

RANCHING WOMEN IN SOUTHERN ALBERTA by Rachel Herbert

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Gender Roles and Working Partnerships on the Ranch

More than mere “helpmates,” ranching women on family operations were, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, directly engaged with the productive labour of their ranches and provided invaluable domestic labour that supplemented the ranch’s primary income and sustained their families within the home. Sharing responsibilities in a working partnership not only helped make the family ranch an enduring form of agriculture, but also led to a negotiated sense of gender relations and a restructuring of the historically hierarchical order of labour roles for all family members. This chapter examines how existing divisions of labour were transformed and gender roles blurred by the realities of ranch work, addresses how women’s status within their personal relationships remained complicated by the patriarchal roots of agriculture, and demonstrates that in the presence of mutuality and shared decision making the conditions of the ranching frontier made the ideals of companionate marriage possible.

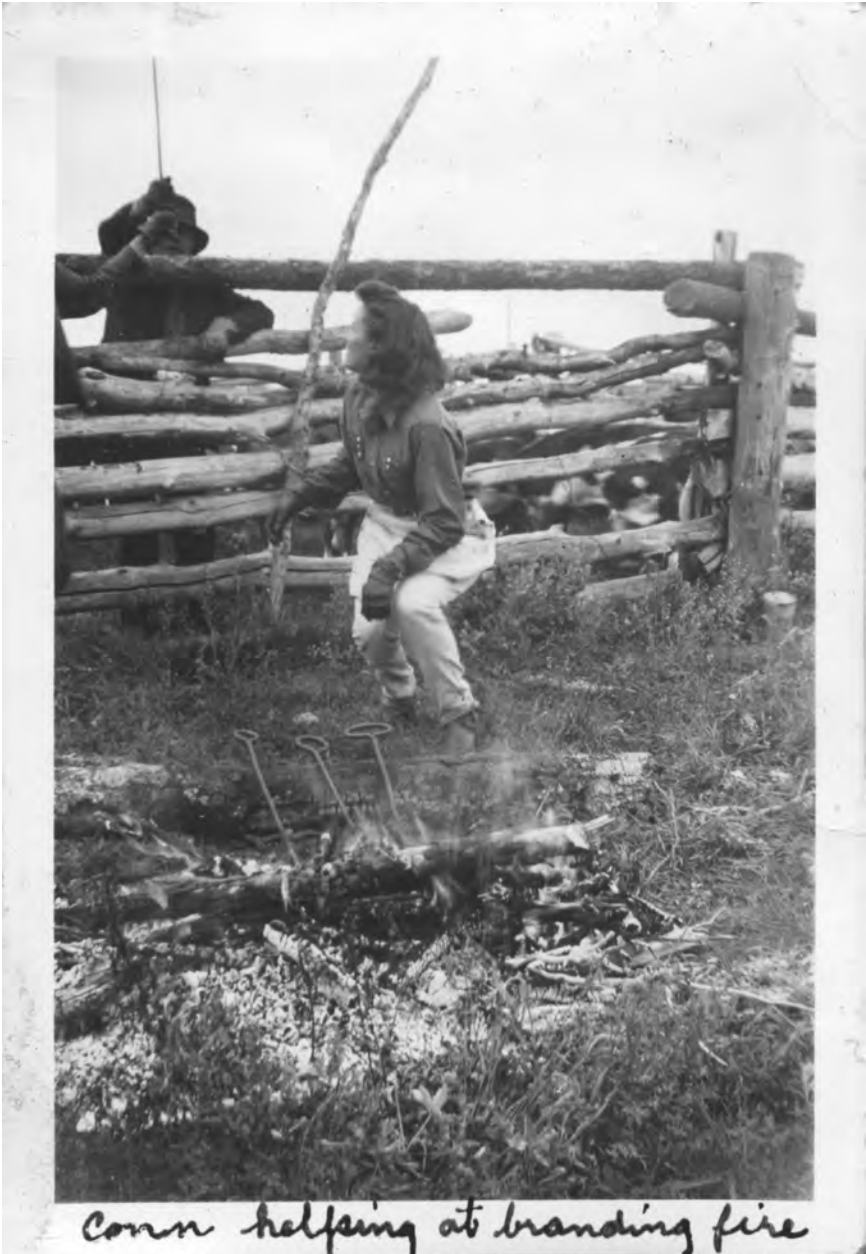
Early ranchers came to the West accompanied by their cultural mores and their perceptions of gender appropriateness. The ideological boundaries distinguishing the socially constructed female private sphere of the home and the masculine public sphere of productive labour in urban Victorian and Edwardian society were present on the frontier, but not rigid or impermeable. Some men (and women) subscribed to the views that historian Lewis Thomas described in his early analyses of Albertan ranching

communities. Thomas suggested that “the English tradition was strong enough to make it difficult for men to believe that the woman who was too weak to pass a tea-cup in the dining-room was strong enough to milk a cow in the stable.”¹ However, my research into the working practices of ranching families reveals that this proscriptive gender bias was not universal. From as early as the 1880s, women were accepted as a valued part of the working family ranch. Even on ranches that employed both domestic servants and hired men, such as the Midway Ranch established in 1903, women were both expected and self-motivated to help with primary production and subsistence work.² Similarly, in her study of the historic and modern roles of Texas ranch women, Elizabeth Maret challenges typical analyses of the gendered division of labour roles with very real evidence that women have always played a role in the primary production of cattle operations. She writes: “ironically, the ‘traditional’ view of women’s roles is predominantly from an urban-industrial perspective, which presumes separate spheres of activity for women and men. This traditional view of women is that of domestic specialist and helpmate to men. Men are defined and perceived as the economic providers and producers.”³ Working on ranches on cattle frontiers was, for many women raised in urban centres, their first opportunity to truly test these proscribed boundaries. And many men – again, for the first time – found themselves truly dependent on the direct and often physical support and labour of the women in their lives. Confining women’s work to the insular sphere of the home was simply not the practical rural reality. As a result of the essential role that women played both within and outside the home, traditionally gendered hierarchies and gender specific labour roles gradually became less defined on most ranches. Men’s and women’s work was not always clearly demarcated into separate realms; the barnyard became the arena where labour and gender roles blurred and interconnected, and the range became the site where barriers of gender division were dismantled. For ranch women, a sense of home, work, and place encompassed an expansive space that extended beyond their domestic duties within the home to include the barnyard and the rangeland beyond.

The spatial dynamics and the nature of work on the family ranch during the development years of the late 1800s and early 1900s especially blurred the boundaries between gender-specific spheres of activity. A dual economy operated on the range. Scholar Jeanne Kay defines this model

as “a subsistence or secondary economy that functions within the commercial staple export economy.”⁴ The lingering Victorian ideal of separate spheres was part of the cultural baggage that ranchers had brought with them from the East, but like many of the values brought west, it failed to transplant successfully and became modified by the conditions of the frontier. In theory, men’s and women’s labour roles were segregated into gender-specific spheres where the domestic, labour-intensive, and typically subsistence economy was deemed a private feminine sphere and the extensive production of staples, such as beef, for a commercial economy was deemed a public and masculine realm. High status and power through control of the primary cash income traditionally accompanied the masculine sphere. Feminists criticize this “doctrine of spheres” and the dichotomous power structure it creates as legitimizing a limiting view of women’s activities and potentials. For in actuality, “the two economies swing in and out of balance with one another,” alternately taking turns providing for and supporting the family and the business operation as financial conditions necessitate.⁵ This balancing or blending of economic and domestic spheres was made evident by both the geography and the workloads that men and women had to navigate as they established their homes and ranches. The expansiveness of the landscape, the miles of unbroken and unfenced range that women and men negotiated so as to tend their herds, and the intensive and repetitive work involved in keeping the home meant that members of both sexes were necessarily engaged in the productive economy and the “secondary” domestic labour. In analyzing the working environment of the cattle frontier it is, as Kay notes, “defensible to view domestic and commercial spheres as useful economic and spatial abstractions independent of gender, and then to see how men and women moved between them.”⁶ On a family ranch the working environment included the home, the barnyard, and the range, with all members of the family functioning as necessary in all of these domains; physically and theoretically, women and men operated within the same framework on the frontier.

Though the official census record acknowledged only one “‘main operator’ on family-owned agricultural enterprises” – and “further assumes that this operator is a man unless there is no adult male present” – the unofficial record composed of memoirs, diaries, and photographs reveals that women worked directly alongside their partners or were indeed the “main operators” of their family ranches.⁷ Women on ranches were, and



3.1 CONSTANCE LOREE HANDLING THE BRANDING IRONS AT THE FIRE (C.1940).
COURTESY OF LOREE FAMILY.

continue to be, directly involved in the primary production of raising beef cattle. Out of necessity and desire, women occupied labour roles that were typically held only by men in more established regions: they cared for livestock, assisted with any farming work, built fences and erected out-buildings, and rode the range. Women and girls were not only valuable assistants to husbands and fathers, but often acted as the primary producers and provided the impetus for enacting more rigorous management. In 1884, Mary Ella Inderwick commented on a neighbouring rancher in the Pincher Creek area. She wrote that “his wife is the leading spirit, and even goes out with him putting up fence because I suppose he would not go alone. She does the really hard labour.”⁸ Women’s involvement in the work of managing and running their ranches enabled them to navigate and transcend traditional gender roles. Like the male ranchers, who both created and assimilated into the culture of the ranching frontier, women developed the skills, language, and familiarity with the environment that accompanied the work of raising beef cattle. In doing so, they experienced a kind of egalitarianism and independence that was not afforded them in more established communities in the East, where women’s labour was typically either restricted to the uniquely female sphere of the home environment or committed to the constraints of paid employment. Ranch women were essentially self-employed. They took pride in their productivity while making tangible improvements and progress on their ranches and within their homes. The necessity of work moved women beyond the domestic sphere and began to integrate them into the mode of primary production. When there was work to be done, matters of propriety were subsumed by the reality of ranch life.

Standards of gender appropriateness were often ignored when there was vital work to be done; if women were required to assist the men with ranch work it became imperative for men, in turn, to help women with the burden of domestic chores. Of course, not every family blurred divisions of gendered labour, but many households regularly shared responsibility for some chores, like gardening and milking, that were typically considered women’s work. Evidence indicates that not only did the cultural and physical environment of the West allow women to overcome the restrictions of late-Victorian constructions of gender, but the requirements of ranch life also afforded men the opportunity to experience life with fewer limitations on their behaviour. Even when attempting to adhere to cultural

conventions that were transplanted onto the frontier, such as formal dinner parties, gender roles were subverted according to circumstance. After dining at a neighbouring ranch operated by a family of brothers and one sister, Inderwick reported that her hostess, Miss Smith, had “brought all her traditions with her.”⁹ Despite this, however, she wrote that “the dinner was very simple as they keep no cook, but do all the work themselves, and when we rose and swept from the room, we did not leave the men to enjoy a quiet smoke only, but to wash up. They appeared later looking guiltless of ever having seen a dish towel or dirty plate.”¹⁰ Men crossed the lines of traditionally separate gender roles to help their households, and ranches, run smoothly.

Men and women shared and balanced the workload according to what was practical at the time; in many cases that meant men helped with the domestic chores. In the late 1880s, Isabel Randall, her husband, and their friend Frank shared the burden of household duties, barnyard chores, and ranch work on their Montana outfit. Mrs. Randall wrote that “Jem, Frank and I are all pretty busy now, as we have all the domestic duties to perform.”¹¹ She was a proficient rider and routinely did the horse or cattle work while one of the men cooked. In one particular instance, after riding all day to help sell horses to a visitor, she discovered that “when we got back, hungry and happy, about 7 o’clock, we found Frank had a regular banquet for us: bean soup, fresh-caught trout, haunch of venison with buffalo berry jelly, compote of (dried) apples, *and* a beautiful sponge cake, made with nothing but flour, water, sugar and eggs.”¹² Even when chores were ordinarily segregated by sex, with women reigning in the kitchen, if a ranch wife was needed to help ride or do cattle work, it was possible that she would be assisted with the cooking or dishes upon her return. On their ranch in southwestern Saskatchewan, Lou Forsaith was primarily responsible for the home and children but also worked at all of the ranch jobs, which included feeding the cattle with her newborn daughter wrapped in a quilt and wedged between bales on the hayrack. Her husband was “quite willing” to come in and make supper and watch the children so that she could “go and do chores or something . . . get away from the house for a little while.”¹³ Monica and Billie Hopkins were equally flexible about labour roles on their Priddis horse ranch. As Monica was frequently needed to help with the riding, Billie made himself useful in the kitchen. One of Monica’s lively letters illustrates that though each sex had its own

particular area of responsibilities, the reality of balancing the duties of ranch and home meant that men and women crossed over and performed nontraditional duties that blurred the boundaries of gender-specific roles:

My housekeeping is running fairly smoothly and I try to be systematic but what can you do when a husband dashes into the house as he did yesterday, and says, "Hurry up and get into your riding things, we are going to gather some horses and you had better come along too." I looked around the kitchen; the breakfast things weren't even washed up and I was just going to start the bread. I said, "I can't leave everything like this, and I have bread to start." Billie quickly put that objection aside by saying, "I'll make some baking powder biscuits when we get back; you go and get dressed and I'll put the things away."¹⁴

On the ranching frontier the presence of a man in the kitchen or with his hands in a washtub was only slightly less common than the sight of a woman riding out alone to check on stray stock or behind the lines of a hay mower. Of course, assessing the equitable nature of labour division is problematic and subjective at best. How does a historian account for the significant number of photographs from the frontier period depicting men at the washtub? In her shrewd "ficto-critical" rendering of the laborious task of laundry day, Aritha van Herk muses that "either those men have no woman to do the job for them, which is likely enough, or it was so amazing and unusual when they plunged their hands into a tub-full of water, someone just had to take a picture of them."¹⁵ However, it is equally as likely that men simply took a proactive role to ensure that the work that had to be done was. This was the case for newlyweds Monica and Billie Hopkins; the clothes had to be washed and neither had the experience to do it. So they simply suffered together through the trial of learning to do laundry, often with hilarious results.¹⁶ As Kay remarks, the realities of life in cattle country left room for "an expanded definition of the heroic male in the Old Wild West that includes domestic activities. . . . If the West was 'heaven for men and dogs' it was also a place where they cooked and cleaned for themselves, and sometimes for women as well."¹⁷ On the frontier the home remained a women's realm, but men were welcomed into it and not emasculated by regularly performing domestic work.



3.2 DAVE BLACKLOCK DOING HIS LAUNDRY (C.1913). PIONEER EXISTENCE BLURRED THE LINES BETWEEN TRADITIONALLY GENDER-SPECIFIC TASKS. REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

Women's essential role in the productive labour of ranches and men's willingness to help with domestic duties did not automatically transfer into increased status for women and their work or necessarily indicate an egalitarian environment within the family. Complicated by factors such as primary male ownership of land and the overarching patriarchal power structures that had shaped political and familial values for centuries, women did not simply gain equality by performing "higher-prestige" men's work.¹⁸ In fact, some historians, such as Canadian scholar Veronica Strong-Boag, have argued that as the barriers of gendered labour division were dismantled, pioneer women were further indentured by an increase in their workload.¹⁹ Other causes deemed responsible for a rural woman's subjugation were the lack of modern conveniences, such as indoor plumbing, heating, and lighting; the improbability of labour-saving devices in the household; and her relative isolation with little reprieve from physical

labour.²⁰ In practice, however, these factors did not affect a farm or ranch woman's quality of life nearly as much as did the nature of her relationship with her partner and the degree to which they shared responsibility for the management and day-to-day operations of their ranch. The limiting factors on female autonomy, which Dee Garceau suggests the New Woman of the twentieth century sought to overcome, were "family authority, domesticity, and female dependence."²¹ As this book has thus far indicated, in many cases the frontier experience afforded women the chance to rise above these obstacles; however, when family life entailed unequal divisions of mobility, labour, and power, women then failed to experience the emancipation that so many others gained as a result of their ranching lifestyle.

One of the complexities of ranch women's experience was that the same factor that could increase their independence and resourcefulness could also make their lives more restrictive while also making men's domain more expansive. In many cases a woman's ability to maintain the yard, ranch, and home enabled a man to work out and earn much-needed income from external sources while the couple simultaneously "proved up" a homestead or established the foundations of their ranch. Often, however, this meant that women not only shouldered the bulk of the work, but had to endure the isolation that was compounded by their husband's prolonged absences. It was also the women's work on the home front that enabled their partners to play cowboy; in countless situations, women bore the burden of the daily responsibilities in the immediate vicinity of the home while men enjoyed the adventure of the range. Though some women were empowered by the personal fortitude it took to attend to ranch work in their husband's absence, many expressed frustration over the repetitive and isolating nature of their tasks. American historian Elliott West cites one Texas couple's binary depictions of their life on the range. When the Newcombs left their established life in town to start their own ranch, the patterns and rhythms of their once cohesive daily lives began to diverge. In his diary, Mr. Newcomb described his thrilling life on the range, "full of bluster and brag," as West notes.²² His wife, however, wrote of an increasingly insular life: "a man that is cowhunting with a lively crowd has no idea how long and lonesome the time passes with his wife at home. . . . A man can see his friends, hear the news and pass time . . . , while his wife at home sees and hears nothing until he returns from a long trip tired

and worn out.”²³ An absent partner or one who simply “wasn’t a help-mate” made the already arduous, and at times lonely, work of women all the more difficult.²⁴

The work that brought many couples together was the same factor that caused discord and bitterness in other marriages. When workloads were unbalanced or when her partner shirked his responsibilities, unremitting work and isolation could make life enormously challenging for a ranch woman. Furthermore, when a marriage was founded on making a living off the land, and that land was legally owned by the male head of the household, women in abusive situations were in a position of extreme vulnerability. Factors such as scarce personal funds, isolation, a limited network of support, and their fundamental lack of legal property rights combined to keep women trapped in oppressive and abusive relationships.²⁵ While the nature of ranch work inspired equality in many partnerships, frontier conditions have been associated with an increase in domestic violence. The contradiction of women’s vital roles on their ranches and their lack of power within domestic relationships is illustrated by the life of rancher Doris Burton. Ironically, behind her back Burton’s husband credited her with keeping the ranch running, even though he was alternately abusive and dismissive. Reflecting on these incongruities, Doris Burton wrote:

I long ago found that I was married to a man who expected me to take life’s hard knocks on my own. He talked to other people as if he cared, but didn’t let me know because it might make me a sissy! Imagine! It was through other rodeo cowboys’ wives that I learned Ed replied to their questions of “How can you be rodeoing when you’ve got a big ranch to run?” Ed replied jokingly, “I’ve got a wife at home who can run the ranch better than I can.” That was news to me, and I wished that I could do the muscular work as good as a man. I got things done, but it was harder on me than on a man, I’m sure.²⁶

Knowing that he was dependent on her to keep the ranch operational, and that it was her greatest love, her husband continually threatened to sell the ranch at times when Burton was unable to come to her own defence – such as when she was in the hospital recovering from abdominal surgeries made necessary by overwork during her pregnancies. Burton was

confident in her competence as a rancher, but vulnerable to the whims of an emotionally unstable husband and the patriarchal legal system that denied ranch and farm women ownership of the land they had worked and invested their lives into developing.²⁷ She sometimes justified his behaviour, attributing his cruelty to the stressors associated with establishing and running a ranch on meagre funds in the uncertain economic climate of the late 1920s. She wrote, for instance, “[Ed] was a slave driver and hard to please, but I understood the stress and tension and did my very best.”²⁸ Her diligence, work ethic, amazing competence, and grace enabled her family to prosper even under the conditions of abuse she endured. Eventually, armed with the skill set and the self-confidence fostered by a lifetime of ranch work, Burton left her husband and forced him off the ranch that she had almost singlehandedly sustained. To circumvent the legal complexities associated with the divorce, the ranch was inherited by her granddaughters, but she continued to run it for them until her death.²⁹

Ranch women had different motivators and used varied strategies to rise above adversity. Doris Burton was driven to overcome the hardships of her situation by an intrinsic love of the land, the animals, and the practice of ranching. For Mary Kropinak, who also endured overwork and an abusive and frequently absent husband, it was the determination to make a better life for her children that pushed her to continually advance against seemingly impossible circumstances. Unlike Burton, who had the constant companionship of her horses and dogs and the stimulation of having a significant ranch to run, Kropinak was isolated on a remote homestead in the foothills, with little food and a large family. Burton was personally committed to a lifetime of ranching, but Kropinak had reluctantly accompanied her husband to their homestead where he promised that having their own land and cattle would bring their family “security and freedom.”³⁰ In actuality he had wanted a place that he could control, even if it was not large enough to support his family. A lifetime of overexertion caused Kropinak’s early death, at the age of fifty-one, yet she lived to see three sons own land and livestock. At one point her son Frank held the prestigious position of “top rider” at the Walrond ranch. Kropinak’s tenacity enabled her family to gradually expand their holdings from a meagre homestead shack and one milk cow to include a substantial and productive mixed hay and cattle ranch.³¹ Subordination and unbalanced workloads were undoubtedly a part of the pioneer experience for some

ranch women, but motivated by a desire for the lifestyle or a commitment to their family's well-being, women found ways to survive inequity and establish productive ranches that supported and sustained their souls and their families.

Even when inequity in a relationship or the vagaries of life gave them a heavy load to bear, ranch women performed work that connected them to the land in fulfilling and meaningful ways. In an interview, rancher and poet Rhoda Sivell recalled that she and her husband had mutually made the decision to emigrate in 1899 because "we wanted a free ranch life in the West."³² She reflected on her experience: "Pioneering is a wonderful free life but I found out you have to pay for the life you love, and want, and stand up to all the hardships and storms in a strange land."³³ Burdened by her husband's ill health, with a large ranch to run in an arid and remote part of what is now eastern Alberta, Sivell independently managed their operation and yet still found the time to write the poetry that sustained her. First published in 1911, her poetry reflects the beauty of the place she came to call home and has an immediate, intimate resonance that indicates her familiarity with the land on which she lived and worked. One of her poems, "The Wood by the Saskatchewan," illustrates how the land she toiled in was both the source of, and a respite from, work:

I came, when the dawn was breaking,

To a wood by the river side,

I rode from the far-off ranges

Where the prairie stretches wide.

Looking for stock that had wandered;

Thinking they might have strayed

Down to the wood by the river,

So straight for the wood I made.

I stayed in the wood by the river,

The sun rose high on the plain,

And a voice from the range was calling

Me back to my work again.

I forgot for a time my duty,

For the place held joys for me,

And the peace I found by the river

Set my weary spirit free.³⁴

Like the tone that echoes in so much of ranch women's writing, the voice in Sivell's poetry is shaped by place and experience. She claimed for herself, and for all ranch women, a rightful and essential spot on the range. Ranch women were at home on the rangeland, and the comfortable connection they had with their working environment enabled them to do the jobs they had to do with grace and brought them relief from the weight of the work they performed.

In an extensive analysis of the social dynamics within family farms in the American Midwest, historian Mary Neth teases out the complexities of workload and power distribution. Modified, of course, by differences in time and place, her insights aptly apply to the family ranch as well. Neth concludes that in the presence of "mutuality," family agriculture was made both viable as a business endeavour and empowering as a lifestyle: "By emphasizing work flexibility, shared responsibilities, and mutual interests, farm people limited the conflicts created by the patriarchal structure of the family and agriculture and created strategies for the survival of family farms."³⁵ To argue either that the burden of work expected of women saddled them to lives of unrelenting drudgery and abuse or that the freedom of the frontier was entirely empowering negates the complexities of women's lived experience. Mutuality best describes the domestic and working relationships of most ranching families. Elliott West defines the "pioneer household" as "an economic mechanism of mutually-dependent parts"; in its totality, a frontier family was a "productive unit, often a remarkably effective and self-sustaining one."³⁶

Distributing power equally within the family was one of the most effective ways in which ranchers kept family dynamics harmonious and

made the ranch a viable economic unit. Involving women and children in the decision-making processes of a ranch ensured that the entire family was committed and personally invested in the well-being of the operation. Joan Lawrence, who saw her children and grandchildren flourish on their ranch near the Cypress Hills, wrote that “the best part of raising children on a ranch is their sharing in the work and the decision-making. I think that’s wonderful.”³⁷ There were practical reasons for including the whole family in the work and management of smaller ranches. When women were responsible for the cattle or the crops, it only made sense that they would also be a part of the decision making that went into their management. Every spring when her husband was busy in the fields, wrote Doris Fenton, “the cows were mine. . . . I had to sort out the cows and calves and put them out with the bulls. I had to dehorn the commercial calves and do horn weights and all that kind of thing. . . . When it came to making decisions, I always had my ‘say so.’ We didn’t always do what I said, but very often we did.”³⁸ By including even the youngest members of the household in the working details, families prepared for both the best and the worst possibilities: the expansion and succession of the ranch by the younger generation or incapacitating accidents or death. Vivian Bruneau Elli, whose family ranched in southern Saskatchewan, reflected that by including the entire family in decisions that affected their daily lives, her father had fostered a working environment that facilitated equality and independence. In addition, as she told a friend, her father had insisted that the ranch was run as a family affair: “He always wants us to know about everything. One of these days he could have an accident and he wants us to be able to make decisions and carry on.”³⁹ Many family ranches were collaborative ventures that required the labour, knowledge, and commitment of the entire family, both inside the home and on the range. Each member of the family was made more effective and responsible when they were included in the decisions that affected the day-to-day operations of the ranch.

Women’s contribution to the daily productive labour of ranches is undeniably evident on ranches of all sizes and within a multitude of family conditions, but their role in the management of operations is less definitive and more difficult to ascertain. Even within similar social classes and peer groups, women maintained various levels of engagement with the business operations of their ranches. The differing levels of involvement of

the wives of two of the founders of the Calgary Stampede demonstrate the multiplicity of ranch women's experiences. Some women, like Elizabeth Lane, had little to do with ranch business. She deferred to the business decisions of her husband, George Lane, even though he had somewhat of an impulsive nature. He bought and sold land and livestock alongside the major players in the early cattle industry, but left little financial legacy behind after his death in 1925.⁴⁰ In her memoirs, "Mrs. George Lane" referred to ranching as her husband's "business."⁴¹ All references to property acquisitions are mentioned as George's purchases; there is no indication of mutuality, even in regards to major investments like purchasing one of the largest intact ranches in southern Alberta. She wrote simply that "in 1904 George bought the Bar U Ranch."⁴² She also projected herself as separate from their financial troubles, writing that "in 1907 it looked as though all the big cattlemen were broke, George Lane included, but the situation was saved with grim work and trying."⁴³ In comparison, Florence and Guy Weadick integrated all of their endeavours, from performing in Wild West shows to raising cattle to operating a dude ranch. According to rancher Lenore Maclean, who grew up next to the Weadicks' Stampede Ranch near Longview, Alberta, the influential and entrepreneurial Alberta couple "had a truly good partnership. He was an organizer and had a vision. She was a stable business woman."⁴⁴

Women were likely to be more directly involved in the management and financial decision making on smaller ranches, whose economies were closely integrated to the common needs of the family. They kept the books for the ranch and the household, recording cattle sales beside the egg money, keeping track of expenses like hay and tea, and documenting births of cattle and babies in their diaries.⁴⁵ However, even on some of the larger ranches, such as the Oxley, which at one point in the 1880s held over 100,000 acres of prime lease land, women were involved in management. When the Oxley was reorganized as a private company in 1883 its board of directors comprised Staveley Hill, the Earl of Lathom, George Baird, and all of their wives.⁴⁶ It is unknown if any of these women ever saw the ranch first-hand, but on paper, at least, they played a role in its administration. Curiously, influential women have always played a major part on this ranch. From Evelyn Springett, the energetic wife of manager Arthur Springett, in the 1890s, to the fiercely independent owner Elsie Gordon in the 1920s and 1930s, to her granddaughter, Jennifer White, who continues

to run the ranch today, women's commitment to the productivity and legacy of this ranch and their direct involvement in its management have enabled the Oxley's survival. Reflecting on women's ongoing role on the Oxley, from its management to the menial tasks required to keep it running, White observed that – as with many other ranches that have been maintained for generations – “this ranch here has been predominantly loved and cared for by women.”⁴⁷

As an “economic mechanism,” frontier partnerships worked exceedingly well.⁴⁸ With the labour of both partners, moderately scaled family ranches proved to be successful and sustainable on the grasslands regions of the West. For some couples trying to establish their lives and livelihoods in a frontier environment, as American historian Cynthia Culver Prescott points out, “the financial necessity of a partner superceded their desire for a romantic companion.”⁴⁹ When the focus of a relationship was on agricultural production rooted in a system of patriarchy that gave men unlimited authority over women and children, women's status and a family's quality of life were not necessarily improved by the conditions of the frontier. In a study of farm families in North Dakota, Barbara Handy-Marchello notes that “pioneer unions appear to have been primarily economic relationships in which women held (at least nominally) a subordinate position.”⁵⁰ To a degree this was true on the Canadian ranching frontier; ranch women were not immune to the fundamental inequalities that privileged male ownership of land and assets. Comparatively, however, the frontier period in western Canada occurred much later than it did in various parts of the American West. The notion of companionate marriage, one based on “ideal love” and friendship, was already well established in society at large by the 1890s, when couples began to settle the ranchlands of southern Alberta.⁵¹ Thus many of the couples who came to ranch had intentionally entered into their unions anticipating both the mutual exchange of labour *and* the ideals of companionship and romantic love. When this balance of reciprocity and romance was achieved, women's status within their marriages improved. For many, the ranching frontier of the early twentieth century was an ideal social environment in which the modern marriage thrived. As Elliott West asserts,

The companionate family and idealized views of children did not develop in response to frontier conditions; they were

brought westward from elsewhere in Victorian America [and Canada]. . . . [T]he new country did not wear them down or change them dramatically. On the contrary, these attitudes and modes of living flourished because, quite by chance, they were splendidly suited to a setting for which they were never intended – the peculiar world of the frontier West.⁵²

The new ideals of companionate marriage combined with the mutual sacrifice and effort that went into establishing homes and ranches on the frontier to enable couples to form the bonds of interdependence, equality, and friendship that led to healthy and productive relationships. Working together strengthened the bonds of marriage. Endless work was the common denominator in many ranchers' relationships, and particularly toward the ends of their lives, partners became reflective and appreciative of each other's contributions. After his wife's death James Fergus, a Montana rancher, credited her with the success of their ranch. He referred to her as the "Madame [who] fails less than I do, works hard, doing nearly all the work for nine men, makes butter, raises chickens, has flowers and plants indoors and out and is always busy."⁵³ Fergus was a prolific letter writer, and his writing conveys the depth of the partnership that he and his wife eventually shared; clearly his affection for her grew beyond simply respecting her for her hard work. Reflecting on the later years of the couple's life together on their isolated ranch, he wrote: "We were always together and thought far more of each other than we did when we were young. I think people of good sense generally do, having lived so long together they become forgiving and one becomes as it were a necessity to the other, I know it was so with us."⁵⁴ Along with the frontier their relationship evolved, from one of economic reciprocity and mutual dependence to one of companionship and deep appreciation.

Partnerships that thrived were based on mutuality and the shared goal of bettering the lives of their families through establishing viable ranching enterprises. The erosion of gendered labour roles facilitated the equality now recognized as beneficial to fulfilling marriages by fostering commonality and an awareness of each person's daily routines and preoccupations. When women were involved in all aspects of ranch life a truer understanding of each other's needs was possible. In her argument that women's riding ability granted them equality, scholar Nancy Young proposes the idea

that “to communicate knowledgeably about the tasks, the men, the horses, and the dreams for the future of the ranch, would surely have been of great benefit to a husband and wife.”⁵⁵ Pioneer rancher Bob Newbolt noted that the mutual affinity for horses he and his wife shared had strengthened their marriage: “Mabel’s love for good horses resulted in her persuading me to purchase the beautiful imported Hackney stallion, Romance. This act was to be the means of providing us with plenty of Romance in the years ahead.”⁵⁶ Mabel and Bob Newbolt integrated their passion for ranching with their commitment to each other: “We both fell in love with our ranch home as well as remaining in love with each other all these years.”⁵⁷

Even prior to marriage, women’s immediate knowledge of and familiarity with ranch life gave couples a foundation for their relationship. When American cowgirl Agnes Morley Cleaveland was “wooed” by a young cowboy it was the stock that gave them something to talk about while they rode out together: “All of this summer when Tod rode with me we talked of – well, I suppose horses. Maybe we mentioned cows, but it was horses about which most conversations revolved.”⁵⁸ Since so much of ranch life was spent working, sharing jobs gave couples common interests. The creative fictitious personal ads that the teenage Macleay girls wrote for their *Rocking P Gazette* reflect two realities: that a relationship on a ranch revolved around work and that flexible labour roles were attractive to both men and women.

Young lady wishes to correspond with Cow-boy who can
cook and clean house, lady musical and fond of travel.

Cowpuncher wants wife to run outfit for him. Has good
house and a large set of unbreakable dishes.

Handsome cow-boy would like to correspond with a good
strong lady who can cook, break horses, chop wood etc.

Wanted before spring; strong young woman, who can haul
hay and plow. If good worker will consider marriage.⁵⁹

The desire for a partner with whom to share both work and companionship was a concept familiar to two observant young ranch women who were witness to the romances between the ranch hands and local “school marms.”⁶⁰

Although it is daunting to historicize love, the nature of relationships between husbands and wives on the range appears to have been shaped by the intimacy of their working partnership. The working and family lives of ranchers became so interconnected that many sources closely associate love with work. When Richard Copithorne's wife, Sophia, passed away in 1923 at the age of forty-three, adjusting was a struggle for him because he was used to her accompanying him on horseback for ranch work and for sport on organized coyote hunts. His family wrote that "this was a hard blow as she loved to ride over the ranch with him."⁶¹ A lifetime of shared commitment and experience often solidified the deep partnership of a husband and wife. One member of a ranching family from the Twin Butte area remarked on the deep bond that had formed between her parents over a lifetime of ranching together: "When mom died on April 6, 1935 it seemed as though half of Dad died with her. There was no one to give his first strawberry, or his first fish to and he just pined away over the next three years."⁶² A poem entitled "You and I" by Catherine Dick, who ranched with her husband near Chain Lakes, Alberta, illustrates the shared experience of a lifetime of ranching with her husband:

We've ridden all the cow-trails on the range,

You and I,

We've rounded up the beef-steers in the fall,

And it's been a busy life,

Filled with joy and work and strife,

But we've weathered it together,

You and I . . .

We've drunk from every crystal sparkling spring,

You and I,

And we have "ridden fence" from dawn to dusk,

We have lunched beneath the blue,

Picked the first spring blooms that grew;

Now the riding days are through, for

You and I!⁶³

Another of Dick's poems further emphasizes that mutuality was the fundamental foundation of the family ranch and that the ranch provided an environment in which fulfilling personal relationships thrived:

The hills are all about me now,

The ranch is much the same,

But my partner drifted off one day –

It's all in Life's big game.

We had long talks together,

Our boys, our ranch, our stock;

And now he's gone and I am left,

Oh, how I miss that talk!⁶⁴

As central as the ranch and the need for a working partner was to many relationships, love regularly became an expected component of marriages, particularly after the turn of the century when the previously unbalanced sex ratio began to level off and many family ranches had been established for a decade or more. Rancher Fred Ings wrote from Alberta to his "sweet-heart," Edith Scatcherd, whose mother was "very distressed" to see her daughter, and only child, leave London, Ontario, for a new life and marriage in the West:⁶⁵

You can assure her that I am not marrying you solely for a housekeeper, neither will my little wife be asked to do anything more than the ordinary Canadian girl is accustomed to do in her own home. I think you are too sensible and energetic a girl

to wish to [wring] your hands all day. I want you to be my best chum to be with me as much as possible.⁶⁶

Their marriage was based on deep friendship and a shared affinity for their home in the heart of ranching country, of which Fred wrote, “This is the country I have lived most of my life in. It is my home. It is mine *it will be ours* . . . free and independent from anyone. If I did not love you as I do I would not ask you to share it with me.”⁶⁷

As historian Elliott West concludes, “pioneers poured physical and emotional energy into trying to transplant and nurture traditions in the frontier’s fresh soil.”⁶⁸ Some of these ideals, such the gendered division of labour, were impossible to preserve whereas others, like companionate marriage, took root and flourished. The frontier afforded women opportunities previously thought impossible, and their hard work and resourcefulness, when combined with the support and respect of a true partner, earned them increased status. Though for some the entrenched patriarchal prejudices that limited their ability to control their agricultural assets kept them trapped in abusive marriages, many found ways to gain autonomy. Even when they worked within the context of the family ranch, where men had conventionally held control of primary production and the family’s resources, women challenged the limitations socially ascribed to their gender. Many shared decision-making responsibilities with their partners and assumed roles of authority in their households, both in the absence of their husbands or in cooperation with their partners. They took pride in the simple accomplishments associated with maintaining their own homes on their own terms and contributed directly to both the primary and subsistence economies of their families. Hard work was made bearable by the privileges that accompanied the pioneering experience, the freedom from restrictive gender norms, relationships based on shared responsibilities, and the reward of investing oneself in the management of a business that was directly integrated with the labour of each family member and in a marriage that promised love and respect.

