



ROCKING P RANCH AND THE SECOND CATTLE FRONTIER IN WESTERN CANADA

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Introducing the *Rocking P Gazette*

As the reader will no doubt now realize, a significant portion of the information we have used to describe and explain the growth and development of the Macleay enterprises in the Porcupine Hills south of Calgary has been gleaned from the *Rocking P Gazette* newspaper. That fact alone tells us that the paper is a fertile primary source. There is, however, much more in it that speaks volumes not just about this one very well-known ranching outfit but about the social, cultural, and economic attributes of the family operation as it emerged and then in a sense became an institution on the northern Great Plains of North America. As promised, we will now examine the paper closely in an effort to unveil the very large and varied types of information it provides. This chapter introduces the main contributors and provides a basic discussion of the quality and significance of their involvement.

One of the characteristics of the *Rocking P Gazette* that strikes the reader almost immediately is its professional quality, especially considering that during its life, from 1923 to 1925, the two editors were in their early to mid-teens. The writing for the most part is fluent, the grammar precise, and even the spelling remarkably accurate for an age predating computers and spell check. Also, while the overall appeal is unashamedly country and western, virtually every issue features at least one educational article, usually on an Old-World subject such as “Sparta’s Bravest Man,”¹ “The Pottery of Peru,”² “The Dark Age in Poland,” or “Charlemagne.”³ Authorship designated by a pseudonym reveals that Dorothy and/or Maxine were the essayists, presumably using books brought to their attention by their teacher.



FIGURE 7.1. Home schooling for Dorothy and Maxine by teacher Watts. *Rocking P Gazette*, April 1925, 85. Property of the Blades and Chattaway families and their descendants.

The girls were well equipped to edit the *Rocking P Gazette* in part because they were not products of the country school system. On close investigation, historians have discovered that the typical rural school in the 1920s was poorly financed and equipped, with shoddy instruction, often by a single unqualified teacher in a one-room setting where up to a dozen students of various ages and grades had to be accommodated.⁴ Though Rod attended meetings of the local Muirhead school board and actually sat as trustee in 1924, he and Laura could not expect their children to begin school three miles away when too young to saddle their own horse, let alone open the many gates; and after the war, the Spanish flu was a real concern.⁵ Therefore, between 1916 and 1925, with the exception of two years, they had a hired teacher living on the ranch to work with the girls throughout the school year.⁶ If Ms. Ethel Watts, who supervised Dorothy and Maxine's work on the *Rocking P Gazette* (1923–25), is any indication, the Macleays chose their teachers very well.

Fittingly, it was Ms. Watts who recognized the girls' editorial ability, their energy, and their dedication in one of the fine pieces she herself wrote for the paper.

“Scene – Kitchen”
Any Evening”

By the Printers' Devil

See them, far into the night,
Under a dim, religious light,
Tax their brains and rack their heads
Till tis time to seek their beds
For the sake of our Gazette!

See their worried, anxious looks
Pond'ring deep o'er many books!
Page after page of pencilled treasure
They have writ for public pleasure,
For our “Rocking P. Gazette.”

Hush! Hats off to these great minds!
Walk on tiptoe – draw the blinds!
Honour to each lofty brain –
Hard the labour, great the strain,
Producing our Gazette.

One creates deep themes of love;
One portrays the skies above,
One our hearts, with danger, thrills,
One our eyes, with teardrops fills,
By tales in the Gazette.

Tales of knightly deeds, out West,
Filled with song and timely jest;
Days of Ranch and cowboy-life,
Poems of love, and mortal strife
You'll find in our Gazette.

Have you ought to advertise?
Down our columns cast your eyes.
Perchance your needs you'll recognize.
And please, don't harshly criticize
Your "Rocking P Gazette."

When you're far from friends and home,
When in city haunts you roam,
Turn your lonely heart, – peruse.
With home-sick tears, the "local news."
In your Gazette.

Then give Three Cheers for the writers two,
Working by night, and all for you!
May success their labours crown!
May Suns of Glory ne'er go down.
On the name "Macleay," of wide renown
The Authors of our Gazette!?



FIGURE 7.2. “Unexpected Guests,” Dorothy Macleay, *Rocking P Gazette*, November 1923, Cover. Property of the Blades and Chattaway families and their descendants.



FIGURE 7.3. Maxine Macleay's talented depiction of the motion (and the excitement) of "bronco bustin." *Rocking P Gazette*, October 1924, 27. Property of the Blades and Chattaway families and their descendants.

As noted previously, the young editors were also blessed with abundant artistic talents. A number of their own poems and illustrations will be featured here. Above are two of many examples of their visual art found in the *Gazette*.

Some of the plots the young editors presented in their many short stories about second frontier ranchers, ranch hands, outlaws, and relationships are, to be sure, not particularly sophisticated. One argument here, however, is that this reflects their understanding of the types of people they were attempting to reach. From the content, it is evident that the paper was meant for all the men and women who worked on the Rocking P and Bar S Ranches at the time of its production. Because it was handwritten it could only come out in one copy, so after the Macleay household at the Rocking P headquarters read it, it must have been circulated through the bunkhouses on both ranches, where single and relatively young rough-and-tumble cowpunchers predominated. As we will see, while keeping the Macleay household informed and entertained, the paper also attempted to relate to and reflect a bunkhouse culture.

The extent of the two girls' input can be gauged from studying the script. Most of the text is in the handwriting of one or the other. For comparison, easily viewed together are Dorothy's "Cowboy Cal," by "Bucking Barns," and Maxine's "Roaring River Canyon," by "Dan Panhandle," in the October 1923 issue.⁸ It would be misleading not to mention that a significant minority of the writing in the *Rocking P Gazette* was done by Ethel Watts, and that she deserves much of the credit for its high standards. She was, after all, responsible in this period for the girls' education. Moreover, she set up each edition by providing the "index" (or table of contents) at the beginning, and she wrote a short story or poem (and sometimes both) for almost every issue, variously endorsed E. W., E. B. W., the "Schoolmarm," or the "Director of Education." Given that she lived with the Macleays at the Rocking P ranch, she was in an excellent position to work with Dorothy and Maxine day in and day out and even when school was not in session. She was able as well to vet each issue of the paper before it came out and to see to the correction of any mistakes she detected or flaws of style, grammar, or spelling. She must also have been a great encouragement to her two charges, in order to keep them committed to the project through seventeen monthly issues.

We have pointed out that women and girls played numerous substantial roles in the early ranching and farming world, and it is fitting that these three particularly capable ladies were able to voice their perspectives through the pages of this remarkable publication. Moreover, that they were able, as will become evident, to get the cowboys and other workers on Macleay ranches regularly to write original poetry for the *Gazette*, and to supply reports about what they considered newsworthy in their working and leisure worlds, brings out the raw, mostly male culture on this one ranch. This is important too. The second cattle ranching frontier in western Canada is distinguishable from the first principally by its longevity (indeed, by all appearances, its permanency). We need to examine it more closely from all its cultural, as well as its agricultural, perspectives in order to gain a better understanding of its attributes—that is, to discover what made it tick. Hopefully, in conjunction with the first portion of our study, the second will help us to take some valuable steps in that direction.