

## **Santa Clarita-area ranches: Not just for westerns anymore**

**By Richard Verrier, Los Angeles Times**

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On a cold, wet afternoon two cowboys trudge across a muddy street in a western town carrying saddles on their backs as a loudspeaker blasts Jim Croce's hit song "I Got a Name."

The scene was being played out at the historic Melody Ranch in Santa Clarita, where director Quentin Tarantino was filming his upcoming western "Django Unchained," starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Jamie Foxx.

"It's a blast shooting here," Tarantino said during a break from shooting. "Most other western towns look like dollhouses. This has the complete look. It's fantastic."

There are as many as 10 ranches in the Santa Clarita area that have become increasingly busy with production, providing a big boost to the local economy. The mostly privately owned ranches are hosting a wide range of productions, including westerns such as "Django," beer and truck ads for the upcoming Super Bowl and a soon-to-shoot scene set in Afghanistan for the HBO series "True Blood."

The city, which dubs itself Hollywood North, had a record year for film production last year with a 15% increase in shooting production days.

Some of the ranches are expanding. Walt Disney Co. is preparing to build a dozen soundstages on the Golden Oak Ranch, a prime location for such classics as "Old Yeller," "The Apple Dumpling Gang" and more recent releases such as "The Muppets" and "Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End."

Tarantino's "Django," a story about a slave turned bounty hunter, is among many productions — including TV shows such as FX's "Justified" and ABC's game show "Wipeout" — that regularly shoot on ranches in the Santa Clarita area in northern Los Angeles County.

Although most of the ranches are in the county and outside the city limits, they have become vital contributors to Santa Clarita's growing film industry, which already is home to several soundstages and TV shows, such as the CBS series "NCIS," the TBS comedy "Franklin & Bash," and two ABC family shows, "Jane by Design" and "Make It or Break It." The city views the ranches as key to the long-term growth of the industry and recently approved a zoning designation that makes it easier for owners of ranches in the city limits to host filming and build soundstages and other production-related facilities on their property.

"The movie ranches are very film-friendly, and they help keep Santa Clarita top of mind for location managers who are considering a place to film," said Russell Sypowicz, film office administrator for Santa Clarita.

The ranches are popular among filmmakers for several reasons.

- They offer wide open spaces — one boasts more than 800 acres — that can accommodate large crews and enable filmmakers to shoot in one location without the cost and hassle of filming in residential neighborhoods.
- They have diverse terrains, including mountains, oak groves, lakes and desert landscapes, enabling them to double for locations as diverse as Afghanistan and Virginia.

- The ranches are within the so-called 30-mile studio zone from West Hollywood, which determines the rates and work rules for union workers. Filmmakers like to stay within the zone because shooting outside the radius is more expensive.

In addition, each of the ranches offers something different and many have ready-made sets catering to certain types of movies or scenes.

Melody Ranch, which opened as Monogram Studios in 1915, has long been famous for its western sets and hosts an annual Santa Clarita Cowboy Festival. The original western town was burned down in a fire in 1962. The Veluzat family bought the property from Gene Autry two decades ago and restored the ranch, which now has 74 buildings and two sound stages.

The western town is popular for movies, especially westerns, but also commercials, including Super bowl commercials recently shot by Budweiser and Dodge Truck. "The town has been pretty busy," Renaud Veluzat said.

He and his brother Andre also own another ranch in Santa Clarita that is known for its Spanish town.

A third Veluzat brother, Rene, owns the 100-acre Blue Cloud Ranch in Saugus that specializes in military settings, with an Afghanistan-town set that is so real the U.S. military uses it for training. The ranch also has a full-scale army camp and 50 military vehicles, including tanks, Humvees and helicopters.

A former stuntman and actor, Rene Veluzat bought the ranch in 2000. He says he booked 70 shows and more than \$2 million in revenue last year, renting his property to crews for such TV shows as "Touched" and "Chuck" and the low-budget war movie "Battle Force."

"I get 50 phone calls a day," Veluzat said. "I'm booked up into March."

The sprawling Golden Oak Ranch, which spans more than 800 acres, recently built a business district set with 42 stores and a residential street with 13 houses, each with a different architectural style, according to its website.

A few miles east off Placerita Canyon Road is the much smaller A Rancho Deluxe, a 200-acre movie ranch started by Steve Arklin, who sold a sanitation business and used the proceeds to buy the ranch in the mid-1980s. Initially, his goal was to earn enough to pay taxes on the property.

His Sand Canyon ranch, which includes an artificial lake, Mediterranean villa, cabins and a western town surrounded by mountains, has attracted 10 productions in the last two months alone, among them a salsa commercial, the TV show "Bones" and an upcoming Rob Zombie movie called "Lords of Salem." "If I can pay my taxes and my kids earn a living out of it, that's a good thing," said Arklin, who runs the business with his two sons.

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