

Palen's artistic talents run from comic to serious

By DEBRA BAKER BECK, Alumnews Editor

Renowned artist and 1998 distinguished alumnus Jerry Palen (BS '69) has never been one to follow the rules.

"I was always intimidated by the kids who could keep their crayons within the lines," he admits. "I was one of those kids who could never keep it in the lines. I wanted to go off and do my own thing."

Apparently, that rebel streak has served him well — the Wyoming native grew up to be a world-famous cartoonist who is equally talented in other media, particularly sculpting and watercolor.

Art was his destiny. Jerry's father developed a massive western art collection over the years, including original paintings from the leading artists of the era (e.g., Charles M. Russell). Indeed, the elder Palen was an expert in western art and in western Americana.

"I grew up with his interest in it and his avocation for fine art," Palen says of his father's influence. "I spent a lot of time with artists, art critics and art museum directors coming and going out of our house." Jerry also spent a significant amount of his travels as a youth visiting galleries and museums around the country.

Going to college was his mother's idea.

"My mother said, 'Look, I know you're going to be an artist and a bum. But you're going to get an education.'" That is how Palen ended up at UW, where he studied political science and economics.

After college, Jerry headed to Santa Barbara, Calif., a sleepy artist community in the 1960s. There, he studied with two masters, who took him under his wing and helped him develop the fundamentals and developed a good background in fine art.

Palen still draws upon that background as he spends about half of his time creating commissioned pieces in bronze and in watercolors. At the time this interview was conducted, Palen was working on a life-sized bronze of "a young Wyoming-type kid" that will stand in front of the state's Barrett Building in Cheyenne when complete and on a fountain for a private residence.

Watercolor is another favorite medium for Palen. He sells about 20 per year, most of them commissioned works. Usually, he gets to pick the subject; and it's frequently a scenic piece that is almost abstract in style. Palen likes to take risks in this medium, which means he regularly discards pieces that just don't work.

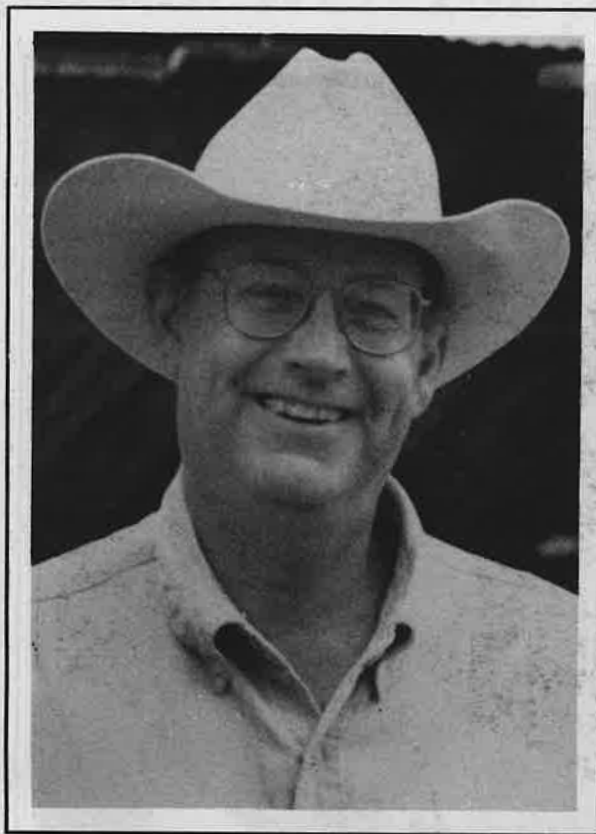
"I'm pushing the watercolor medium right to the breaking point," he says.

His art is part of some of the finest public and private collections in the U.S., Canada and Europe. It's even made it to Africa. This spring, when President Bill Clinton traveled to that continent, so did a Palen sculpture. Clinton presented the work, which featured a moving steer, to the leader of one of the African nations he visited there; and the gift was well-received.

Art lovers also can find work by Palen on the UW campus — a bronze bust of P.A.B. Widener sits prominently in the Widener Room of the Williams Conservatory. Other Palen works call the UW American Heritage Center home.

Elmo and Flo

Palen probably is most famous for his cartoon series, "Stampede," which chronicles life through the



Jerry Palen

eyes of Elmo and Flo, a ranch couple. Though distinctly rural in flavor, "Stampede" draws a global audience that follows Elmo and Flo and relates to their perspectives. "Stampede" appears in publications around the world; and related products — including books, t-shirts and calendars — also are available. In addition, several large companies (e.g., Merck Animal Health Products and SOLIDLOCK, one of the world's largest fence manufacturers) incorporate the "Stampede" characters into their advertising campaigns.

Why does the 25-year-old cartoon appeal to so many different cultures? It's simple.

"Art is a kind of a universal language," Palen explains, whatever the medium may be. Simplicity and universality are qualities he strives for in all of his artistic endeavors, including the cartoon.

That universal ability to draw a reaction is why "Stampede" works so well: virtually everyone can think of someone who resembles Elmo or Flo in some way.

The cartoon couple are a composite of many ranch families Palen met during the late 1950s and 1960s, while accompanying his father, a large animal veterinarian, on his rounds across southeast Wyoming.

"Elmo and Flo are just a compilation of those people."

Coming up with names for the characters wasn't a long-deliberated process. They popped into his head as he met with Bob McCracken, then ag editor of the *Wyoming Stockman-Farmer*, who liked the series and offered to pay him. McCracken asked about the couple's names, and Palen just blurted something out.

"I was so desperate to make the \$5 that he offered to pay me per cartoon that I said, 'Oh, that's Elmo and Flo,'" he says. The names stuck.

While focusing on fairly timeless themes, he admits that the couple have changed a bit over the years.

"They've probably gotten simpler, just because as I get older I get simpler."

Flo's unique ability to accessorize — she's known for her trademark oversized boots and gloves — comes from Palen's wife, Ann. Called out to help with some chore on the family ranch outside of Cheyenne, Ann would grab the first set of boots and work gloves she could find, usually something far too big. That "look" became Flo's.

Flo's a pretty popular girl, according to marketing studies conducted by companies using "Stampede" in their ad campaigns.

"Flo is more well-known than Snoopy (of the "Peanuts" cartoon) in the agriculture set," Palen says. "Schultz ("Peanuts" creator Charles) and I have something in common — he's rich and Flo's recognizable."

Elmo's a bit different character.

"He's always grumpy, and he's always grumpy at the wrong time," Palen says of Flo's spouse.

Fan mail comes from everywhere and is always positive. Palen has been known to actually receive letters addressed to "Stampede Cartoons, Wyoming." He's also fielded calls from people like commentator Paul Harvey, who usually wants copies of cartoons that mention him, and a nameless Illinois farmer who regularly called to say, "liked that cartoon in the paper" before hanging up. (Palen never knew which cartoon or which paper.)

"Stampede" is more than a cultural phenomenon — it's also a thriving business. Stampede, Inc., of which Palen is president and CEO, is based in Saratoga, Wyo., a small town just over the Snowy Range in Carbon County. That organization handles the production and marketing of the cartoon and related merchandise.

The Palens also run Saratoga Publishing, which produces a variety of printing jobs. Two recent publications were a book commemorating the National Cattlemen's Association centennial and a cookbook for the National Football League's Jacksonville Jaguars.

Unique Grazing Approach

Art isn't the only area where Palen has won acclaim. He's also well known for implementing a relatively unique approach to grazing on his Cheyenne ranch, which he owned until moving to Saratoga.

Palen is one of the first ranchers to practice an intensive, holistic approach to grazing. It was inspired by Alan Savory of Rhodesia, who noticed that during African droughts, animals move in and out of parched areas en masse. Whenever they would leave an area, vegetation would spring back up, even better than before.

Palen took that observation and applied it to the Wyoming rangeland. With the help of his ranch manager and his teenage sons, he partitioned off the ranch into 40-acre parcels then moved the herd around from section to section. The result of having thousands of hooves "roto-tilling" the soil doubled the land's carrying capacity. Besides improving the

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overall productivity of his ranch, his efforts in this area have earned him several conservation and agricultural awards.

Miscellany

Palen and his wife, Ann Prosser Palen (EX '67), have two sons: Eric (BS '94), a law student at UW; and Brian, a student at Creighton Medical School. Ann's grandfather, Dean Prosser Sr., served on the UW trustees. He was that group's president in 1927 and 1928.

In 1997, Jerry donated a significant portion of his father's western art collection to the UW American Heritage Center. He also donated his artist's fee for the Widener sculpture to UW, continuing a long tradition of philanthropy through art.

Palen is listed in *Who's Who of American Art* and is a member of the prestigious National Cartoonist Society. He has been honored by agricultural groups for his contributions to that industry. Jerry also has been selected to be in the Governor's Art Show during Cheyenne Frontier Days for the past five years and is a multi-year nominee for the Governor's Art Award.