about her horses' reaction if she's ever used flash when in the saddle and she giggles

Her words slide into each other; she works out a thought right in front of you and perhaps why she's so instinctive on finding a new or better angle to photograph a perspective. "My images," she writes me in an email later, "not only tell a story....they all have a story. Maybe it was the warmth in the light, or was it the glistening sweat on a hard-working ranch horse... the weathered hands that had worked this land since they were childlike....I shoot from my heart."

Collared in the offices of newspaper the Cochrane *EAGLE* photographer Pat Price exhibits all the characteristics of the cornered glazed stare of a rabbit-in-your-headlights-just-before-impact when asked for a byline photograph of himself. Sitting uneasily on a wooden bench by the infamous Westlands Bookstore as I set up the shot, we both notice a pretty brunette watching. "He's a famous photographer," I call out (the impulse was irresistible) and almost lose my subject material right there as he threatens to exit at speed.

Price is on contract for Reuters, a worldwide news wire service; his signature photographs also distinctively stamp the outside front page each week on his local newspaper owned by longtime publisher Jack Tennant. "Reuters picked me up in '85 when they picked up United Press Canada," Pat explains, "I took their last ever photograph at a hockey game then typed in, "The last picture to move on the UPC wire, thank you and goodbye." He laughs, savouring an almost filmmaker closing line Spielberg might enjoy too.

His bread-and-butter speciality is sports – hockey, football, rodeo - and he might be surprised as just how highly regarded he is by his colleagues who equally covet dinner invitations as he's a fiercely accomplished cook of the first water. I complain that sports editors always seem to use people falling into water jumps when it comes to covering horse events and his mouth straightens, eyes narrowing with cynical-around-the-edges humour. "I look," he shrugs, "for wrecks, it's what sells."

Like Kim Taylor, Price has a book of Alberta's ranching foothills life firmly in crystal clear focus as a future project, from photographs taken over decades. His motives, though, are completely different, with simple admiration for early homesteaders and ranchers and cowboys top of his shooting list. He shakes his head, wondering, amazed at the resilience, the toughness, the discipline needed day after day. "I couldn't do it," he says simply, while adding he wishes more ranches would let him capture, document their way of life.

I know from a story of Jack Tennant's that sometimes Price will drive his ancient gas-guzzler somewhere and sit, waiting, for fifteen minutes, seeing if something might happen. It sounds erratic and is anything but; he's watched wildlife move in precise corridors for years, watched fingers of sunlight walk down shadowed

hills at certain times, or thought about leaves falling against a backdrop of a blue hazed Devil's Head. Sometimes he admits an idea can take years to happen.

Or, he smiles, "sometimes you just see it when you get there. And you have to forget the inner image that may be in your mind." A complex man with an unerring ability to be in the right place for that split second shot that-tells-you-everything.

Equally charismatic is Todd Korol, loosely Calgary based although these days he's traveling the globe on commissions piling up at speed from international newspapers and magazines. Korol shot dynamite photographs years back for the now deceased *EQUINOX* magazine (absorbed into *CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC*)...some readers may remember a certain *COWBOY CULTURE* feature co-written with Ian Tyson.

"My parents probably thought I was a weird kid," Todd remarks leaning across a coffee house table. "When I was eight years old, my son's age, I loved the country, loved the farm, loved driving a disking tractor across the fields. Then, " he shakes his head, mouth edges tilting upward, "when I was 14 I discovered Winnipeg, the art galleries and art and paintings, architecture. My life kind of divided after that."

Back, he goes on explaining, when he did that *COWBOY CULTURE* piece, and before that really, when he was working and photographing range life, individual faces and cowboys, "that was a pure time in my life."

"I was," he remarks, "probably making a quarter of what I earn now, there was time to play, to be a cowboy, to be with cowboys. It was good to be alive, I'd wake up and think that."

"A camera," he insists, "is a passport into people's lives. The ranching community has always been generous, always let me in. A cowboy would invite me for an hour and I'd end up spending the day, talking, taking photographs, working. I'd try and be interactive, to the point where they wouldn't notice you any more."

Korol is known for using a prodigious amount of film, say 15-20 rolls of film a day. "That's 720 shots," he exclaims, "and perhaps I'll get one really outstanding photograph. Sometimes you'd get three minutes of great light; all day you'd be taking what you knew were crap shots with indifferent light and then suddenly you'd get one magical picture."

These days he's in love too with Central America, Mexico, Cuba. "The light's magical," he gestures wildly, "there's such political tension there too, the air almost fizzes with that energy."

Rangeland detailing, he reminisces, may be on a backburner right now, “but it’s something I think about all the time. I want to explore the landscape this next time, no people in it, because the landscape’s changing in our lifetime too.” I notice he drives an environmentally friendly vehicle and he admits his family’s lifestyle is conscious of the impact of the human footprint. He wants to use colour, large portraits. “Grittier, more real,” he feels, “black and white can be too romantic.”

“I remember,” Korol’s smile easily slices through deepening shadows of dusk, “a cowboy looking one day across a view that would take your breath away and remarking it was part of the pay.”

THE END