



RANCHING WOMEN IN SOUTHERN ALBERTA by Rachel Herbert

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Introduction: Women on the Ranching Frontier

On a frosty foothills morning in the early 1900s, shouts of “Ride ’em, La-Grandeurs” pierced the chill air.¹ Two riders, one with skirts flapping, rode out the bucking of their frisky mounts before galloping off toward home, much to the delight of the cheering friends they had just left behind at a barn dance.² Violet LaGrandeur’s life story, punctuated by independent triumphs and the literal and figurative bruises that come from hard falls, is only one of many that can be told about women who rode, ranched, and raised families in the grasslands of the Canadian West. Despite the significance of their contributions, and women’s undeniable presence on the range from the earliest frontier period to the present, studies focusing on ranch women are noticeably absent from the historiography of the West. Farm women, however, have been widely historicized; from depictions of a life of drudgery to the image of the selfless helpmate, they have been cast in a supportive role in the settlement of the prairies. Their involvement in the development of agricultural communities as well as the challenges and accomplishments in their lives have been recognized in a range of articles and monographs.³ In contrast, extant histories of ranching frontiers have been dominated by research that perpetuates the myth of the cattle industry as a masculine realm. In most analyses, ranchers are assumed to be men, while their wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters are given cursory treatment. Too often, the early range men’s business endeavours

are dissected and their “cowboying” exploits glorified, creating an image of an entirely male-dominated pioneer cattle industry. This book intends to write ranch women into western history. It argues that the ranching frontier was not “hell on horses and women,” but an environment that fostered women’s resourcefulness and independence and in turn led them to transcend the restrictions of traditional gender roles and participate as active and essential players in the emerging cattle industry in Alberta.⁴

This study was largely motivated by my attempts to reconcile what I knew about my family’s lived experience, on the one hand, with the history of the Alberta frontier that I encountered in books and popular culture, on the other. My family has ranched in Alberta since the 1880s. Independent and capable women have played a role in maintaining and sustaining our family ranch – as comfortable on a horse as they were in the kitchen – and I know the same is true on neighbouring outfits. As the fourth generation to ranch and raise a family here, I am certain that although technology has changed and shaped important aspects of our lives, the rhythms and routines of ranch life remain unchanged for many women. What I knew of my great-grandmother and what I saw my grandmother and her sister accomplish led me to believe that everyone acknowledged that women were, and are, integral to the success of family ranches. What I encountered in books and in the history courses I took at university, however, told a different story. Ranching women were largely invisible. The early women who helped to settle the province had homesteaded and farmed, I read; they fed threshing crews, grew gardens, and raised large families. But what of my great-aunt Mary, who taught me to work a cow from horseback when I was eleven and she was eighty? What of the “guest book” (favourite reading at our summer ranch) that told of the girls’ riding to the hills in the 1920s to bring home the strays in the fall? What of the photographs my granny showed me in her kitchen, scented by rising bread dough, that depict her mother mounted and ready to start sorting the herd for branding? And Granny, age five, bundled on a pony and ready to ride to the one-room Sunset School, her *tapaderos*⁵ dragging in the snow? These images did not connect to those I encountered in popular culture, of the rugged and solitary men who were said to live and ride hard as they established the cattle industry in the West. As I pursued my academic goals, began my own family and cattle herd, and became more aware of the living ranching



0.1 A YOUNG
CONSTANCE
INGS, THE
AUTHOR'S
GRANDMOTHER,
RIDING HER
PONY DAFFY
TO SUNSET
SCHOOL (c.1924).
COURTESY OF
LOREE FAMILY.

culture around me, it seemed timely and appropriate for me to bring to light the realities of the many ranching women in Alberta's past.

While the curiosity that fuelled this research was driven by my personal family history and my own sense of place within a ranching community, the theoretical framework of this study is shaped by the influences of scholars working within the field of western women's history, and

particularly those concentrated in the study of the ranchers' West. Writing "herstory" had preoccupied many scholars in the 1980s when western women's history began to flourish.⁶ Currently, both Canadian and American historians continue to grapple with the complexities of women's experiences on the western frontier – a concept fraught with symbols and ideologies that has long integrated myths of nation-building with constructions of masculinity. Historian Elizabeth Jameson still argues that "to add women to history will require us to separate the mythic Wests of both countries from history and to analyze how gender has functioned in them."⁷ The frontier – with its associated connotations of conquest, patriarchy, and individualism – is a problematic term for revisionist western historians who have sought a more inclusive and complicated history of the West using race, class, and gender as necessary categories of analysis.⁸ Despite this, the significance of the notion of the frontier endures.⁹ This study considers the frontier as a fundamental component of its analysis, both as a concept and a region. When its accompanying myths of masculinity are deconstructed, the frontier represents unknown potentials for both men and women. The frontier, as it pertains to this analysis of southern Alberta, was the liminal "social process" involved in creating new settlement and refers to a specific natural environment dominated by grasslands that had yet to be understood by those who sought to put it into agricultural production.¹⁰ Gender, another essential concept for this study, was, like the frontier, socially and culturally constructed and particular to time and place.¹¹ Thus, as men and women adapted to the conditions of the frontier and the patterns and expectations of their lives changed, their experience of gender and gender-specific roles evolved as well.

Within the field of ranching history, as historian Sarah Carter observes, some earlier works, including those by Sheilagh Jameson and Lewis Thomas, examined the lives of women, but few focused on the role of women in the cattle industry and ranching culture.¹² In a 1997 article, Carter argues that "a cherished myth of an entirely masculine ranching culture and cattle industry has proven difficult to dislodge. . . . It has been only through the highly selective use of evidence that the idea of a masculine ranching culture has been created and sustained."¹³ While some myths about the West have been dismantled, the impression that the cattle frontier was an overwhelmingly male domain persists. Undeniably, men outnumbered women on this frontier. In the Macleod district, at the heart

of ranching country, even as late as 1911, there were 18,231 male residents and only 12,548 females.¹⁴ This gender disparity only increases when comparing single men with single women; in the same area in 1901, unmarried men outnumbered unmarried women by nearly two to one.¹⁵ The preponderance of young men on the ranching frontier explains why they have been the central figures in its history, but it does not justify why the women who were there have largely been ignored. Images of the romantic role of the capable cowboy and the notion of a frontier existence where only the rugged individualist thrived have subsumed the reality: that early ranchers worked ceaselessly to adapt their agricultural methodologies to the environment and that their success often depended on cooperation with women within a family unit.

The research that sustains this close examination of ranching women and their families focuses on previously overlooked “evidence” to convey a fuller and more inclusive picture of ranching in southern Alberta. Reviewing the abundance of material artefacts, along with photographic and textual evidence, pertaining to ranch women effectively dismantles the illusion that they were not active participants in the formative years of the cattle industry. Many barns on ranches, some owned by the same families for over a hundred years, hold worn vintage saddles that are a testament to the miles women rode on the range. Photographs tucked into tattered albums display resourceful-looking women forking hay to cattle, or posed in front of well-maintained ranch houses surrounded by children, or confidently mounted on long-legged horses flanked by hounds and ready to hunt. From the frontier days onward there is a rich record of women on the range. This analysis of their daily lives conveys the complexities and realities of their existence and strengthens the understanding of their role in the ranching industry. Another purpose of this project is to give voice to the many women whose stories are known only to their families or immediate communities.¹⁶ Several interviews with descendants of pioneer ranchers are included to bring these stories to light. Ranch women wrote. They used letters to bridge the distance between their isolated homes and the families they had left behind, they kept diaries to help process and record the daily events of their lives, and they wrote poetry and prose in response to a lifestyle and a landscape that were inspirational. Many wrote memoirs as a way to preserve what they felt had been a significant past. I have taken great pleasure in drawing liberally from women’s writing and

memories. There is no better way to understand women's experiences than through their own words.

A re-examination of the ranchers' West through the lens of a gender historian promises to provide a much-needed perspective on the most prevalent and persistent form of livestock raising – the family ranch. To date, historians have examined the Canadian ranching industry with great scope, but have merely hinted at the presence of women. Most commonly, ranching histories study the successes and failures of the large-scale open-range ranches that predominantly reigned over the “cattle kingdom” from the 1880s to the turn of the twentieth century. Among the first to focus on the society of the ranching West was Lewis Thomas, who proposed that Old World values and traditions were transplanted in the frontier by a community of privileged ranchers who created a society that reflected their British and Eastern Canadian heritage but was unique to Alberta.¹⁷ Among the beliefs that endured, argues Thomas, was the notion that women were best suited to the domestic sphere and thus had a limited role on ranches other than being wives and mothers. In his exhaustive examination of the institutional foundations of its origins, historian David Breen depicts a cattle fraternity dominated by powerful men, motivated by financial gain and supported by political ambition.¹⁸ In this context, where cattle ranching was considered big business, not a family economy, women played an incidental role. Both Thomas and Breen depict the Canadian range and its social institutions as distinct from those of the American cattle frontier. In contrast, however, by focusing on the daily routines and rhythms that defined and shaped rancher's lives in the Canadian West, the research and anecdotes that unfold in the following pages demonstrate how the frontier had a transformative effect on settlers' values, particularly concerning the status of women on ranches that were founded not on the principles of monopoly capitalism, but on the efforts of the family as a cooperative economic unit.

My work is more closely aligned with that of scholars Terry Jordan and Warren Elofson, who both cite environmental factors and the particular circumstances of caring for livestock as the most important factors influencing the development of cattle cultures. Jordan's close analysis of the transmission of ranching practices throughout North America illustrates that these practices, like the cattle themselves, crossed political boundaries.¹⁹ Similarly, Elofson argues that the cattle culture of the

northwestern Great Plains was similar on both sides of the American-Canadian border.²⁰ In particular, he details how, following the failure of the open-range ranches, small and mid-size ranchers adapted their practices to better suit the geographic and climatic features of the region. Building on these works, this study examines women's contributions on moderately sized ranches that adopted labour-intensive practices resembling those on mixed farms in order to ensure their sustainability. This study is focused on the ranchlands of southern Alberta, an area that reaches roughly from the Bow River south to the American border and from the foothills of the Rocky Mountains east to the short-grass prairies that surround the Cypress Hills. However, the analysis of Canadian ranch women is supplemented and complemented by research on their American counterparts. A similar material and social culture developed on both sides of the border. It was unique to ranching communities and changed from the culture that immigrants had left behind in the East.

The time frame of this study corresponds with the introduction of the first cattle herds, in the 1880s, and uses 1930 – a year that ushered in economic and climatic extremes – as a loose end date. It illustrates women's presence in the earliest frontier period and examines their continually expanding roles on family ranches, which became prolific after the turn of the century. For the sake of this study, the term “ranch” applies to any agricultural operation that was primarily invested in livestock, be it cattle, horses, or, more rarely in Alberta, sheep. Distinct from farms whose major commodity was grain, and from homesteads that were largely subsistence-based, the typical ranch raised beef cattle. Women were particularly indispensable on family-run ranches, where their productive and reproductive labour sustained their families and contributed directly to the viability of the operation. Although Linda Husa is writing of the modern family ranch, her observation applies to the frontier ranch as well: “I know of no other industry that turns totally within the concentric circles of family and community.”²¹ It is women who were, and who remain, at the centre of those circles, mediating between the private and public spheres of home and economy. Each individual within a family unit was essential to the endless work involved on a ranch; women and children were integrated into the cycle of the operation that encompassed aiding birth, sustaining life, and acknowledging the certainty of death. As such, lines of gender division were blurred. For the young, the freedom



0.2 JOSEPHENE BEDINGFELD FEEDING THE HENS ON HER FAMILY RANCH (1915).
REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

and responsibilities associated with frontier existence were particularly egalitarian. In his analysis of childhood in the American West, historian Elliott West notes that “sons did women’s work, and far more often, young girls moved into the realm of men – herding, harvesting, and hunting.”²² As traditional gender roles broke down within the family, they became more flexible in the larger ranching community that both depended on and supported the family ranch. Along with their involvement in managing cattle on the range, women remained fundamentally responsible for the domestic sphere and the activities that went on in the home and barnyard. Despite the weight of their responsibilities in the home and the significance of their subsistence production, as Elizabeth Jameson adroitly articulates, “we still have histories of the cattle frontier, but not of the egg or butter frontiers.”²³ The aim of this book is to encompass the feminine frontier to reflect the diversity and routines that defined the lives of ranch women within the home and on the range.

For the sake of specificity, this book primarily examines the experiences of women of European descent. Within ranching districts, the earliest immigrants dedicated to ranching were largely of Anglo origin. Those

whose roots were in Eastern Canada, Britain, and the United States made up the relatively homogeneous dominant ranching order. Many women, conscious of their origins, explicitly identified whom they considered to be good neighbours. Elizabeth Sexsmith, who later married American cattleman George Lane, represented a commonly held pioneer perspective when she reflected that soon after her family had immigrated to the High River area in 1883, “the country began to settle quickly with good Scotch, English, Eastern Canadian people all farming, ranching, selling, and buying.”²⁴ In his somewhat glossy account of early southern Albertan ranching communities, Thomas proposed that the typical ranching family was young and relatively well-funded.²⁵ In general, this was the case. Most ranching families initially came west with some means of establishing themselves comfortably, if simply, and providing for their daily needs. As Agnes Skrine of the Bar S Ranch (writing under her pen name, Moira O’Neil) attested of the ranching region in the 1890s: “No one is rich here. On the other hand, hardly anyone is distressingly poor, of those at least who live on their ranches like ourselves, and make their money by horses and cattle.”²⁶ There were, however, many settlers who were indisputably poor and suffered a harsher existence than the typical ranching family, not to mention the less-typical families whose wealth placed them in an enviable position among their peers. The majority of ranchers were reasonably well educated and had enough funds to establish themselves and furnish a simple home, but they had to work and manage their assets carefully in order to maintain a viable ranch.

Although this study emphasizes the experiences of white women, Indigenous women were among the first female ranchers in both Canada and the United States, often marrying non-Aboriginal partners and holding active roles on frontier ranches.²⁷ Largely ignorant of Indigenous women’s culture and their role in enabling the settlement of the plains, Anglo ranch women considered themselves to be the first women in the West and were dismissive of the contributions of their Aboriginal counterparts.²⁸ In Canada, most interactions between whites and First Nations peoples occurred when travelling bands or family groups camped near or on land recently claimed by ranchers. As scholar Sheila McManus notes, white frontier ranch women used their gender to position themselves as superior to First Nations women, but it was also their own “ambiguous positions . . . as subordinates in colonial hierarchies” that made them “fear

aboriginal people and the spaces they dominated.”²⁹ Once white women had overcome their initial fears of the “real red Indian,” they often came to view them as novelties and regarded their visits, as Mary Daley did in 1889, as “a break in the routine . . . though sometimes a nuisance.”³⁰ In some cases, white women recognized the female companionship of their First Nations visitors and welcomed them into their homes despite cultural and language barriers. Violet LaGrandeur recalled that as a young bride during a particularly lonely winter, “I was almost in tears baking bread, etc. when the kitchen door slowly opened and behold . . . there was another woman, a squaw. She could not speak a word of English but I could have embraced her. We got along very well by making signs. I made tea and we had some fresh bread.”³¹ Women of European descent enjoyed privileged status on the frontier in part because of their gender, in a region where men outnumbered women almost two to one, and in part because of their perceived cultural superiority over the dispossessed Aboriginal peoples. The social and geographical parameters of this study are limited to examining the pioneer experience. This specificity is meant to serve as a starting point in the discussion of women ranching in southern Alberta, while recognizing gender as a tool of colonialism. My hope is that it will open up the discussion for further, more nuanced analysis of Indigenous women in agriculture.

Pioneer women were attracted to the frontier for many of the same reasons as men. The potential of accessible land and economic independence encouraged settlers who were motivated by the opportunities the West offered. In addition, unmarried women came west optimistic about the prospects for employment and marriage in a region where women were in short supply. Some women, like Edith Scatcherd, were tempted to move west by a combination of persuasive partners and the allure of adventure. Scatcherd’s husband-to-be, already an established rancher in southern Alberta, used the promise of a fast horse to sweeten the deal when encouraging her to leave Ontario to be with him. In one of his many letters, he wrote persuasively:

I met a friend of mine [a few days] ago when I was shipping some stock from Cayley a short distance from here. I was riding my sweetheart’s chestnut and he was so taken with her that he urged me to put a price on her. But I said no, said she belonged



0.3 THE WELL-APPOINTED MIDWAY RANCH AS IT WOULD HAVE APPEARED UPON THE ARRIVAL OF EDITH INGS (NÉE SCATCHERD) IN THE WEST (C.1910). COURTESY OF LOREE FAMILY.

to one who was very dear to me. I do hope you will like her. But perhaps my little girl will not like any part of her surroundings myself included. But I think she is made of the right material and will soon realize that there are greater opportunities in this part of the world than the east.³²

Despite the advantages promised by ranching, some women were “reluctant pioneers” who accompanied their husbands to the frontier out of obligation rather than enthusiasm.³³ Understandably, a fear of the unknown and the uncertainties of establishing oneself in a region far removed from the support of family and friends were psychologically daunting.

Even for those willingly engaged in the process of emigration, the transition could yield unpredictable challenges that tested a woman’s fortitude. In 1909, Mary Nichols arrived on the southeastern prairies of Alberta accompanied by seven sons, whose ages ranged from three to twenty-one years.³⁴ Her husband, travelling by freight car with their livestock and the cash from the sale of their land in North Dakota, was to meet them several days later. Nichols had yet to locate their homestead when a

telegram arrived notifying her that her husband had died of “heart trouble” en route.³⁵ When his body, the cattle, and their household possessions arrived the next day, the cash box was empty. Although never confirmed, the family suspects that he was murdered, with the money as motivation, after unloading the stock for water. Nichols’s story demonstrates the resiliency of some frontier ranch women. She walked the seventeen miles to the 960 acres she claimed with her dependent sons and carried on. In a straightforward letter she wrote to friends back in North Dakota, briefly relating the events of her husband’s death, she closed with “You folks had aught to come here and get land it surely is fine land. I can’t think of much else to write now.”³⁶ Fortified by her sons who worked adjoining land, Nichols ranched in the area until the 1920s, when she relocated to Turner Valley. As a testament to her contribution to her community, the Mary Nichols Dam just outside of Seven Persons, Alberta, bears her name.³⁷ Women in the ranchers’ West – whether they were fortunate, like Scatcherd, who had arrived to a fine home and a doting husband, or not, like Nichols, who had arrived to heartache and hard work – were afforded unprecedented opportunities. Many of them met the challenges presented with resourcefulness and fortitude.

This book demonstrates how women responded to the new social and physical environment of the ranching frontier. It opens by showing that independent women played a more significant role in the early cattle industry than has previously been recognized. An extensive study of the family ranch argues that women’s efforts contributed to the success and sustainability of this form of ranching. Following this examination of women’s work is an exploration of evolving gender roles within the family and on the range. An analysis of the changes in ranch women’s fashion and the saddles they used uncovers physical evidence of women’s emancipation. Pioneer women’s experiences of childbirth, which were discussed with surprising frankness in primary documents, are an important part of this analysis; they illuminate the women’s fears, strength, and sense of community. Finally, an appreciation of the role of the horse as both a mode of mobility and a vehicle for equality rounds out the analysis. The conclusion illustrates how an intimate relationship with the land shaped women’s sense of place and created within them a deep and lasting connection to a lifestyle and livelihood that has so often been construed as a man’s world.



0.4 AN OPEN-RANGE ROUNDUP – BIG SKY, BIG HERDS, AND RIDERS WORKING ON HORSEBACK (1898). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

As historian Lewis Thomas aptly notes, “it was the work of the ranchers that gave their community meaning.”³⁸ For ranch women, it was often this work that defined their lives and gave structure to their days. Some scholars have deemed the burden of labour borne by ranching women oppressive and demeaning. Alternatively, women’s productive and reproductive labour on ranches can also be viewed as a direct means of liberation. In her study of Manitoba farm women, Mary Kinnear notes that despite their unbelievable workload and a lack of “conveniences,” many women were satisfied with their lives because they felt that they were “true partners” with their husbands.³⁹ In my research, this was also the case for ranch women who worked within relationships of mutuality with their partners. Most fundamentally, ranch work integrated with the seasons to demarcate the cyclical nature of women’s lives: calving marked the return of spring and new optimism, the flurry of summer tasks took place against a backdrop of green grass and growing crops that then plunged into a frenzied fall of harvest and weaning, and then a retreat into winter gave

families a chance to reconnect within the home. On top of this, the many opportunities for equal, independent work alongside their male counterparts gave ranching women a context in which to challenge the notions of Victorian domesticity that had been entrenched in society since the early nineteenth century. Western women were part of a larger emerging movement toward the recognition of female equality and capability. The frontier provided a social and physical environment in which women could experience the full capacity of their minds and bodies and realize personal emancipation. The degree to which women's status was enhanced by ranch work and their contributions recognized by their partners or the ranching community at large differed from family to family and from circumstance to circumstance. Mary Guenther, a third-generation rancher who raised her family and ran the operation after her husband's death in 1959, best described the challenges of depicting women's roles on ranches as she related her family history:

You know, I think I've probably been giving the impression that ranch women are much more equal and involved and so on today, but I've been thinking back and I think women on farms and ranches have always done what needed to be done. There are an awful lot of women who didn't just cook for the threshing crews but worked in the field and milked ten cows and drove teams and whatever, so, you know, it's just that it is more official today or recognized or acknowledged possibly. I don't think people have changed that much. Circumstances change somewhat and ways you do things but I think there's always been very strong women.⁴⁰

This book intends to tell their stories.