

PineStraw

A woman with brown hair, wearing a teal vest over a black long-sleeved shirt, is holding the lead rope of a brown horse with a white blaze on its face. The horse is wearing a black halter with brass-colored buckles. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with greenery and a wooden fence.

The Art & Soul of the Sandhills

February 2014

Saving Sam A Love Story

*The Gentleman Painter
A Thoroughly Modern Rose
For a Love of Wellies*

PART TWO

The Gentleman Painter

Percy Rosseau's unexpected life at Overhills provided an artist's ideal sanctuary, allowing him a foot in two distinct worlds

By GAYVIN POWERS



Not long ago, a rustic painting of a hunt called *October on Grassy Hill*, portrait of 'Transue Bill' and 'Glensale Harry' set the art world aflutter owing to its sale price of \$120,000. Impressionist strokes feature hounds hunting through a straw-yellow field flanked by a forest full of autumn colors, inducing romantic overtones. This painting and others like it have resonated with sportsmen for almost a century, but this one has local ties. It is the creation of Percival Rosseau, an artist residing in the Sandhills in the early 1900s.

A nationally recognized artist, Rosseau came here at the invitation of Percy Rockefeller, who was so taken with Rosseau's work that he built the painter his own cottage at Overhills, the vanished Rockefeller family retreat that is now part of Fort Bragg.

The warm climate, protective pine trees, plentiful birds and serene surroundings making up the over 40,000-acre escape at Overhills proved an ideal winter retreat and artistic inspiration for Rosseau. Rockefeller spent

time considering the artistic and creative needs when planning Rosseau's cottage, ultimately funding a getaway that was primarily an artist's studio. Located on a hilltop, the one-room studio featured a cathedral ceiling that let in the northern light. To take full advantage of the light, Rosseau's home had, as Ed Bruce, Jr. fondly remembers in *Overhills On! History*, "a big row of windows all the way across the side up about six or eight feet off (the) floor," bringing nature's enchantment indoors.

Despite its straight forward subject matter, *October on Grassy Hill*, portrait of 'Transue Bill' and 'Glensale Harry' is much more than its simplicity would suggest, due to the expertly faded background that gives the impression of movement and skillfully drawn canines with bodies "on-point." These subtle details are capable of a masterful artist greatly familiar with his subject.

With such grand success and wealthy connections, one may think that Rosseau was charmed from birth. Not true. A look at his life reveals both times of good fortune and of great despair. Ultimately, his determination and talent rose above adversity, thus minimizing the tragedies in his life.



With a less than ideal start in life, how did Rosseau, an orphan, become an accomplished artist who captivated an elite class of American sportsmen, gain expert knowledge of hunting dogs, and spend the last twenty winters of his life at Overhills?

The story of Rosseau's life is more suited for a Zane Grey novel or as an accompaniment to Teddy Roosevelt's adventurous *Rough Riders*. The son of a Louisiana plantation owner in Pointe Coupée Parish, Rosseau's father and two older brothers were killed during the Civil War, and soon after that, his mother succumbed to illness. When General W.T. Sherman set fire to his family's plantation, Rosseau and his sister avoided the same fate when they were rescued by a slave. The two were later raised in Kentucky by a family friend who instilled a love of nature in young Percy, teaching him how to shoot and fish.

With little more than his name and a handshake to recommend him, Rosseau decided at the age of 17 that it was time to make his fortune and acquire a dowry for his sister. In the spirit of the burgeoning west, he worked as a cowboy from Mexico to Kansas along the Chisholm Trail for six years; failed as lumber entrepreneur; and was ultimately prosperous as a fruit importer in New York. Finally, Rosseau had achieved his financial ambitions at the age of 35. He made enough money from his investments that he retired, leaving the business in the hands of his partner. This accomplishment gave him the financial freedom to make a dramatic change and pursue his artistic aspirations.

While traveling to study art at Académie Julian in Paris, a chance encounter

in Hawaii, Rosseau met Nancy Bidwell, another orphan, who was on holiday on the island. The two were inseparable; however, Rosseau honored the

ship captain's recommendation to take a guardian's eye while spending time with Bidwell, allowing the two to get to know each other while adhering to proper courting etiquette. At the end of Bidwell's vacation, she returned to Chicago and Rosseau continued on to school in France, but not before becoming engaged.

They were married in Paris while Rosseau was attending art school. Their joy didn't last long, though. In 1898, Rosseau was shocked to discover that his business partner had fled to Brazil with all of the company's funds. With his finances depleted, the two escaped ruin by living off Nancy's dowry which, fortunately, enabled Rosseau to continue attending art school.

Rosseau was often quoted by art experts saying, "In France, I used to spend a great deal of time in the hunting field making sketches from the day that shooting season opened. Most of the painting over there (in France) was from such sketches."

Recognition of his artistic talent was swift. In 1903, while still in art school, Rosseau received significant notoriety for his untitled exhibition of Diana and two wolfhounds; critiques looked past the naked version of Nancy as the Greek goddess Diana and took special notice of the

realistic rendering of the Irish wolfhounds. The next year at the 1904 Salon, he presented two paintings featuring setters, and the response was unlike anything he'd received before. The day after the exhibition opened, he received eleven telegrams asking about the price for his paintings—both sold *tout suite*.





This solidified his demand as an artist.

Since this was a turning point, art aficionados also frequently quote Rosseau as saying, "Thereafter I had little trouble selling my work. A man should paint what he knows best, and I knew more about animals than anything else."

A sportsman himself, Rosseau's talent and interest in painting dogs came at the perfect moment in time, aligning him with a national pastime of the elite. The steady surge of wealth in the United States was increasing thanks to "the rapid growth of capitalist enterprise, industrial corporations and investment banks, primarily based in New York, (and) created a sport as well as common aspects of worldview, attitude, motivation, and social affiliations," notes the *Overhills Oral History*. "With massive wealth came the luxury of leisure time, which many filled with hunting for their social standing."

Such inflated financial success solidified a class of wealthy men who were prime examples of "work hard, play hard" — long before the phrase became popular. Their patronage of artists like Rosseau helped to memorialize their love of hunting and their social standing. From the early 1900s through the

1930s, Overhills was the pinnacle of this type of lifestyle and society.

Content with his prosperous professional and personal life in France, Rosseau frequently traveled to the United States, staying at wealthy patrons' homes and hunting estates to fulfill commissions until 1915. With World War I devastating Europe and threatening Paris, Rosseau moved his wife and two sons to a permanent home in Lyme, Connecticut, where the summers were pleasant and winters were astonishingly cold.

With the war waging in France, for a second time in life, Rosseau averted disaster. Earlier, in 1914, Rockefeller had built Rosseau's cottage at Overhills for him and Nancy, providing them an open invitation. The Rosseaus accepted, spending the late autumn through early spring at Overhills annually, placing them in an interesting category among the staff on site.

Rosseau walked with a foot in

two worlds, both as a guest who often hunted and enjoyed the amenities of the sprawling estate and who also worked for Rockefeller as his personal artist-in-residence.

If the pine trees, yellow fields, manmade lake and sandy terrain were the





backdrop for Rosseau's canvases, then the Walter Fox and Maryland hound dogs and Thoroughbred horses at Overhills were his subjects through the 1930s, when he and Nancy would escape from the cold Connecticut winters. Even though the subjects in his paintings were similar, nor were they portrayed that way on Rosseau's canvases.

Susan Leask, senior curator at San Jose Museum of Art and the daughter of an Army officer in the 82nd Airborne at Fort Bragg, recalls during her childhood "seeing one of Rosseau's paintings on the wall in my friend's father's study. It was a yellow dog with a beautifully described head and a chin so well rendered that it 'felt' warm and soft."

It's the "warm and soft" detail Leask mentions that hearkens back to Overhills, a dreamy landscape unknown to most except for the elite who visited, their friends or the workers, who remained hush about their employ-

ers to the outside world. At the restful retreat, Rosseau traded the traditional, darker palate found in popular European hunting paintings for canvases filled with golden hues and backgrounds with loose lines, thus creating the warm, romantic effect on canvas that Leask remembers as a child.

Though Rosseau and his wife faced tragedies in life, they found an idyllic sanctuary among the pines, reveling in the virtually untouched landscape and days filled with art, beauty and sportsmanship. A unique refuge not found elsewhere, Nancy continued visiting the retreat long after her husband's death in 1937.

Akin to modern day photographers, Rosseau captured a beloved part of Overhills, memorializing a forgotten time and place in Sandhills' history. A bit of a rogue aristocrat whose story would fill the pages of a western novel, Rosseau is like an old cowboy with a mysterious past who rides off into the sunset seeking solace at Overhills — a place that

proved to be a haven for him and his family until the last of the northern light faded. **PS**