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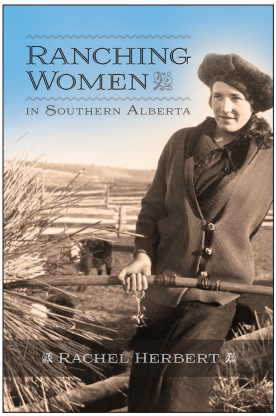

RANCHING WOMEN IN SOUTHERN ALBERTA
by Rachel Herbert

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CHAPTER ONE

Independent Women Ranchers in an Emerging Industry

The majority of extant histories concerned with the early days of cattle ranching on the northern Great Plains focus on men's labour and investment in the region. They emphasize the fiscal speculation that drew men with means and political power to invest in the early cattle industry and the sense of adventure and opportunity that pulled young cowboys and would-be ranchers to the West. Though cattle ranching was predominantly a masculine endeavour, it was not just men who sought to capitalize on the opportunities of the open range. In addition to operating ranches in partnership with their husbands, numerous women owned stock independently, and their experiences have gone largely unexamined. It is critical, however, to define what is meant by the terms *women's autonomy* and *independence* in the context of the working ranch. As historian Dee Garceau explains, being independent did not necessarily mean living and working on the land alone – although occasionally this was the case and some women achieved "economic self-support."[1] Ranching was most effectively carried out by a family enterprise working within the context of a supportive community. When women worked as part of a ranching family, "independence meant economic viability as a family unit" or "decision making power within a group enterprise."[2] Examining a selection of women's accounts of their experiences as the owners and managers of ranches and stock in early cattle-grazing districts reveals that scholars have been

remiss in discounting women's role and establishes ranch women's historical significance. Women were effective players in the early cattle industry and their engagement in the business of raising beef increased their personal sense of autonomy and their status within cattle communities on the western frontier.

The ranching industry in the western grasslands region began as a deliberate response to a market-driven demand for food, both locally and internationally. In western Canada – then known as the North West Territories – the presence of the first North-West Mounted Police (NWMP) troops in 1874, an influx of trappers and prospectors, and the dispossession and patronization of First Nations populations created a need for a productive provisions industry.[3] The success of grazing cattle south of the border and the increasing pressure due to high stocking rates on American ranges encouraged a northward movement of stock, while at the same time capital investment moved westward from major centres in England, Ontario, and Quebec. Due to the topographical and ecological similarity of the fescue grasslands of Montana and the region that is now southern Alberta and Saskatchewan, the first stock owners viewed the Canadian range as an untapped extension of the American livestock frontier. Small stockmen, many retired from service with the NWMP, were encouraged by the perceived potential for immediate sustained profit and introduced the first herds of cattle into the area in the mid-1870s.[4] Operating on a manageable scale with minimal investment and small herds, the earliest open-range ranchers proved that there was profit to be made by raising grass-fed beef on the northwestern plains. It was not only men who decided to capitalize on the opportunity presented by the newly opened cattle-grazing territory; several women are known to have participated in the earliest days of the cattle industry.

Though the cattle frontier promised wealth, this potential was accompanied by the risk of the unknown and the instability of a sparsely populated place. Despite the hazards involved, many women knowingly accepted these insecurities and invested their money and lives in cattle ranching. One of the first domestic cattle herds brought across the border from Montana in 1875 was owned by a husband and wife, but the "herd was always known as Mrs. Armstrong's" and the cattle were solely her responsibility and occupation.[5] She ran a dairy on the Old Man River north of Fort Macleod and her cattle were included in the first roundup conducted

in the district, in 1879. At that gathering Mrs. Armstrong's interests were represented by her hired hand, Morgan. Though some of the first herds thrived and multiplied on the Canadian range, they were threatened by various factors such as weather, cattle rustling, and the near-starvation conditions that prompted the First Nations population to slaughter beef as a means of survival. Frustrated by the loss of substantial numbers of cattle, some stock owners decided to retreat south of the border. After reported losses to her herd following the roundup and having one of her cows shot through the head while penned in her corral, Mrs. Armstrong chose to move her herd back to Montana, where she and her hired man were subsequently murdered.[6] Similar hazards faced those who began the earliest ranches in the United States. Agnes Morley Cleaveland and her two younger siblings accompanied their widowed mother into the wilds of New Mexico, where they invested their inheritance to establish a cattle ranch. Frontier conditions typical on both sides of the border plagued the Morley family's endeavours, and though their ranch was a substantial size they barely managed to stay solvent. Cleaveland remembers how challenging it was for her mother:

> Faced with the supervision of a well-stocked cattle range of a good many thousand acres, she rode and did her indomitable best to keep herself informed about what was happening to her livestock; but she was unable successfully to cope with the cattle-rustlers who abounded and with the proclivities of open-range cattle to wander. . . . That she survived the years that followed speaks volumes for her courage, her stamina, and her self-sacrifice. It would have been so very easy to sink under the all but overwhelming flood of hardships and disappointments that were hers.[7]

Mrs. Armstrong's and the Morleys' experiences in the earliest stages of the cattle industry demonstrate that women participated in the same business endeavours and faced the same challenges as their male counterparts. The fledgling industry and the open range of the Canadian West held the same promise of opportunity for both men and women, but the conditions of the frontier and the tragedies and hazards it held were equally indiscriminate.

In Canada the unstable advent of the ranching industry was followed by a period of intense growth: herd sizes expanded, capital investments increased, and government interest in the West rose. Increased law enforcement by the NWMP, the promise of a transcontinental railroad, and the federal government's commitment of secure grazing rights encouraged serious investment in the cattle industry. The year 1881 marks the beginning of the "golden age" of the cattle kingdoms, when the Conservative government approved a lease system that enabled regulation of the large tracts of land used specifically for stock grazing.[8] By 1885, the reach of the railroad into the ranchlands had increased market opportunities for cattle ranchers. This period is infamous for cronyism on the part of major investors and famous for the integral role played by increasingly skilful cowboys. The fact that some women also participated and prospered in the early cattle business, acting as both owners and operators of ranches and not merely as helpmates to their husbands, is little known. As interest grew in the new frontier that stretched north from the American border and west from the prairies of central Canada, the belief that the cattle country was a decidedly masculine realm emerged. In the popular consciousness, and in academia, the stories of independent women ranchers have been subsumed by analyses of the ranching moguls and the exploits of the cowboys they employed. Feminist scholar Catherine Cavanaugh argues that "in constructing and reconstructing the West – from wilderness wasteland to economic hinterland to agrarian paradise – expansionist discourse perpetuated the myth of the west as a 'manly' space, assigning to it a moral and political force that underwrote elite Anglo-Canadian men's hegemony in the territories."[9] The same emphasis on the masculine nature of the frontier was propagated in the United States by the conventions of historian Frederick Jackson Turner's thesis that promoted individualism and viewed each new landscape and wilderness area as territory available for domination by men and their economic endeavours.[10] Esteemed American historian Walter Prescott Webb stated that "in the final analysis the cattle kingdom arose at that place where *men* began to manage cattle on horseback."[11] Despite this proscriptive ideology, many women bucked convention and sought to profit by using the resources of frontier environments. As Cavanaugh writes, "while the possibilities for women (and men) were shaped by masculinist cultural context, in the shifting realities of the turn-of the century, Euro-Canadian women's responses to cultural

constructions of the West as a manly space were neither inevitable nor always predictable."[12] As the example of successful small-scale rancher Agnes Bedingfeld demonstrates, the "golden age" was not merely a period of huge ranches sustained by the myth of frontier masculinity and individualistic male enterprise; women working in cooperation with their community were also able to prosper in the emerging industry.

Despite the efforts of the large ranchers to keep the range open exclusively for grazing, squatters and homesteaders began to infiltrate the grasslands of the Canadian West as soon as it became known as a cattle region. In 1883, Agnes Bedingfeld squatted in prime ranching territory near the enormous Bar U Ranch on Pekisko Creek, southwest of what is now High River, Alberta. As a widow, she was able to use her status as the head of her household to acquire a homestead, which became the headquarters of the productive ranch she operated in partnership with her son, Frank. Together they developed a successful horse and cattle business and became well-respected members of the ranching community, even garnering the support of the largest ranchers in the area as they sought to expand their land base.[13] Bedingfeld's shrewd management of the ranch business led to the steady development and expansion of their infrastructure and herds. Her business aptitude was complemented by their combined competence in daily ranch operations and supplemented by her employment as a cook at the Bar U and Frank's as a cowboy. In spite of Bedingfeld's financial success, however, historian Henry Klassen points out that – in comparison with the displays of wealth shown by other ranchers, such as Pat Burns – "for Agnes Bedingfeld, ranching was not mainly an opportunity to pile up riches. . . . [R]ather than seeking to parade her wealth, Agnes tried to blend into the picturesque landscape. Famous for making her ranch an inviting place, she was adept at building and maintaining friendships in the Pekisko ranching community."[14] Unlike the cattle corporations, Bedingfeld was intent on building a home, not just a business. Women's vested interest and labour were a constant factor in the success of this small-scale ranch. Bedingfeld provided the initial capital and the consistent management of the ranch, and she ran the operation independently while her son went to the North to prospect for gold in 1898 and 1899. Frank's wife, Josephene, later ran the ranch while he spent two years overseas during World War I. Like her mother in-law, "she [Josephene] was a splendid rider and negotiated many successful horse sales during her husband's absence."[15] By the

1.1 Mrs. Agnes K. Bedingfeld and Frank Bedingfeld. Together, mother and son established a reputable, successful ranch in prime cattle country (c.1900–03). Reproduced with permission of Glenbow Archives.

time the 1,600-acre ranch was sold to the Prince of Wales in 1919, it was a reputable and profitable example of the competence and commitment of women in the early ranching industry.[16]

By the turn of the century, the rate of settlement had intensified in both ranching and farming regions in western Canada. The federal government used promotional propaganda and the promise of free land to entice settlers to the agricultural regions of the prairies. However, the ideology accompanying the Dominion Lands Act of 1872 held that men alone were fundamentally inclined to be productive agriculturalists. The restrictive decree of Canadian homestead laws dictated that women were permitted to obtain land only if they were the heads of households, which, in interpretation, basically meant only widows with dependent children under the age of twenty-one. As minister of the interior Clifford Sifton elucidated in 1905, "the department does not recognize the right of a woman to take up homesteads."[17] It was this gender-biased decree that

most fundamentally challenged the notion of "the frontier-as-equalizer."[18] As Cavanaugh argues, the prevention of access by single women to homestead land, combined with the failure of early women's campaigns to win married women equal rights to their property, reveals an element of "patriarchy preserved on the prairie."[19] The gender-biased system inhibiting single women from claiming agricultural land overlooked two important factors that should have influenced policymaking: one, the premise of the argument in this chapter, that women who were able to access land proved to be capable as independent agricultural producers; and two, that south of the border the American Homestead Act was granting women "free" agricultural land and that these women were highly successful in creating homes, farms, and ranches in the West.

While government rhetoric discouraged women from becoming agriculturalists, many women viewed pioneering as a way to improve their lot in life. Following a trip to Canada to observe the realities of pioneer life in the early 1900s, English author Mrs. Cran was dismayed to find few "bachelor" women working the land. She mused, "Travelling as I am doing at this stage of my visit, week in and week out, over soil so rich, I am constrained to wonder if there is any reason why women should not come out and work it as well as men."[20] Cran posited that for the "appropriate" woman, homesteading or the outright purchase of agricultural land promised opportunities unimaginable in the Old World: "women in England have no conception of the openings there are for them in the great North-West. Given health and industry, there is a fortune waiting them in that marvellous prairie loam, just as surely as for the men who go out to grow wheat and run stock-farms."[21] If Cran had travelled in the American West she would have encountered many more women working and living on land held in their own name. Due to a homesteading policy that was not biased in terms of gender, there are thousands of documented cases of female homesteaders south of the border. These American "girl homesteaders," historian Glenda Riley notes, even had a better rate of "proving up" than their male counterparts.[22] The personal observations of Elinore Pruitt Stewart, who established a ranch in Wyoming in 1909, spoke to the potential of women homesteaders:

> To me, homesteading is the solution of all poverty's problems, but I realize that temperament has much to do with success in

> any undertaking, and persons afraid of coyotes and work and loneliness had better let ranching alone. At the same time, any woman who can stand her own company, can see the beauty of a sunset, loves growing things, and is willing to put in as much time at careful labor as she does over the washtub, will certainly succeed; will have independence, plenty to eat all the time, and a home of her own in the end.[23]

Although published for an audience wanting to believe that the West afforded opportunity and egalitarianism, this depiction of the competent female homesteader resonates with the lived experience of women on both sides of the border; those who eschewed lives of domesticity and the security of established communities to engage themselves in the West proved to be as successful and as fulfilled as their male counterparts.

Despite the gender-biased nature of homesteading on paper and in government rhetoric, many Canadian women filed and proved up claims independently. Interestingly, multiple sources that suggest women claimed homesteads in their own names do not indicate the marital status of the women. It has to be presumed that the majority of these women would have been widows. Some widowed women, such as Agnes Bedingfeld, came west and started their ranches alone or with their children, while others continued the progress on their newly established ranches after their husbands had died. In their quest for land in the Lethbridge area in 1909, women householders were, for the most part, given equal treatment by their male counterparts even if at times "chivalry [was] not much in evidence."[24] On one occasion, three women were reported among a fighting mob of potential homesteaders outside the land office. According to pioneer Wilfrid Eggleston, who quoted from an item in the *Lethbridge Herald*, "'several big male brutes' impeded the progress of the women and one of the 'brutes' was observed deliberately holding back the women by the arm, so that a male could force his way in ahead of her."[25] Despite this instance, single women homesteaders typically garnered respect from their contemporaries and from those who recorded their experiences in local history books. Following her husband's death in 1893, Mrs. Murphy "took a homestead on the creek at Pincher and was known to be the first woman to do so in the community."[26] When widowed during the infamously cold winter of 1906–07, Mrs. Ford took over the family-run operation,

negotiating with cattle buyers and improving the bloodlines of her horse herd by introducing the Shire breed. Apparently, "many farmers in the Nanton-Stavely district improved their power supply by buying horses from Mrs. Ford."[27] She became the legal owner of her ranch by inheritance, the most common way for women to circumvent the gender-biased homesteading process.

However they acquired their land, women proved successful as ranchers and independent operators of small-scale stock farms. They demonstrated the abilities integral to prospering in the developing cattle industry, including shrewd business sense, and the skill set necessary to run cattle, grow crops, and develop infrastructure. Adequate grazing land with shelter and a secure water supply was the most important asset for stock grazers. Female cattle-owners, like their male counterparts, were cognizant of the complexities associated with managing herds in increasingly populated areas. In the Nanton-Parkland district, Mosquito Creek was an important water source and became a cause of contention between ranchers and homesteaders who fenced the creek and ran off herds of open-range cattle from the water. Mrs. Ingram, who settled in the Parkland area to ranch with her two sons in 1901, understood the significance of water rights and resourcefully had each member of her family claim land along the creek. She demonstrated prudent foresight by taking advantage of homesteading laws to ensure their large herd of cattle had access to water.[28]

As early as 1887, women in the Calgary area were proving to be successful on their own small ranches and mixed farms. When one journalist surveyed the area along Pine Creek fifteen miles south of Calgary he found a number of women, both single and widowed, among the prospering agriculturalists. He reported that "about a mile from the trail Miss Wilkin owns a half section, which was purchased from Capt. Boynton, and she is bringing it into a good state of cultivation."[29] Another young woman, Miss Jerram, "has made especially good progress, and has a little band of cattle."[30] The reporter was particularly impressed by the rate of development on Mrs. Hudson's land:

> The first place we came to in the divide is that of Mrs. Hudson. She went in there four years ago [1883], when a long journey was needed to do much visiting of neighbors. A good deal of substantial fencing has been done, and a sturdy crop of grain is

> growing. She has a herd of between thirty and forty dairy cows and horses, which will be enlarged by a crop of probably twenty calves this year. We saw a very interesting book of watercolor paintings of prairie flowers, from the hands of Miss Lilly Hudson, very cleverly and beautifully painted.[31]

Women proved capable of not only establishing ranches, but maintaining them and keeping them viable. Many women did domestic work or cooked for their neighbours in exchange for having their farm work done or hired out the specialty jobs such as ploughing and seeding. However, some did the full spectrum of manual labour on their ranches themselves. In the Wood Mountain area in what is now Saskatchewan, another journalist reported on "the most industrial family I met there": a widow, Mrs. Chamberlain, and her teenage daughter, who were working to save their debt-ridden ranch after Mr. Chamberlain's death.[32] This mother and daughter duo handled all the daily operations, marketed their products, made improvements to the infrastructure, and, according to an eyewitness, could "rope a steer and ride a horse with any rancher in the country":[33]

> They have today about 275 head of cattle and 40 horses. . . . This summer they have milked 15 cows, filled the contract with the North West Mounted Police in the district for butter and had $150 worth of butter extra in their milk house ready to take to market. They cut with a mowing machine, raked up and drew in and stacked 100 loads of hay this summer for the use of their cattle. They branded 55 calves; they built an addition to the house, about 16x20, of lumber and shingles drawn from Moose Jaw, 120 miles distant, by themselves. They fenced in with a neat picket fence a garden of an acre in extent.[34]

This exhaustive list of undertakings indicates the scope of ranch women's accomplishments. Women did not shirk hard work, and they proved equal to the task of owning and operating ranches.

Even women who ranched not independently but in partnership with their husbands or families, were able to participate as owners in the cattle or horse business. Some women circumvented the rigid patriarchal system

that prevented them from sharing the title of land with their husbands by assuming legal ownership of other commodities, including cattle and horses. The abolishment of dower by the Territorial Real Property Act of 1886 had effectively ensured that land, the major measure of wealth in an agricultural economy, was owned and controlled by men.[35] Even a series of amendments to Alberta's legislation earned by the early women's reform movement in 1917 failed to uphold a married woman's interest in the family estate. Ranch and farm women were not entitled to their share of the property and accompanying assets until the disappointing results of the landmark *Murdoch v. Murdoch* case in 1979 prompted a national feminist campaign that finally won equal property rights for married women.[36] However, a brand is an indisputable symbol of ownership; it is a virtually indelible mark that by 1900 was recognized by both range custom and government ordinance as verification of an individual's claim to specific stock. All of the lists of brand records in published local history books indicate that women held brands in their own names. According to Macleod district brand records from 1888 to 1913, women had registered 27 of 476 horse and cattle brands.[37] In the Stavely area from 1906 to 1918, women's brands numbered 11 of the 123 recorded in the local history.[38] A search of the extensive brand files at the Stockmen's Memorial Foundation Archives lists 151 brands registered to single and married women, both separately and with their husbands. These numbers are remarkable in the context of the patriarchal legal climate and considering that the demographic ratio in the same region at this time favoured men to women at approximately two to one.[39] Among the brands recorded in the Macleod district was a cattle brand belonging to Alice H. Mott. She and her husband had accompanied the 1886 Powder River Cattle Company drive from Wyoming to the North-West Territories. This drive had brought ten thousand head of cattle to the land that the ranch had recently purchased on Mosquito Creek. Upon their arrival, the Motts operated a stopping house and a moderately sized ranch. Mrs. Mott had two sources of income: running cattle and feeding travellers.

Women owned livestock under a variety of circumstances on the frontier. While Mott likely tended her own cattle with her husband, Evelyn Springett ran her stock on a range adjacent to the ranch managed by her husband, Arthur Richard Springett. Her "Circle Arrow" brand was applied to about eight or ten cows. She was proud of her ownership, writing

1.2 The capable Ings sisters, Mary and Constance, working their cattle at the Smith corrals, neighbouring their Trail's End Ranch (c.1930). Courtesy of Loree family.

that "A.R.S. as manager, did not care to own any cattle himself, but he allowed me to invest in a small herd."[40] Priddis-area rancher Monica Hopkins also owned her own stock. As her personal herd of horses (which had begun from one mare acquired as a wedding gift) began to expand, Hopkins remarked that "Billie says I shall soon have to apply for a brand of my own. Both my colts are fillys [*sic*] – isn't that lucky?"[41] She was well aware that a breeding herd was certain to multiply, in both physical numbers and capital worth. On the Rocking P Ranch in 1923, both of the owner's daughters, Maxine and Dorothy Macleay, owned stock; this was seen as a positive way to ensure one's children had a vested interest in the ranch.

The girls wrote, "Max and her 'pard' started in the horse business this month, with one colt apiece, branded as follows: Max, 3 on the right jaw; Dorothy, 5 on the left jaw."[42] The following month they acquired cattle: "Dorothy and her 'pard' started in the cow business this month. Max got a heifer branded [half diamond over] 5E on the left ribs. Dorothy captured a roan steer, also branded [half diamond over] 5E on the left ribs."[43]

Women profited by taking initiative and engaging themselves in the well-being of livestock. Being educated in how to handle stock and having the confidence to independently assert themselves in a critical situation sometimes provided them with a direct return on their efforts. One quick-thinking woman, Mrs. Sharples, the daughter of the manager of the "44" Ranch in the Porcupine Hills, demonstrated a rancher's characteristic initiative and was rewarded for it in the late 1890s.[44] Driving a wagon with her two babies on board en route to the "44," Mrs. Sharples came across a cow and calf stuck in a mud hole in a notoriously treacherous canyon. As her friend Evelyn Springett recalled,

> Though she realized that she was taking considerable risk in approaching any wild animal with young, she knew that, if they were left without help, they would probably both die. Being the plucky wife of a "cowman," she did not hesitate, though she confessed to me afterwards that she was terrified.[45]

After unloading her young children and putting them in a safe spot, Mrs. Sharples had hesitantly approached the unfortunate pair until she determined that they were indeed stuck fast in the mud. She proceeded to milk the cow into her shoe and then feed the hungry calf. After dragging the calf from the bog and putting it on dry ground, she continued on her way to the ranch. By the time ranch cowboys found the cattle the next day, the cow had died. The calf, however, lived and was given to Mrs. Sharples. Three years later she exported the animal to England and sold it at a profit.[46]

Another way women acquired stock was by caring for orphaned calves, lambs, or foals. These helpless animals required more attention than was deemed profitable by many cowboys and ranchers and so were often turned over to women, who cared for them in the barnyard. The poem "The Motherless Calf," written by rancher and poet Rhoda Sivell

and published in 1911, depicts the pathetic state of an orphaned calf and the sympathetic response of a woman rancher:

> We put you away in the old cow's stall;
>
> And we made you warm and dry;
>
> We gave you milk of the best to drink,
>
> But we could not stop your cry.
>
> The little motherless heifer,
>
> Out in the old rough shed,
>
> Is the pick of the bunch with my pard and I,
>
> Because her mother is dead.[47]

Women's practical and maternal response to the needs of orphaned animals often yielded profitable results. Ann Clifford, who was married to the manager of the Bar U Ranch during the 1930s, saved an average of five lambs a season by bottle-feeding them and raised an orphaned filly named Lady who went on to raise seven foals.[48] However they acquired them, owning and caring for their own stock contributed to women's income and to their engagement and sense of personal interest in ranching operations.

The fictitious submissions in the "matrimonial bureau" of the handwritten *Rocking P Gazette* indicate that their teenaged, ranch-raised authors clearly understood the flexibility of gender roles and the opportunities made possible for them by women who lived and worked independently in ranching country. One of Dorothy and Maxine Macleay's presumably tongue-in-cheek "personal ads" reads as follows:

> A charming young lady wishes to correspond (view to matrimony) with good-looking Cowboy. Lady owns a small ranch; two cows and a pig; would like a cowboy capable of looking after stock, cooking, washing dishes, and all kinds of housework. Must be a HUSTLER – no lazy ones need apply.[49]

Despite the dominant belief that ranching was the domain of men, women proved equally capable and competent at venturing to the unsettled West, investing in the cattle business, and running profitable enterprises. Whether by operating their own ranches or maintaining herds of their own stock, women found ways to circumvent standards of convention, assert their independence, and increase their personal assets, despite the legal and social restrictions they faced. The cattle frontier afforded opportunities unknown to women in more established society. Those who successfully handled the workload and enjoyed the gamble of the livestock market could be formidable and enterprising players in the often unpredictable and male-dominated ranching industry.