

## RANCHING WOMEN IN SOUTHERN ALBERTA by Rachel Herbert

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## The Family Ranch: Women in the Barnyard and Beyond

Despite myriad challenges and threats, such as unpredictable environmental conditions, periodic economic downturns, and market volatility, the family ranch has endured and remained viable for generations on the grasslands of southern Alberta. When the so-called great ranches established during the glorified golden age of the cattle kingdoms failed, smaller ranches that functioned primarily with the labour of immediate family took their place as the most prolific form of raising livestock. These moderate ranches were made sustainable by better adaptation to the environment, in terms of developing infrastructure and supplementary feeding programs, and by their manageable scale that often integrated mixed farming with extensive livestock grazing. However, this chapter will demonstrate that another significant and traditionally overlooked factor contributed to the success of smaller ranches. Women's integral labour enabled the family unit to persist as the most stable form of ranching. By working in partnership, husbands and wives were able to provide the close management necessary to establish and maintain businesses that could both meet the immediate needs of their families and sustain growth for future generations.

Before exploring women's direct contributions to the family ranch it is necessary to examine how this more intensive form of cattle raising came to be. The dominance of the family ranch coincided with the demise

of many massive spreads during the early years of the twentieth century; moderately scaled, labour intensive, with the supporting infrastructure to protect their herds, family operations took over the range when the largest ranches failed.<sup>1</sup> The majority of large-scale open-range ranches that had initially dominated the region proved to be unsustainable and did not survive much past the open-range period and the turn of the twentieth century. As the pioneers of the industry soon discovered, ranching on the high plains and the foothills fescue regions required a modified system of livestock management and agriculture that combined established practices brought up from the United States with adaptations to suit the area's ecosystem and environment. The successful model that has persisted in Alberta, in the form of the family ranch, integrated the extensive grazing practices of the open-range ranches and the intensive management typically associated with the mixed farm.

The earliest and largest cattle operations, such as the Walrond Ranche and the Cochrane Ranche Company, used a system of livestock management that required minimal input costs but was unproven on the Canadian grasslands. As historian Warren Elofson points out, "On paper, ranching was a marvellous process. . . . [T]he animals would harvest the prairie grass while their owners did little more than watch and rake in the money."<sup>2</sup> The owners and managers of these great ranches turned massive herds out on vast ranges and virtually left the cattle to fend for themselves. In doing so, they overestimated the carrying capacity of the land when deciding on stocking rates and underestimated the severity of the northern climate. Cost-cutting measures – such as hiring minimal numbers of cowboys to oversee these herds and failing to stockpile enough hay and grain for supplementary winter feeding – exacerbated the loss of cattle and profits. Threats particular to the frontier, including predation, cattle rustling, and wandering stock, further contributed to financial losses. When combined with fiscal mismanagement and the vagaries of international export markets, these untried and subsequently inadequate management practices led to the downfall of the "great ranches." Even in typical years these ranches struggled to maintain their herds from season to season, but they found themselves drastically ill-equipped to protect and provide for the cattle during the extreme winter seasons of 1886–87 and 1906–07. While the winter of 1886–87 brought massive losses and served as a warning to the industry, it was twenty years later that the effects of

another hard season combined with a failing export market to cripple the large corporations. As environmental historian Barry Potyondi asserts, the devastating winter of 1906–07 marked the inevitable end of the initial golden age of ranching.<sup>3</sup>

The myth of open-range ranching outlived the method. The era of large cattle corporations was actually an anomaly in western Canada; small stockmen had brought the first herds to the region, and small and medium-sized ranches continued to survive. As early as the late 1880s the family approach was established in the region and with close management – made possible by the vested interest of family members – was able to weather the literal and figurative storms that wreaked permanent havoc on the larger spreads. Smaller ranches far outnumbered large ones in the prime grazing areas. According to census reports, “between 1891 and 1901, while two big ranches existed in the Bow Valley, the number of small ranches increased from 176 to 458, most of which had fewer than three hundred head of cattle.”<sup>4</sup> According to historian David Breen, mid-size stock growers took over from the large corporations and were increasingly influential in industry organizations like the Western Stock Growers Association: “it was the ‘new man’ [*sic*] . . . who saved the western cattle export industry from threatened collapse after 1905.”<sup>5</sup> It was not just this “new man,” however, but also women and children who contributed to the successful transition into a more feasible form of cattle ranching.

There was a wide variation in the size of family ranches. The smallest, particularly in their earliest forms, stocked fewer than one hundred cows. Moderate spreads, like the Ings brothers’ OH Ranch near Longview, ran approximately 600 head in the 1880s. In 1893, in the Macleod area, smaller ranches had stocking rates that ranged from 9 to as many as 650 head.<sup>6</sup> The Little Bow Cattle Company on Mosquito Creek – owned by a partnership that included Thomas and Adela Cochrane and managed by part owner (and Thomas’s cousin) William “Billie” Cochrane and his wife, Evelyn – stocked 800 head of good quality Galloway-Hereford cross cattle in 1890.<sup>7</sup> Among the larger family-owned ranches, the Macleays’ Rocking P had herds that at times numbered in the thousands.<sup>8</sup> Many ranchers started out with a homesteaded quarter section and used open range to graze their stock. Those with more financial backing operated on significant amounts of deeded land and access to rangeland. However, as the best grasslands became more densely settled and fenced toward the

end of the 1890s most ranches operated with a combination of privately owned land and increasingly regulated grazing leases. In the early 1890s, "the leased land held by the average cattle operator fell from over 30,000 to just under 1,100 acres."<sup>9</sup>

Although their acreage was reduced, it was these leases that enabled most family ranches to continue, ensuring the continuation of some of the extensive grazing practices from the open-range period and enabling ranchers to maintain sizeable herds without overgrazing their home range.<sup>10</sup> The homeplace and ranch headquarters were typically used to winter the cattle and calve the cows in the spring, while in the summer months cattle were turned onto large areas of leased land on the hardy short-grass prairie in the eastern parts of the province, in the rich fescue of the foothills, or into the remote and rugged forestry of the mountains. The use of leased land and the necessity of mounted work that accompanied it is what primarily differentiated ranchers from mixed-farmers, who tended to keep smaller herds close to home year-round and managed their docile stock on foot. Isolation was also one of the main defining characteristics of frontier cattle ranches. Ranches were necessarily remote in order to allow enough room for animals to graze, and they were pushed into more marginal areas after 1900 with the flood of farmers and settlers into the region.<sup>11</sup> The use of large tracts of grazing land required ranch men and women to maintain the skill set for which the open-range cowboys were noted. Managing semi-feral stock on expansive ranges ensured that ranchers continued to ride and rope to manage their herds even as they now routinely laboured at less romantic work such as stacking hay and fixing fences.

By the 1900s most family-run ranches had begun to diversify their agricultural operations. The practices that persisted were in some ways more akin to mixed farming than to open-range grazing.<sup>12</sup> In his explicative 1913 text *The Range Men*, contemporary journalist L. V. Kelly described the drastic changes that had come to the cattle industry and envisioned what the industry was to become: "the future of it . . . is a gigantic mixed farm, stock fed throughout the winter, happy relations with farmers who take stock to feed."<sup>13</sup> To a degree his prediction rang true. Contrary to the mythologized notion that ranches could thrive with little input, to ensure the well-being of their stock, ranchers had to adopt practices that were labour intensive and involved some farming in order to supply additional



2.1 MYRTLE FORSTER OPERATING THE BINDER, PREPARING GRAIN FOR HARVEST (C.1913–19). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

feed in the winter. What differentiated them from the typical homesteader, however, was that the size of their herds required access to large tracts of unbroken grassland. Even if their operations were exceedingly similar to those of their farming neighbours, many ranchers, particularly those who had participated in the glory days of the open range, held deep-rooted animosity toward farmers.<sup>14</sup> These ranchers resented the increased pressure “to break up [their] beloved sections of prairie land,” as pioneer Robert Newbolt (Bob) articulated.<sup>15</sup> Even when they recognized the necessity of supplementary feeding, stock growers continued to ideologically privilege grassland over farmland. However, in order to survive, all ranchers had to relinquish some of their pride and any of the initial hostility they had held against farmers for fencing and ploughing up the prairie. Even “old-timers” like Newbolt, who cursed the intrusion of fences and tilled soil, became resigned to adopting farming practices and cross-fenced their ranches. Newbolt resisted change exceptionally late. In 1920 he reckoned,

All my neighbors were out making dust. Why shouldn't I be making dust too [?] . . . The Bally farmers continued to move in and by this time my range was practically all fenced up. My friendly relations with my neighbors were not too good. I had to

reduce my herds of both cattle and horses, also had to depend more on my farming operations for feeding my livestock.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike Newbolt, the majority of ranchers had adopted mixed-farming practices by the 1900s. Even the much-touted chinook winds did not render the prairie suitable for grazing 365 days a year. Even today, the few ranches that are forage based year-round have to closely manage their herds during the worst winter conditions, even going so far as to clear snow from the fields in order for the cattle to graze stockpiled grass that has been reserved specifically for the purpose.<sup>17</sup> According to census reports, hay-cropping increased dramatically between 1905 and 1910 as more ranchers fed stock through the cold season.<sup>18</sup> Particularly after the killing winter of 1906–07, most stockmen acknowledged that it was imperative to feed cattle throughout the winter months, thus increasing the ranchers' workload.

When they operated on a feasible scale, it was possible for ranchers to develop the infrastructure necessary to closely monitor and provide shelter for their animals. With part of the ranchlands now devoted to farming, fences had to be erected to protect the crops. Like the farmers, ranchers incorporated barbwire into their infrastructure. As Elofson notes,

By 1901 fences had made district round-ups virtually impossible everywhere except south of Medicine Hat, here and there in the hills, along the Bow and Red Deer Rivers south east of Calgary, and in some districts of southern Assiniboia. At that time those who had not yet sufficiently divided up their lands were buying up wire – some by the “car load” – in an effort to get the job done.<sup>19</sup>

This made a significant change both to the range landscape and to the dynamics of running cattle and turned out to be a valuable and revolutionary management practice. The introduction of barbwire meant that it was suddenly feasible to erect miles of fenceline. Fences enabled ranchers to contain stock, making the animals easier to oversee, and proved invaluable for improving the breeding of range cattle. They kept neighbouring herds from mingling, segregated the bulls to allow for a more controlled





2.2 MARGIE BUCKLEY FEEDING STOCKPILED FORAGE TO CATTLE (1918).  
REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.



breeding season, prevented higher-quality breeding cows from mixing with range bulls, and restricted the herds' movement while directing them to shelter to prevent losses during severe weather. However, many of the innovations that made ranches more sustainable also created an increased workload. On top of the seasonal work associated with the cattle herd – including calving, branding, and roundup – now seeding, haying, and harvesting became part of the yearly cycle. Building infrastructure required not just an initial investment of time and money, but also, and inevitably, ongoing maintenance and attention. Caring for the more valuable pure-bred stock and dairy cows that tended to stay closer to home meant that the daily tasks associated with livestock care, like feeding and watering, became a part of the already busy barnyard routine. Close management was labour intensive and thus required all family members to contribute.

At the same time that a new order was taking over the ranching industry, an increasing number of women came west, and these women – wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters – became key contributors to the success of the family ranch. Labour was a valuable commodity on the frontier, where the sparse population, little established infrastructure, and the great distance between ranches meant there was always more work than there were bodies to do it. Thus, for both logistical and financial reasons, the bulk of work was performed by family members instead of hiring outside labour. The work was endless, particularly when homes and ranches were new, and could be loosely divided into three categories: domestic work that centred on the home, barnyard chores that were part of a daily routine, and ranch work at large that tended to the commercial livestock herd. All labour was so integrated with the communal good of the family and the family economy that the work of women and children was recognized to be as imperative as that of men. Women's and children's labour was considered integral to the ranch as a whole. In her analysis of farm families in the American Midwest, historian Mary Neth proposes that "wages, the factor that devalued women's labor in the market economy, did not define the value of work on a family farm. Daily, periodic, and seasonal tasks structured farm work and connected the rhythms of human needs to those of nature, the needs of the family to those of the farm."<sup>20</sup> This same pattern prevailed on family ranches in the Canadian West; thus, women and children capable of attending to a multitude of tasks and chores were valuable and valued

assets on a working ranch. The family ranch functioned only because of the contributions of each of its members.

One fact about the ranching industry that has remained consistent throughout every period of history is that it was – and is – barely, rarely, and only occasionally profitable. Elofson bluntly argues that the family ranch has “endured in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Montana largely because it is able to keep going in an industry which tends over much of the time to be uneconomic.”<sup>21</sup> On top of the fact that beef markets have always been volatile, establishing a fully operational diversified ranch was costly. As one woman noted upon the completion of her family’s outbuildings and corrals in the mid-1880s, “from our experience of this, building is still a very expensive amusement, and I think it would be cheaper to buy a ranche already well improved, than to do any building oneself.”<sup>22</sup> Most ranches began as bare land and their infrastructure was built from scratch. Ranchers had to find ways to live affordably during times of little income and to create ways of building up their operations with little financial input. Families used different strategies to fund their ranches, but the work of family members always made the costly process more affordable.

Women’s engagement with the primary production of raising beef for market – and their complementary labour – enabled ranches that had not overextended themselves in terms of debt load and stocking rates to survive despite the economic uncertainty of the industry. While ranching historiography in general has neglected the essential role of women on ranches, family histories frequently attest to the significance of women’s labour in keeping ranches functional and viable. Local history books are laden with stories of hardworking women, written by family members who obviously respected and valued these women’s contributions to their ranches. One strategy typical of pioneering families was to utilize the labour of all family members during the first few years of establishing a ranch. This was true of the Bonds when they first arrived in the West to ranch near Longview in 1899. Catherine Bond and her siblings spent the first three years at home rather than attending school because there was so much work to be done: “there were horses to ride, chores to do, cattle to herd.”<sup>23</sup> While her labour was essential to the immediate well-being of her family’s cattle operation, the skills that Bond acquired during her childhood also positioned her to be a valuable and equal partner to her husband when she joined him on his ranch along Willow Creek in 1914.<sup>24</sup>

The experience of the Austin family of the Pincher Creek area illuminates a pattern typical of many young ranch families and demonstrates how some couples pooled their resources to make their ranch a success. By working as a cowboy for the larger ranchers in the area throughout the 1890s, Fred Austin was able to acquire a homestead stocked with a few horses and cattle. His bride, Katherine, joined him in 1901. During the winter he worked for a lumber company in the Crowsnest Pass while she cared for their new baby, home, and livestock. Left alone to fend for herself, Katherine Austin resourcefully adapted to what needed to be done, even donning her husband's clothing so that the milk cow would accept her and stand for milking. Over the years the couple worked side by side, only expanding their operation at a rate they could manage together. Their primary income came from grazing beef cattle on the open range, but Katherine's production of milk, butter, and eggs paid for their taxes and living expenses. As a result of their combined efforts, the Austin family thrived and their Thornhill Ranch remained viable.<sup>25</sup> The following pages will further explore the pattern illustrated by the Austins' experience: that is, working off the ranch for wages or maintaining the ranch during a husband's absence, supplementing income by producing saleable goods on the ranch, conserving money by producing food, and involving oneself in ranching and farming activities – all were sustainable strategies through which women helped ensure the longevity of the family ranch.

Hiring out was a common way for families with meagre means to establish ranches, and the involvement of both partners made this practice possible. In some cases, married couples worked on established ranches together until they could afford to start one up on their own. Directly after their marriage in 1905, William and Annie Lane spent six months working on the C.Y. Ranch, he as a range rider and she as a cook. Annie's childhood had prepared her for working for a living. As a young woman she and her sisters baked and sold a hundred loaves of bread a day to supplement their family's income. Thus, prior to marriage she was accustomed to the reality that her labour contributed to the good of the entire family.<sup>26</sup> Large ranches, like the Macleays' near Nanton, continued to provide employment for couples who worked out together long after the frontier was considered closed. In 1924, the *Rocking P Gazette* noted that "Mr. Chuck cook, his wife and family have left the Bar S outfit. Their places were taken by Mr. and Mrs. Calkins."<sup>27</sup> Commonly, for those who owned their own spreads,



2.3 A GLIMPSE OF RANCH REALITY. NOTE THE BABY IN HER ARMS, THE CHICKENS SCRATCHING IN THE YARD, AND THE HOG AT THE DOORSTEP (C.1900–07). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

a husband found temporary employment off the ranch, in lumber, mining, or freighting, while his wife kept the ranch operational during his absence. In the Pincher Creek area in the early 1900s, Johanne Pedersen was frequently left alone to care for the ranch and her seven children while her husband worked as a freighter. Alongside her many domestic chores, Pedersen was known to “stack hay, stook grain, clear land, saw wood by hand and brand calves.”<sup>28</sup> When a woman had the skills and the resourcefulness to manage the ranch in the absence of her husband, it was feasible for him to earn the income they needed to build their spread from the ground up.

Alternatively, one of the most direct ways in which women enabled ranches to grow during the early years or to survive through financial hardship was by producing saleable products like eggs and butter. Extant ranching histories, more focused on the production of beef for commercial markets, have largely ignored the extent to which efforts in the barnyard contributed to a ranch’s success. However, as Neth points out, “the

connection between women's income and family purchases appears almost universal. . . . Women's labor and women's products proved vital sources of income as well as income-savers for family farms."<sup>29</sup> Like that of their farming counterparts, the additional income that ranch women provided through egg and dairy production sustained many families on the range. Proximity to a steady market, whether it be neighbouring ranches or a major centre, enabled women to earn an income from their efforts in the barnyard. At the turn of the century the Bateman and Copithorne families, both living in the Jumping Pound district west of Calgary, took advantage of their location near the booming city to supplement their ranching income with cream sales. In both families, women were the driving force behind their dairy production. The Batemans' cows were milked out in an open corral, even in inclement weather, with Mrs. Bateman doing the bulk of the work, for she "was a good milker and could milk two cows to anyone else's one."<sup>30</sup> Susan Copithorne, whose family became one of the most well-established ranching families in the Jumping Pound area, had come to Canada from Ireland as a child's maid and then married a pioneer rancher. Her family recalled her devotion to the life to which she had committed and explained how her efforts contributed to the family's success, despite its humble beginnings. Undaunted by the inevitable hard work and isolation that accompanied her lifestyle, "Susan saw no sense in wallowing in self-pity. She had chosen to be a settler's wife and was determined to make the best of it. She learned to milk cows and churn butter. She raised chickens and traded butter and eggs at the IG Baker store in Calgary. Where else would the groceries come from, the bolts of calico and denim?"<sup>31</sup> Her contributions directly supported the development of the Copithornes' ranch. From their start in a log cabin with a sod roof they gradually acquired enough land and their mixed-farm operation evolved into a profitable Hereford beef outfit. As the family recalled, from their subsistence beginning, based largely on dairy, they reached the point where "Holstein [a milk cow] was a dirty word."<sup>32</sup> Like the Copithornes, many families not only consumed the food that women produced in the barnyard, but used it as a means of earning cash to maintain their standard of living while income from primary production was reinvested in the operation for growth, enabling the expansion and development of the ranch.

As well as supplementing the family's income by their efforts in the barnyard, women grew gardens, raised poultry and hogs, and milked dairy cattle for the family's subsistence needs. By providing the family with sustenance they had grown and prepared, women averted the need for major expenditures on groceries. Food production was one of the most fundamental ways to save money on a frontier where provisions were not only hard to access but expensive. In many early communities the provisions available for purchase were minimal, and because the majority of ranches were located at some distance from towns, most families made only occasional and well-planned trips for supplies. The Porter family, for example, who ranched in southern Alberta in the early 1900s, had to make a sixty-five-mile, two-day trip to town for groceries.<sup>33</sup> As late as the 1920s, the "grub stake" (the provisions and groceries) for the Rocking P Ranch was only picked up once a month.<sup>34</sup> Women's labour in providing home-grown food was not only an economic advantage, but a necessity; fresh goods were simply not available for purchase. Bought supplies typically included staples such as flour, cornmeal, sugar, salt, coffee, dried fruit, and raisins.<sup>35</sup> Home-raised meat, also a staple, was kept frozen when possible or put up in salt brine. Chickens were challenging to raise when ranch infrastructure was primitive, as Eliza May attested when she recalled that during her first winter on the range, in 1889, most of her chickens "were frozen stiff as [they] only had a small log stable for them."<sup>36</sup> Even so, hens were a fixture of virtually every yard and were a much appreciated food source. Maxine and Dorothy Macleay wrote enthusiastically about the meat and eggs their flock provided during the winter of 1925: "Max and her 'pard' plucked eleven chickens on Jan 25th 1925. . . . Egg production has increased this month. The first of February was celebrated by everyone having fresh eggs for breakfast."<sup>37</sup>

When domestically raised meat was unavailable, many families turned to hunting and fishing. Women who were comfortable with a gun and an accurate shot were a valuable asset on the family ranch. Shooting for security, hunting, or sport was common among both men and women. Thanks to a longtime British fondness for gaming, many immigrant women, particularly from the upper classes, were proficient with a rifle. They found the wilderness of the West ideal for hunting, both for sport and for provisioning their pantries. Evelyn Cameron, whose husband managed the CC Ranch along Mosquito Creek, was a practiced shot and rarely rode



2.4 EDITH AND FRED INGS SHOOTING GOPHERS AT THE MIDWAY RANCH (c.1911–12). COURTESY OF LOREE FAMILY.



out without packing a gun. She regularly shot prairie chicken and ducks and also used her gun to protect the poultry house. One of her letters expressed her remorse at having mistakenly shot a muskrat: "I shot a muskrat one day, it too [like a previous skunk] was eating the dog's meat. I was very sorry afterwards. I thought it was a mountain cat and would eat the chickens, but musk-rats are quite harmless, and pretty creatures."<sup>38</sup>

Some women who hadn't come west with firearms skills learned to shoot out of the necessity of providing food for their families. Mary Alice Halton, who arrived with her large family to the Pincher Creek area in 1902, quickly "became a crack shot and kept the larder stocked with prairie chickens, Hungarian partridge and ducks."<sup>39</sup> Fishing was her specialty and the creek was well stocked with trout: "she often rode down on horseback to fill a sack with fish – occasionally even casting from astride her horse."<sup>40</sup> Near Priddis, Monica Hopkins wrote of the fresh trout she caught while ice fishing in January as providing a "welcome change" to her family's diet, even though her pantry was well stocked with frozen meat:<sup>41</sup>

We have hanging in the storehouse a side of beef and one pork, a number of partridge and prairie chicken, and about a dozen roosters. My heart sinks every time I go into the storehouse because whatever I choose has to be thawed out before I can cook it and the meat has to be sawed up into joints. It is all frozen solid and takes at least two days to thaw out and I'm always forgetting to get something in until we are down to the very tag end. It's at times like that that the fish come in handy.<sup>42</sup>

In some homes, wild game provided some much appreciated variety to a repetitive diet, while in other homes it was a necessary staple. Whatever their means or their reasons, women became familiar with the western landscape and wildlife in order to provide for their families.

Homegrown vegetables, eaten fresh in season and canned or stored for the winter months, were an important part of the pioneer diet. The work of establishing, maintaining, and harvesting a vegetable garden was laborious, intensive, and essential. The largest ranches employed full-time gardeners, but on most family ranches it was the resident women who did the majority of the gardening. Women of all stations and on all sizes of ranches tended gardens. When Evelyn Cochrane arrived at their CC



2.5 ALICE GARDINER WORKING IN THE GARDEN ON WINEGLASS RANCH (C.1907–08). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

Ranch from England every spring, one of her immediate tasks was to prepare the gardens for planting. Her diary attests to the continuous seasonal work, the challenge of gardening on the northern plains, and women's role in providing provisions for their family while assisting with ranch work and caring for the children. Two days after her arrival on the ranch in May 1904, Cochrane began gardening. On May 9, the sweet peas were put in the ground; three days later, she planted the rest of the seeds in the "hot-bed."<sup>43</sup> What followed was a repetitive cycle of weeding and watering, which on some outfits entailed hauling water from a considerable distance. Due to the elevation and northern climate, women soon learned that the growing season in Alberta is short and thus intensive. In 1904 the gardening season was finished by mid-September, but Cochrane, like other women, continued to provide for her family: "September 13th hard frost 10 [degrees] the garden, flowers and potatoes are killed. Very cold wind – branded 45 calves. Boy's face and hands sore and swelled kept him in the house." Two weeks later she wrote: "Boy almost well. I drove with him to Nanton for beef and oats. Shot some chicken and duck on the way."<sup>44</sup>

Though the garden was typically a woman's domain, husband and wife teams often shared the burden of work that was necessary for their common benefit. Neth argues that on family operations, "despite ideological separations between 'masculine' and 'feminine' work, the reality of the family labour system often prevented such clear demarcations in the actual performance of work."<sup>45</sup> Though many women – like Evelyn Springett, who did the back-breaking work of establishing her yard and garden herself – relished the time spent in their gardens and the reward of flowers and food, others, such as Monica Hopkins, failed to find enjoyment in having their hands in the dirt. For them, the garden was simply another aspect of their work. While some women wrote glowingly about their gardens, often a major source of pleasure and pride on the prairie, Hopkins wrote that "gardening is quite new to me. I never did any at home, never even had the slightest inclination to do so, though I enjoyed the results of someone else's efforts. Now I am learning that it is quite hard work and I still fail to see where there is much pleasure in it."<sup>46</sup> Fortunately, her husband willingly assisted with the work in their garden, which was established in the shelter of a poplar grove about a mile from the house; the Hopkinses' garden was the product of their combined labours, and his expertise compensated for her inexperience.<sup>47</sup> In the spring they rode their

horses to the garden armed with tools and seeds and at harvest time carried sacks of vegetables back to the house behind their saddles. Together they developed an efficient way to plant potatoes: "Billie ploughs a furrow and I come along and drop a 'spud' in every so often, then Billie ploughs another furrow and that covers them up."<sup>48</sup> With her husband at her side, the necessary task became more tolerable and Hopkins even had time to appreciate "the magnificent view" from their hilltop garden.<sup>49</sup>

In addition to taking responsibility for the barnyard chores that sustained their families, the day-to-day activity of ranch women consisted largely of domestic work within the home, cooking, cleaning, and caring for children. The demands of maintaining a home and providing sustenance for hardworking and often rapidly expanding families meant that women's work was unrelenting. However, women and girls who worked on the range and in ranch houses were not simply subservient drudges, as has so often been claimed by historians analyzing pioneer agriculture.<sup>50</sup> Ranch women's personal and published writings reflect that, despite their staggering workload and the lack of household conveniences, many found their work empowering and invigorating. The published words of women speak glowingly about the freedom and egalitarianism afforded by the ranching frontier. In an early article meant to depict the reality of a woman's daily routines on the ranch, Agnes Skrine of the Bar S, writing as Moira O'Neil, stated, "I am not concerned to prove that there is no life more enviable than this which we lead. I may think so, or I may not. But I am concerned to show that a lady's life on a ranch – that it consists necessarily and entirely of self-sacrifice and manual labour – is delusional."<sup>51</sup> As part of a literary trend that popularized women's writing from the West in the first decades of the twentieth century, women's depictions of the work they did in their homes and on the range reinforced the notion that the West afforded autonomy for all. According to historian Dee Garceau, the genre of "women's homesteading narratives" coincided with the emerging concept of New Womanhood that idealized an independent woman.<sup>52</sup> Placed in the context of the 1900s through the 1920s, these published works illuminate how women perceived themselves in the ranchers' West and in relation to changes in gender roles occurring in society at large; "by the second decade of the twentieth century, the separate spheres of Victorian society had blurred, and conventional wisdom urged women toward developing personal autonomy in a heterosocial world. . . . [H]omesteading

[or ranching] became a compelling metaphor for female transformation.”<sup>53</sup> Whatever the degree to which they glorified women’s day-to-day work, published narratives and memoirs depicted the ranching frontier as a space where women genuinely relished the opportunity to create a home and a lifestyle that sustained their families and still left room for personal fulfilment.

Ranch women worked out of necessity and obligation, but also out of a desire for the adventure and opportunity connected with the early ranching industry. The frontier provided women with the challenge of managing and tending to their *own* homes, an experience that women from the upper classes found liberating and one that women from the lower classes found empowering. In her published memoirs, Montana rancher Isabel Randall wrote that she embraced the work she undertook on the frontier. Raised in a British home that had been maintained by servants, in the West she maintained the household, took care of a barnyard full of animals, and helped with the ranch work:

I do think that this is the best sort of life. One feels so much better and happier; and so would any other healthy girl. Of course, washing dishes, scrubbing floors, and all the rest of it, does seem a great hardship to people at home; but I assure you it doesn’t seem so when you do it. I know I would not exchange my happy, free, busy, healthy life out here, for the weariness and *ennui* that makes so many girls at home miserable.<sup>54</sup>

The size and condition of her home affected the amount of work a ranch woman had to do, yet class was a factor that mattered little in the daily realities of sustaining a home and family on the frontier. Women in one- or two-room shacks had different challenges and needs than more privileged women, such as Edith Ings, who had come west to live in a fully furnished two-story sandstone house complete with a maid’s staircase, or Elizabeth Lane, who wrote that her home on the Flying E Ranch was “the largest log house I had ever known.”<sup>55</sup> However, the tasks associated with maintaining a ranch and home erased many of the markers of class division based on labour and occupation. Because it was difficult to employ – or, more specifically, to hold on to – household staff, women in all socioeconomic groups had to adapt to managing their homes and

performing menial domestic and barnyard work. Even women from the moneyed upper-middle class had to learn to be resourceful cooks and housekeepers and to tend the barnyard animals. Most found the process liberating, even if somewhat frustrating at first. According to the travel memoirs of the Duchess of Somerset, her friend Lady Adela Cochrane, a part owner in the Little Bow Cattle Company who also owned land and a lumber business, learned to raise chickens and keep milk cows. Somerset described the difficulty that the two women had in handling the semi-feral chicken: "Adela's sitting hens require a lot of running after; half wild, and as fleet as hares . . . so we have to get some of the men to help us run them down."<sup>56</sup> Randall, too, quickly and competently adapted to a wide range of practical work. Upon dismissing her servant, she successfully devised an efficient method of mopping the floor by making a mop out of an old broom handle and a worn shirt; learned the best ways to thaw frozen bread dough; and handled a wide range of jobs outdoors, such as gentling horses, driving the hay rake, and caring for a hundred hogs. In one of her letters, Randall nonchalantly remarked that though "the ground is *paved* with pigs . . . they don't bother me, as I always greet them with boiling water when they come round the kitchen door."<sup>57</sup> Indeed, published writings by women suggest that they relished the diversity and challenges associated with frontier domesticity and handled their demanding workload with fortitude.

As historian Lewis Thomas notes, "the actual work the women of the ranches had to do was very much the same as that of housewives everywhere who are without servants."<sup>58</sup> In general, women were primarily responsible for the upkeep of their homes and the care of their children. However, this did not relegate them to the confines of the home, as Thomas suggests in his comment that "ranch women rarely did much outdoor work. . . . [O]n many ranches very little of the work which on farms is traditionally done by women was done at all."<sup>59</sup> Ranching women's sense of space and place extended to encompass the barnyard and the range beyond the fences. While this study is not a comparative one, much of my research suggests that ranch women seem to have understood a more expansive sense of space and responsibility than their farming counterparts. Women were included in the sense of adventure that accompanied running large herds of cattle and horses, and many female ranchers, like the cowboys, held a romanticized appreciation of the landscape and their occupation.

Descriptions of early ranch women routinely associated them with elements of the working ranch. The Rowe sisters, for instance, ranched with their father near Pincher Creek after the death of their mother in 1909: Dorothy was “the lover of all horses and loved to ride,” while “green grass and cattle have always been an important part of Gladys’ life.”<sup>60</sup> Evidence clearly indicates that the outdoor work of women and children was important on ranches of all sizes during the earliest frontier days and has remained so into the subsequent generations.

Women and children were the resident “cowboys” on family-run livestock operations. Compared to the open-range ranches that depended on the skills of hired cowboys, most family ranches operated with minimal hired help. When possible, a hired man was employed to provide additional labour, particularly for seasonal work, but even then, families worked directly alongside their help. George Zarn worked as a hired hand for several ranches in the foothills west of Stavely and Nanton and noted the distinction between working for a family operation and for a large-scale outfit: “It was different working on smaller ranches than big ones like the Bar U or Rod Macleay’s where they had steady riders. On the small ranches on Willow Creek everyone was a rider when there were cattle to be moved, branded, etc.”<sup>61</sup> This shortage of employed “man-power” necessitated women’s direct involvement in the work of the ranch at large. Despite Zarn’s accurate assessment that smaller ranches were more likely to use the help of women and children than were the larger operations, even the substantial Rocking P Ranch owned by Macleay used the work of female family members. As part of the curriculum designed by their governess, Macleay’s daughters Dorothy and Maxine created a magazine called the *Rocking P Gazette* that, among other things, documented the daily events of the ranch. Few sources so clearly and explicitly detail ranch life from a female perspective; fully illustrated, this invaluable source indicates that these girls were an integral part of the working operation.

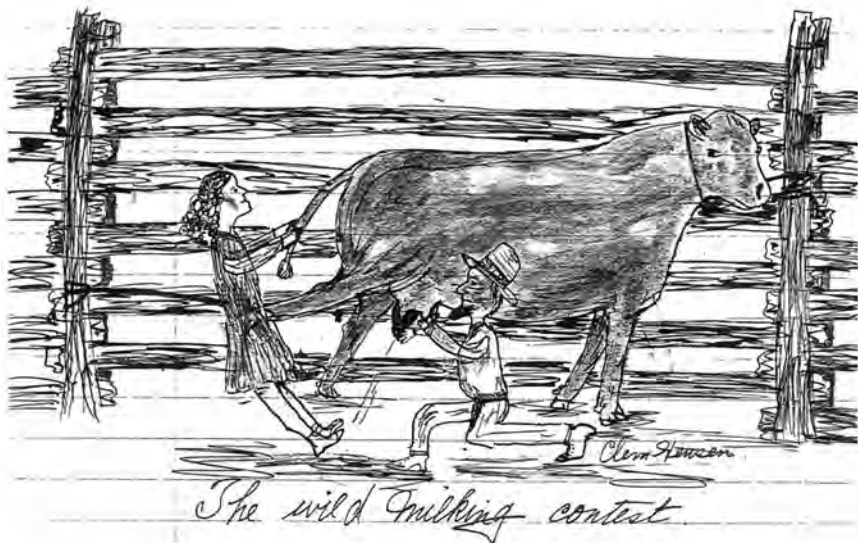
Dorothy and Maxine were on familiar terms with the cowboys, who considered the girls to be highly productive members of the crew. The hired hands admired the sisters and contributed humorous and eulogistic poems about their exploits to the *Gazette*, including this one:



See the feminine Cow-boy  
As she rides the meadows through  
Swings her quirt with careless joy,  
While dashing off the dew . . .  
They would rather be out riding  
For the Boss of the Anchor P  
And on the snow be sliding  
Than play golf with their Aun-tee.<sup>62</sup>

Countless entries in the *Gazette* document the work performed by Dorothy and Maxine alongside the ranch hands and their father, whom they referred to as “Boss.” For instance, a 1924 issue notes that “Jan 30th was a very hard day for Clem, Max, and her ‘pard.’ They worked swift and fast at the Calf Camp separating the fat calves from the beef calves.”<sup>63</sup> Several months later, it was written that “Bert Beacock helped by Max and her ‘pard’ moved 215 head of steers from Section 33 to the Mountain field Sept. 23.”<sup>64</sup> Another issue relates that the “home field [was] worked by the Boss, Max and her ‘pard’ on Feb 19th. Fifty-six head were cut and then taken over to the Bar S feed ground.”<sup>65</sup> The Macleay girls were also a productive unit when they rode out together on their own, supplementing the work done by the hired cowboys: “Max and her pard rode the west field and found 24 more calves that were missed when the field was rounded up earlier in the month” was a typical entry appearing in the *Gazette*.<sup>66</sup>

The size of the Rocking P Ranch necessitated hired help, yet these girls were not relegated to the home; rather, they were members of a large team that worked collectively to tend the stock. Equally comfortable in the saddle or in the barnyard – where they plucked chickens, milked wild cows, and planted potatoes – the sisters were experienced in all facets of the ranch’s management and fully prepared to take over when they inherited it from their father after his death in 1953.<sup>67</sup> As a result of their upbringing on a ranch that functioned as a “family enterprise,” historian Henry Klasen explains, “Dorothy and Maxine became the owners of the Rocking P



2.6 NOT ALL MILK COWS WERE DOCILE. HERE, ONE OF THE MACLEAY GIRLS IS CAPTURED IN CARTOON FORM HELPING TO MILK A WILD COW (1924). *ROCKING P GAZETTE*, COURTESY OF CLAY CHATTAWAY.

and the Bar S Ranches respectively and they managed their ranches with the same diligence and prudent care their father had exercised in his business.”<sup>68</sup>

On ranches of every size, from the 1880s through to the present, women have been directly responsible for overseeing the cattle stocking the range. It is this facet of ranch women’s experience that has been most obscured by the myth of a cattlemen’s fraternity dominated by hardworking cowboys and cattle kings. Rarely are women’s roles on the range documented so cogently and descriptively as in the *Rocking P Gazette*; nonetheless, it is impossible to ignore the fact that women did a significant amount of the stock work on many ranches. Even in the 1880s and 1890s, when gender roles were most proscriptive, women in the West were afforded a freedom created by the absence of established society and frequently accompanied their partners or rode out alone.<sup>69</sup> As more family ranches were established at the turn of the twentieth century and during the decades that followed, it became increasingly apparent that women’s labour was required to help manage and tend to stock, both in the barnyard and

on the range.<sup>70</sup> Many of the jobs had to be done on horseback. Some of the cattle work was seasonal and performed universally on all ranches, like gathering and sorting for branding, weaning, and fall roundups; additionally, each ranch had its own particular patterns of pasture rotation and herd management that demanded almost daily riding. “Feminine cowboys” made it possible for families to keep up with the seasonal work and the day-to-day operations.<sup>71</sup> Some women did more than assist with the cattle work, assuming full responsibility for managing their families’ herds. One of these women was Doris Burton, whose memoirs descriptively illustrate the nature of work performed by ranching women, be it roping, branding, or, in this case, sorting cattle on her own while her husband was away on the rodeo circuit:

One big chore was to gather the open heifers, thirty four head, out of the big herd before the bulls went out. The gate to cut them back through was situated in the worst of all places to get very reluctant animals through. It had a deep, steep narrow coulee fifty yards from the cutting-out gate. To accomplish that job was a hard battle between a good horse and a dodging, hard running heifer. . . . It took a sure-footed horse to race down and up, or up and down in that wicked coulee and to not trip or fall on the run. I did that chore for years and didn’t like that coulee or gate any better the first time or the last. I only had one horse fall once due to the wetness of the earth.<sup>72</sup>

While many ranch women relished the adventure and opportunity that accompanied the increased scope of their responsibilities, outdoor work was not without its challenges. Though ranch women were typically undaunted by physical labour and rarely complained in writing about inclement weather or other hardships, their concern for their children’s well-being while they were performing their endless chores appears to be one of the most ubiquitously stressful aspects of ranching. A woman’s particular stage of life considerably affected the amount of work she had to do and how she perceived her experience. Single women or women with grown children typically had a reduced domestic workload and more freedom to enjoy their time out of the home than those caring for young families. With livestock to tend to in all sorts of conditions, women used

creative strategies both in caring for their children and in carrying out the ranch work. In her memoirs, Catherine Neil recalled the infamously frigid winter of 1906–07, when she and her sister-in-law were required to help the men feed the starving stock: “Each morning after tucking in my baby to keep her warm, my sister-in-law and I each carried a bundle of hay on our backs and threw it out by the handful, so that the sheep would follow, while the men went ahead with a snow plough, trying to cut the snow down to the grass.”<sup>73</sup> As families grew, leaving the children unattended became increasingly worrisome for women who had to work out of the house. Neil recalled another trying winter where she worked alongside her husband to feed the stock: “When winter came I had to drive the sleigh with the hay, while my husband forked it out. My little children, three of them now, had to be left in the house all alone, and many a time my heart was in my mouth, as the saying goes, wondering if they were touching the fires.”<sup>74</sup>

Expanding the breadth of a woman’s sphere into the barnyard and beyond offered a diversity of and opportunity for new experiences, but leaving the house unattended for any length of time compounded the amount of work to be done upon her return. While many women spoke of the satisfaction of caring for their homes and children and the fulfilment of outdoor work, others, like Nellie Hutchison-Taylor, wrote candidly about trying to uphold this balance:

If I went out for more than a few minutes I would come back to find the fire out, children squalling, dishes to be washed, no hot water, and dinner to get. Sometimes I longed to fly away to some place where there would be no stoves to burn my fingers, no scrubbing to be done to harden my hands and fill my nails with slivers, no cooking – but that would pass off and I would go at it again.<sup>75</sup>

The delicate balance of family obligation, economic investment, and personal fulfilment kept ranch women engaged and content in their duties. If the balance in any of these areas shifted, such as in the absence of a supportive partner or during times of economic stress, the challenge of caring for dependent livestock and children put extraordinary demands on women’s time and personal resources.

Many variables affected women's day-to-day obligations and the contributions they made to their households. Thus, how they perceived the burdens they bore differed greatly according to individual circumstances. The refreshingly honest diary of Nellie Hutchison-Taylor illustrates how personal conditions, perhaps even more so than external factors such as class and environment, affected the quality of life for pioneer ranch women. As much as pioneers wanted to believe the propaganda that the West promised everyone a chance for reinvention and opportunity, in reality pioneers needed to possess practical skills and practice prudent financial management in order to succeed. Nellie and her husband lacked both of these traits when, having made some unfortunate "speculations in the Old Country," they immigrated to Canada, "the Land of Promise," in 1884.<sup>76</sup> After two years in Quebec they optimistically ventured to the West, at first squatting and then eventually acquiring a 160-acre homestead and 160-acre preemption on land west of Calgary when the Cochrane Lease was opened to settlers. With the establishment of their frontier home, Hutchison-Taylor recalled, her "trials and tribulations" began.<sup>77</sup> She discovered that maintaining a home under primitive conditions with little income was a daunting and unforgiving job: "I thought I knew a little of the hardship of life, but I soon discovered what a helpless, useless creature I was. . . . [W]e had frittered our money away and had no income except what we earned."<sup>78</sup> After a succession of failures, attributable to their lack of agricultural experience and to drought, the couple moved 130 miles north of Calgary. This time the collapse of their trading business and the death of her husband led Hutchison-Taylor to take over the management of their livestock and new homestead. She remarried several years later, and financial troubles continued to plague her because, as she recounted, "neither of us were very saving and my husband kept open house for his friends. It all takes money and the debts began to accumulate and we could see no hope of getting clear."<sup>79</sup> She eventually sold her remaining stock and moved to Calgary to live with her children until a doctor's orders sent her back to the better air found "pioneering near the foothills."<sup>80</sup> Hutchison-Taylor's honest portrayal of repeated failures on the frontier serves as an illustrative comparative analysis to more positive depictions of pioneer experience. The same personal qualities, such as a willingness to enter into unknown ventures and the belief in the inherent opportunity of the West, led some to success while others, without the advantages of

practical experience or necessary business sense, became caught up in the perpetual cycle of searching for the next “promised land.”

Measuring a woman’s or a ranch’s “success” is a highly subjective task. Even though in her own analysis, Hutchison-Taylor perceived her pioneering experience to be a failure, to some extent the very presence of her story in a local history book – surrounded by accounts of brave entrepreneurial men, selfless women, and ranching and farming families that have now been on the land for generations – can be seen as an accomplishment in itself. She led a hardworking life, and her honesty about her struggle to maintain the balance between family and finances on the ranching frontier is a valuable contribution to our understanding of women’s pioneer experience and how the vagaries of the beef industry affected real people. Other women left more tangible legacies and their efforts are more commonly defined as successful; their ranches had provided them and their immediate families with a livelihood, and they left the gift of good land to their children, who continued to ranch for generations. One would guess that this is what most women desired when they embarked, willingly or unwillingly, on their journey to the cattle frontier.

As this chapter has illustrated, through women’s day-to-day contributions the family ranch became the mainstay in the beef economy of Alberta. The role of women in this process was especially apparent during exceptional circumstances. For the duration of World War I, when many eligible men enlisted and served overseas, women’s efforts kept ranches operational. Their ability to manage varied tasks and responsibilities enabled ranching families to stay on the land. For women accustomed to working alongside their partners, the physical jobs of managing livestock and putting up crops remained largely the same. A significant change for them was an increase in their influence over the management of ranch business. In the absence of their husbands and sons, women’s responsibilities extended to include directly overseeing hired help, marketing cattle and horses, and making the critical decisions on their own. Just as women in society at large became increasingly emancipated as a result of being thrust into the public workforce as part of the war effort, ranch women became progressively empowered by their new positions of authority within the cattle industry. Some used this opportunity to develop and assert their business acumen, as in the case of Josephene Bedingfeld, who was already recognized as an accomplished horsewoman.<sup>81</sup> With women’s elevated

position of power, some found it challenging after the war ended to make the transition back to working with their spouses. Sarah Gardner, whose husband had left on the very day he heard of the outbreak of war and was absent for four years, proved herself capable as ranch manager of their large outfit in the foothills. When her husband returned to Alberta, they had to renegotiate their division of labour and authority.<sup>82</sup> The necessity of maintaining agricultural production on the home front during World War I emphasized women's importance on family ranches and in the cattle industry as a whole.

Just as they had sustained family ranches during the war, women often drew on their resourcefulness to provide the stability and ingenuity needed for a ranch to remain viable in times of particular economic hardship. The Depression years of the 1930s, which brought financial stressors as well as unprecedented drought to the prairies, were especially hard for families dependent on small commercial beef herds. George Zarn, who had worked for several families struggling to keep their ranches afloat during those years, commented sardonically that "the Brazil ranch was like all ranches that didn't have a brewery behind them in the thirties. They all owned a big mortgage."<sup>83</sup> The financial stress caused by big debts, little income, and a compounding drought that saw crops fail and livestock suffer added tensions to many domestic situations. In some cases, women found themselves in a position to not only run their ranches, but pull them back from the brink of financial ruin. During the thirties, Elsie Gordon resolved to hold on to her ranch and home despite the odds. Her father and mentor, George Lane, had died several years earlier "with very little but a memory left," despite his many years as a major player in the Alberta cattle industry.<sup>84</sup> Then her husband deserted her and their three young children, having decided that "the dirty thirties were too much for a person to eke out a living from the land"; he disappeared one afternoon after saying he was going to town for parts.<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, Mrs. Gordon was deeply rooted in the land and able to manage her remaining assets creatively in order to hold on to the ranch. As her children later recalled, in a memorial letter written to their mother,

You had the creek and the Oxley in your blood and you knew one way or another you could support and educate your family by staying on the ranch. By going through Farm Credit, a very



demoralizing experience, you were able to carry on, paying off a mortgage you had inherited when you purchased the ranch.<sup>86</sup>

Gordon not only “carried on,” but, equipped with the practical skills she had acquired throughout her life, she drove, did the mechanical work on her own vehicles, rode and did cattle work in a side saddle, gardened and grew acres of corn, donated land for a schoolhouse, earned the respect and admiration of her neighbours, and managed a successful ranch that was passed on to her children and is now operated by her granddaughter Jennifer Barr.<sup>87</sup>

Like Elsie Gordon, Edith Ings was left with a big mortgage and a ranch to run when her husband, Fred Ings, died at the height of the Depression in 1936. Having already sold off her beloved Sunset Ranch, she was determined to maintain the holdings of the homeplace, the Midway Ranch, and her summer home and grazing land, Trail’s End. Combining her ranching experience with innovative entrepreneurship, she continued to ranch with the help of her daughters Mary and Constance and supplemented their income by opening their summer headquarters in the Porcupine Hills as Trail’s End Riding Camp. In doing so, Mrs. Ings capitalized on the growing trend of “western” holidays on dude ranches, offering her guests trail rides, serene surroundings, and the chance to see a functional working ranch that was managed, at the time, by women.<sup>88</sup> The additional income provided by the dude ranch enabled the cattle operation to stay afloat during the late 1930s and to continue successfully into the next decade. During World War II the guest ranch flourished particularly by hosting young Commonwealth air force pilots who were on their leave from training at southern Alberta airbases. Edith Ings’s strategy for saving the ranch was successful. By the time she died, Ings had sustained a legacy that was passed on to her daughters. Constance and her husband, William Loree, continued to ranch, and both remained on the land until their deaths. The Midway Ranch and Trail’s End remain in the family and are currently ranched by its third, fourth, and fifth generations.

Even as early as the turn of the nineteenth century the economic premise of ranching was well established. As L. V. Kelly remarked in 1913, “no business in the world can recuperate from the losses that the cattle industry receives and recovers from.”<sup>89</sup> Ranching was, and continues to be, a relatively low-income and labour-intensive business; however, because

of the vested interest and labour of family members, the family ranch has endured. On the western frontier where the presence of a woman was initially so uncommon that milk cows balked, horses spooked, and puppies fled at the sight of one, women became eagerly and actively engaged in establishing economically diversified family ranches.<sup>90</sup> Women's labour has been fundamental in the process of sustaining small and mid-size ranches through unprofitable periods and maintaining the operation without having to hire profit-destroying outside labour. The same factors that distinguished them from the large corporate spreads, such as close management and labour-intensive subsistence work in the barnyard, were what made family input so critical to the success of smaller ranches. Women devoted their full energies to the success of the family ranch, ensuring that ranches were able not only to survive, but to thrive and be passed along. By participating in the primary economic production of early ranches and providing their families with support and sustenance, women enabled the longevity of the family ranch, while at the same time dismantling barriers of gender-specific labour, proving that women adapted to the conditions of the frontier as well as their male counterparts. The creation of the family ranch afforded women the opportunity to create and sustain something concrete and enduring, a lifestyle and a livelihood particular to the north-western cattle ranges.