



RANCHING WOMEN IN SOUTHERN ALBERTA by Rachel Herbert

ISBN 978-1-55238-912-6

THIS BOOK IS AN OPEN ACCESS E-BOOK. It is an electronic version of a book that can be purchased in physical form through any bookseller or on-line retailer, or from our distributors. Please support this open access publication by requesting that your university purchase a print copy of this book, or by purchasing a copy yourself. If you have any questions, please contact us at ucpress@ucalgary.ca

Cover Art: The artwork on the cover of this book is not open access and falls under traditional copyright provisions; it cannot be reproduced in any way without written permission of the artists and their agents. The cover can be displayed as a complete cover image for the purposes of publicizing this work, but the artwork cannot be extracted from the context of the cover of this specific work without breaching the artist's copyright.

COPYRIGHT NOTICE: This open-access work is published under a Creative Commons licence. This means that you are free to copy, distribute, display or perform the work as long as you clearly attribute the work to its authors and publisher, that you do not use this work for any commercial gain in any form, and that you in no way alter, transform, or build on the work outside of its use in normal academic scholarship without our express permission. If you want to reuse or distribute the work, you must inform its new audience of the licence terms of this work. For more information, see details of the Creative Commons licence at: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY:

- read and store this document free of charge;
- distribute it for personal use free of charge;
- print sections of the work for personal use;
- read or perform parts of the work in a context where no financial transactions take place.

UNDER THE CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE YOU MAY NOT:

- gain financially from the work in any way;
- sell the work or seek monies in relation to the distribution of the work;
- use the work in any commercial activity of any kind;
- profit a third party indirectly via use or distribution of the work;
- distribute in or through a commercial body (with the exception of academic usage within educational institutions such as schools and universities);
- reproduce, distribute, or store the cover image outside of its function as a cover of this work;
- alter or build on the work outside of normal academic scholarship.



Acknowledgement: We acknowledge the wording around open access used by Australian publisher, **re.press**, and thank them for giving us permission to adapt their wording to our policy <http://www.re-press.org>



Childbirth on the Ranching Frontier

In deciding to establish their homes and families on ranches in the largely unsettled West, women knowingly or unknowingly risked their lives as they bore and reared the next generation. Exaggerated frontier fears of the “savage Indian” and roving wild animals were compounded and glorified in contemporary fiction and the popular imagination. However, in reality, giving birth to their children actually posed the greatest mortal threat to western women. Childbirth was a hazard particular to women and arguably the most significant and dangerous life event they faced while living on remote ranches far from a supportive network of friends and family and the security of experienced caregivers or health providers. Through examining ranching women’s reproductive experiences, we see the true manifestation of the dangers posed by isolation.

Though pioneer experience could strengthen the bonds of marriage through mutual determination and shared work, pregnancy and labour were trials unique to women. Even when women had a connected, concerned partner, reproductive issues made women aware of the distance between female support networks. Bearing children on the frontier made this typically stalwart class of women physically and emotionally vulnerable. Sources from the period that speak candidly of pregnancy and birth are limited, but those that do discuss these personal and previously taboo subjects illuminate much about the female experience. Consistently, the tone of pioneer ranchers’ personal accounts of childbirth is a mix of belief

and pride. The tone of disbelief emerges as these women recall the challenges they and their peers had to overcome as they prepared for and gave birth to their children, while a sense of pride imbues their voices as they recall the tenacity, endurance, and grace that they gained as a result of birthing on the frontier.¹ Research on homesteading women's childbirth experiences supports this analysis. Historian Nanci Langford reports similarly dichotomous findings, even going so far as to conclude that childbirth can be viewed as "a microcosm of what homesteading meant for women of this generation" and that accounts of the experience reveal "all that was bad and good about homestead life."²

Maternal mortality was one of the greatest dangers for pioneer women. Even as late as 1933, childbirth was second only to tuberculosis as the leading cause of death for women in Canada.³ When statistics on maternal mortality began to be monitored in Alberta, in the 1920s, the number of deaths was notably higher in rural areas than in urban centres. Multiple factors combined to make childbirth and the postpartum period exceedingly dangerous for rural women: limited personal reproductive knowledge, isolation from supportive women such as relatives or friends, little reprieve from dangerous and strenuous work, the absence of qualified prenatal and maternal care, and the lack of appropriate birthing facilities combined with the significant travel time required to reach them. The conditions of the frontier made bearing and raising children particularly dangerous for ranching women, yet they contributed to women's solidarity in the West.

The challenge of bearing children alone in primitive conditions was exacerbated by many women's ignorance of the birth process and maternal care. Most women on the earliest ranches had no network of experienced female informants. Even as late as the 1920s, the little published material on childbirth and mothering that was available was not applicable to rural women, as it emphasized the "integral" role of medical professionals during delivery and advocated for a scientific approach to child rearing that was impractical in most rural conditions.⁴ As a reflection of society at large, the events of the barnyard were separated from those of the bedroom by conventions of modesty. On some ranches propriety dictated that women and girls were not permitted to be present during breeding or calving, even when they were actively involved in other aspects of the operation. This lingering conservative tendency remained intact on some

ranches through the generations. Edith Wearmouth, who currently runs the Wineglass Ranch west of Cochrane, Alberta, remarked that when she was growing up in the 1950s “my dad and my grandpa were very strict in that they didn’t allow us girls or their wives to be out with the men, so my mom never saw a calf being born until she was well into her sixties.”⁵ Attempts to protect women’s “decency” as late as the 1950s can be interpreted as quaint at best, but restricting women’s access to reproductive information during the pioneering years, when they were often left to attend to their own health and that of their children, was fundamentally dangerous.

Lack of readily available reproductive knowledge also resulted from the absence of female companionship and the paucity of forthright conversation about birthing itself. Young families often came west looking for a new beginning, leaving their relatives behind. Women felt this separation from their network of female friends and family most poignantly when pregnant. When Catherine Neil was expecting on a remote southern Alberta sheep ranch, for example, she felt unprepared by her upbringing and by the fact that her extended family were in Scotland:

As I came from a large city, I had never been on a farm except for a short visit of a week. I was an only girl, and had been raised by one of those reserved Scots mothers, who think it time enough for a girl to learn things about married life, after they are married, always in the hope that she will be at hand to tell all a young wife should know. Unfortunately for me I was married at Medicine Hat, so my mother was far away.⁶

Letter writing kept women connected to their family and friends in the East. However, as Langford’s research suggests, women’s writing seldom revealed any information about pregnancy, though out of necessity it might mention the event of the birth itself.⁷ Correspondence regarding the 1907 birth of Claudia Gardiner on the Wineglass Ranch brusquely related that “Alice [the mother] is alright but it was an awfully long time but came naturally in the end. Got to fix up the house, get lunch and pack so no time for more.”⁸ Even women familiar with livestock and the biological processes of animals were generally reticent to share information about reproductive issues.⁹ When writing to a friend concerning a neighbour’s birth experience, Monica Hopkins – who typically gave a blunt depiction



4.1 A BABY IN DIAPERS TAKES THE REINS ON THE KEY HORSE RANCH (C.1906).
REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

of events – was elusive: “She knew what had happened, or at any rate what was going to happen, if it hadn’t already happened. (I hope you can follow my happenings.)”¹⁰ Limited opportunities to connect with other women and the lack of readily available and forthright practical information for birthing and caring for their children compounded the challenges of starting a family on the ranching frontier.

Rancher Doris Burton’s experience was representative of those who struggled physically and emotionally to bear their children on remote ranches because they had been ill-prepared by their families and society. Written in reflection, both the introduction and conclusion of Burton’s memoir explicitly emphasize her lack of reproductive knowledge and her personal opinion that raising girls innocent of the “facts of life” was detrimental to women’s health and autonomy. Born in 1910 and raised in a seemingly egalitarian ranching and outfitting family near Waterton, Alberta, Burton grew up continually surrounded by both domestic and wild

animals. Yet, as a girl she never witnessed a live birth, nor did she ever ask her parents where the new animals came from. Though from a young age she was entrusted with empowering responsibilities such as tending camp and wrangling pack horses alone for days in the wilderness, Burton was emotionally and physically unprepared for her marriage, at age sixteen, and for the babies that followed shortly thereafter. When her son was born, on October 21, 1927, following “a very complicated delivery,” she “had never seen a baby changed or nursed.”¹¹ In the conclusion of her memoirs, she stridently argued that girls deserve to grow up and become informed before they reproduce. Drawing from a multitude of rich life experiences that had thrust her into traditionally masculine domains, such as cougar hunting with hounds, breaking her own horses, and running a ranch, Burton emphasized that informed motherhood above all else was the most important element of women’s emancipation. Because both of her children were born when she was very young and living in primitive conditions, in a shack on a grazing lease in the mountains, she suffered permanent physical damage because she lacked the nutrition and the respite from work needed to bear and raise them sufficiently. Burton advised that “if a child is involved, it has the right from conception on to a mother during its unborn nine months, where her body is ready to supply the building of the child and not deplete her health.”¹² She advocated physical, mental, and spiritual maturity and preparedness for taking on the task of mothering – wise advice from a woman who raised her own children under challenging conditions, yet highly idealistic for the circumstances of her generation of ranching women.

Even women in the most advantaged positions within the ranching order faced frontier conditions that were not particular to status. To a degree, women were equalized by their birthing experiences. As Elliot West notes in his analysis of parenting in the American West, all women “were expected to see to the thousands of details of child care while tackling the demanding jobs of frontier homemaking. Even the luckiest felt the strain.”¹³ Unlike Burton, Evelyn Springett had domestic help and the means to live comfortably on the ranch her husband managed, but even so, she recalled being overwhelmed and unprepared for caring for her infant daughter:



4.2 FRANK AND JOSEPHENE BEDINGFELD POSE WITH BABY JOSEPHENE FOR A FAMILY PHOTO (1914). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

A puny little mite she cried incessantly for the first few months of her life. I seemed to have plenty of nourishment for my baby, but she did not thrive; probably because I did not handle her aright. I had been ill off and on for months and was pitifully thin and run-down; and I had no one to advise me, either before or after her advent.¹⁴

Without appropriate prenatal and postpartum care, and without either the support of family or the security of being well informed, women in the simplest range shacks and on the most prominent open-range ranches simply did the best they could to meet the needs of their children.

The amount of physical work women performed during their pregnancies and during the postpartum recovery period changed little from the extent of their typical duties on the ranch. Out of necessity, pregnant women and new mothers remained active and engaged in the process of sustaining their families, homes, and ranches. Often this entailed physically demanding domestic work: hauling water, tending fires, and preparing meals were inevitably part of their daily routine. Most women also continued a degree of involvement in the functions of the ranch at large. Both housework and ranch work posed a hazard to pregnant women, but a break from their responsibilities was not an option when there was no extended family or hired help to provide assistance to their husbands. Women's contributions to their family economies were not curtailed by pregnancy. Accustomed to participating in ranch work alongside their husbands, most women chose to continue to ride and work, particularly when the alternative was to remain alone in an isolated ranch house. Violet LaGrandeur, who ranched with her husband in southern Alberta, recalled that she had ridden right up to the end of her first pregnancy, in May 1912:

It was time to trail a load of horses to Medicine Hat. Emery said he would be away for four days with the [h]orses. I said, "Okay, so will Violet LaGrandeur." I wasn't going to stay alone out there. We saddled our horses, struck out with the string of horses that were to be shipped. I am sure that these broncs never walked a mile the whole fifty miles. After we got to the stockyards at Medicine Hat, we rode to the Royal Hotel which was run by John Quail. I dismounted, the first time out of the saddle since daylight that morning. I was pretty weary as I was expecting our first born in about two months.¹⁵

For many women who remained active during their pregnancies, being stuck in the house with a newborn baby was harder to endure than the injuries sustained from ranch work. Rancher Doris Fenton, who kept up her workload on the ranch even after her children were born, was not fazed by being bucked off a colt she was training – something that had occurred because Fenton "didn't have strength back in . . . [her] legs yet because Barb [her daughter] was only a month old."¹⁶ Fenton later recalled that after the

birth of her son, Carl, what bothered her more than being thrown from a horse was that "Stuart was hauling straw and I couldn't go. I was watching out the window in the kitchen, bawling because I couldn't be with him."¹⁷

Like LaGrandeur, Fenton, and others, Catherine Neil was engaged in a working partnership with her husband, and pregnancy did not limit her involvement in ranch operations. As a young woman helping to run a sheep ranch in remote southeastern Alberta in the early 1900s, Neil had multiple accidents during her pregnancies. She participated in all elements of ranch work, but one of her injuries occurred while she was simply preparing supper and fell down the steep stairs leading to the cellar. Typically, however, it was handling livestock that posed the greatest physical threat to women. Toward the end of the same pregnancy, Neil was assisting her husband as he worked the sheep through a corral. She was standing outside of the enclosure trying to keep the sheep from jumping the fence when one of the panels fell on her. The sheep then escaped, trampling her in the process.¹⁸ Neil's most serious injury was sustained during her third pregnancy. While she was putting the horses in the stable for the night, one broke away and tried to get out the door past her. It head-butted her in the abdomen, sent her flying, and then stepped on her and broke her arm. With two small children at home, Neil was desperate for assistance. A year earlier, she had taken in three girls from a neighbouring family while their mother recovered from an infection obtained during childbirth. In return, the family sent their fourteen-year-old daughter over to help. This was "a blessing," according to Neil.¹⁹ When she later had to undergo abdominal surgery to repair internal injuries caused by the accident, the girl again stayed to care for the children while Neil healed.²⁰ It was this mutual exchange of labour and goodwill that enabled women to make it through the daunting ordeal of childbirth and childrearing while responsible for so many other duties as well.

While there were hazards associated with the physical nature of the work required by ranch women, this work also kept them physically and mentally prepared to meet other challenges. Although, as mentioned above, standards of appropriateness differed from ranch to ranch, some women were likely to witness and aid in the birth of their livestock. In an age where little reproductive information was disseminated to women and when they were separated from other females who could share their own personal knowledge of the facts of life, it was involvement with livestock

that provided women with invaluable and critical life lessons. Catherine Neil was responsible for assisting the sheep during complicated births because her hands were better suited than the men's to working in the birth canal. This active involvement led to several of her accidents, but the experience also provided her with essential reproductive knowledge. And she clearly valued this education. Later, she commented that "it was during this first lambing season that I got my first lesson in midwifery."²¹ She was further educated in midwifery when her first child came earlier than expected and the birth was attended by a Mrs. Slawson, who acted as the neighbourhood midwife.²²

Typically, when possible, ranch women made arrangements to travel to the nearest hospital or birthing facility shortly before their expected date of delivery or had a doctor or midwife notified once labour began and brought to the ranch for the delivery. However, with the great distance between towns, the expansive size of many outfits, and the unpredictable nature of birth itself, it was all too common for a woman to labour at home without assistance for all or part of the birth. In 1907, Augusta Hoffman and her siblings were the only attendants for the birth of their sister. Hoffman recalled that "in all her pain" her mother "asked us children to pray for her as that was all we could do."²³ Other women were not as lucky, and their tragedies affected the decision making of those around them. In the Porcupine Hills in the 1890s, isolation and impassable conditions trapping them in their remote ranch home during a spring flood led to the death of both a labouring woman and her baby.²⁴ The woman's neighbour, Evelyn Springett of the New Oxley Ranch, was cautioned by the event and made arrangements to go to Fort Macleod for the birth of her own first child. Yet, despite her advanced planning, she laboured primarily alone when the baby came five weeks earlier than expected:

At about 5 o'clock in the morning I could bear it no longer, and one of the cowboys went galloping off to the station sixteen miles away, to fetch the station agent's wife, a good soul who had some experience in a slum district in England. . . . Though she was vastly better than no one at all, I shall never forget those awful hours before the doctor arrived. The heat was terrible and I was covered by flies.²⁵

After this harrowing experience, Springett's family encouraged her to spend her second "confinement" in the comfort of her well-to-do brother's home in Winnipeg rather than risk labour on the ranch a second time.²⁶

Those who travelled away from their ranches to birth were occasionally more comfortable and provided with better care than they may have received at home. However, often the journey itself was hazardous to the well-being of mother and child. Weather, distance, and trail conditions were the biggest factors that determined the comfort of a labouring woman's trip to the doctor. Monica Hopkins wrote of the experience of her neighbour, Mrs. Bolt, who had "had her babe under the most unpleasant circumstances, though they seem fairly ordinary out here."²⁷ The labouring woman was being transported by buckboard to the doctor when it became evident that the baby would arrive before the trip could be completed. The travellers made it to a neighbour's house "on the gallop," getting there just in time for the baby to be delivered – while the baby's father "was having hysterics in the stable."²⁸ Hopkins wrote: "Freda said the buckboard never missed a stump or a stone on the road. She was bumping around so much she hardly noticed the pain, she was so afraid she would be thrown out."²⁹ As Catherine Neil recalled, unforeseen emergencies could also disrupt plans to have a baby in town. Expecting her second child, Neil and her husband were en route from their ranch to catch the train to Lethbridge when they spotted a prairie fire and had to turn back to fight it. After the fire was out they continued on, arriving just in time for the baby to be born the following morning.³⁰ Other women were less fortunate. For many women, travel proved more than they were physically able to withstand. While travelling from Calgary to Kamloops, where her husband was to manage the Senator Bostock Ranch, Elizabeth Callaway gave birth to her sixth child in a railway station. Shortly after their arrival in Kamloops, Callaway passed away.³¹

Women's tales of discomfort and close calls during home births served as cautionary advice for their contemporaries, prompting some – but only those who had the opportunity provided by location and means – to labour in hospital. Although she never did have any children, Hopkins wrote that "I have heard so many appalling stories of abnormal births since I came out here that I have made up my mind to spend the nine months in a hospital to be on the safe side."³² However, turn-of-the-century medical standards and practitioners could be inadequate, unprofessional,

or unsanitary. Maternal morbidity was not necessarily decreased by the presence of a doctor, and hospital staff often interfered with a mother's ability to care for her child as she wished.³³ Common risks associated with pioneer women's births, such as infection and toxemia, can be attributed in part to suspect frontier hospital conditions. May Dodds Ings, the first wife of rancher Fred Ings, succumbed to an infection commonly dubbed "childbed fever," shortly after giving birth to their son in a hospital in High River in 1898. Two other women at this hospital died in similar circumstances at the same time.³⁴ Tragically, the risk of maternal death was so great that Ings, like many other women, had prepared her affairs prior to delivery just in case she did not survive. When her husband, who had been away on a horse-selling trip at the time of the birth, returned to the ranch some months after her death he found a letter laden with pathos, saying goodbye and explicitly detailing how she wanted her child to be raised:

I am writing this to you today, not because I am feeling ill but because it relieves my mind to know that if anything does happen I shall have said the few things I wished. Darling if the little one comes and lives and I should not, I know that for its mother's sake you will do the best you can for it. But because a child needs a woman's care I should like sister May to have it to bring up till it was old enough to be a companion to you. She would be the only one who I could trust *our* little one to. Then whatever you do with my things only keep my watch for my child – it will be old enough to be valuable then. Dearest love you have been so good to me and I know you love me truly, but some day you may meet some good woman who will be happy to make you comfortable. Then dear remember I should wish you to marry again, for I should have had your love first and I should not be jealous when it['s] for your good. Oh love good-bye. I don't know what makes me feel that it is to be a good-bye, but something seems to tell me to write this to you. You are so good dear far better than I and I know that if God takes me to him you will come to me there bye and bye. Live so you will my darling and bring up the little one to be proud and tell it of me and give it the best education you can. Kiss me darling; I love you so much. So much. Your Wife.³⁵



4.3 EDITH INGS, PREGNANT WITH HER SECOND DAUGHTER, FEEDING AN ORPHANED FOAL ON THE LAWN OUTSIDE HER HOME (C.1912). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

Seemingly as an afterthought, she had scrawled across the bottom of the page, "Dear either bury me at home or out here near *you*."³⁶ On the frontier, women knew that anything was possible; unfortunately, childbirth often manifested their worst fears.

In most cases a lack of funds, the inability to leave one's responsibilities at home, or the absence of a facility nearby prompted women to birth at home. However, for many the sense of autonomy and security they felt at home was simply preferable to being confined in hospital. When she was expecting her second child, Edith Ings travelled the twelve miles to town and returned home after the doctor advised her that the birth was imminent, preferring to labour in the familiar and comfortable surroundings of her summer ranch house in the hills rather than in the hospital. The child born that day, Constance Ings Loree, recounted that "when she was expecting me to be born, she drove down in the buggy to see the doctor, knowing her time was close. He advised her to either stay down, or return to the ranch immediately, which she did. I was born at Sunset [Ranch] that same day, before the doctor arrived."³⁷ For all the tragedy and challenges associated with bearing children on the frontier, most women, remarkably, whether assisted by medical professionals or not, lived to raise their children on the range.

Pioneer ranch women were tested by birthing and tending to their children. However, it was in overcoming frontier conditions that they developed the tenacity to establish their homes, families, friendships, and communities in the West. They strategized to deal with their isolation, turning to one another where and when they could for birthing support or postpartum care. But in the earliest phases of settlement in ranching districts there were simply too few women and they were too recently arrived to have developed networks of mutual aid. Writing of more established agricultural communities in the American Midwest in the early twentieth century, historian Mary Neth notes that "life transitions such as births or deaths, often required economic assistance as well as emotional support. Neighbourhood and kin networks provided this support."³⁸ However, in the earliest phases of pioneer ranching, in the 1880s and 1890s, these networks were seldom available; the provision of adequate support for new mothers often took money of their own. For all of the levelling effects of the frontier, this is one area where having money directly contributed to an increased quality of life. Hired domestic help was invaluable in making



4.4 HIRED HELP WAS WELCOME, ESPECIALLY FOR MOTHERS WHO WERE ACTIVELY INVOLVED WITH RANCH WORK, AS WAS JOSEPHENE BEDINGFELD (1912). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

the postpartum period more manageable and was virtually ubiquitous among the most privileged ranch women, such as Luella Goddard of the Bow River Horse Ranche. Hired girls, nurses, and governesses – or “Lady Helps,” as they were called by the Lynch-Staunton household – were common on ranches that could afford them.³⁹ However, securing long-term help was a problem that plagued frontier households. Staff turnover rates were high, as many young women who came west as employees soon married and established families and ranches of their own. As an alternative to hired help – or as a supplement to it – sisters, mothers, or friends made extended visits from distant homes to provide companionship and ease the burden of mothering on the frontier. Elizabeth Lane, who had married Bar U Ranch manager George Lane in 1885, recalled gratefully that when her eight children were young, her sister Alvira had spent “a good deal of time with me” on the Lanes’ recently acquired and remote ranch on Willow Creek.

The isolated and self-sufficient nature of their lives led most women to believe that they were expected to bear their children stoically and

independently. However, where possible, women expressed great solidarity by assisting one another with their births, and it was in this mutual assistance that women formed the bonds that began to build communities. In 1887, Lily Young, who had recently settled in the Springbank district west of Calgary, was forced to deliver her own baby while her husband attempted to get a doctor. Fortunately, she had prepared herself in anticipation of an unassisted birth by soliciting the advice and instruction of her doctor prior to leaving Ontario. Although she managed the birth by herself, she was adamant that no woman should have to give birth alone, and she became a birth assistant to over one hundred babies in the community.⁴⁰ Like other community-oriented midwives, Young not only provided help during the delivery itself, but also often assisted a family in getting ready for a new arrival by helping with housework or food preparation – invaluable aid to a new mother, particularly under the demands of frontier conditions where providing meals was an all-consuming task in itself. Another laywoman, Bertha McCarthy, locally dubbed “the only doctor the Twin Butte area ever had,” presided over many births.⁴¹ Like other women in her unofficial position of responsibility, McCarthy felt obligated to help her sisters in need despite the associated risks. In 1911 she brought her own baby with her on a wintery night to aid with a delivery and her daughter’s minor cold turned to pneumonia and she died shortly thereafter.⁴² Because women on isolated ranches and homesteads were dependent on the goodwill of their neighbours for assistance, those with the will and competence to aid their fellow women were highly respected members of their communities. While they received little remuneration for their services, they were often repaid in food, livestock, or the simple admiration and deep appreciation of their peers. A Saskatchewan rancher, Pansy White-Brekhus, recalled the home birth of her younger brother: “The old lady that lived next to us couldn’t talk English – she spoke Norwegian, and she came down. She was a midwife and she was pretty capable. And after, whenever she saw my brother, she would say, ‘That’s my boy.’”⁴³ The bonds created by a sense of shared responsibility for the well-being of mothers and children transcended barriers of language and ethnicity and facilitated community building on the ranching frontier.

Children created a common bond among women. Differences in social standing, country of origin, and language were diminished by the presence of a baby and the recognition of the shared experience of the

challenges that accompanied mothering on an isolated frontier. After a particularly lonely period, Catherine Neil recalled, she felt relief and euphoria upon meeting her first “Canadian” baby and his mother:

I visited another of the early settlers, a Mrs. Clark. She was a young woman with a tiny baby, and I managed to tell her all my trials. When we met we ran to each other, and put our arms around each other's neck, and just had a good cry. All the hunger and longing we each had to speak to another woman, and had stifled for so long, gave way, and we felt better after our cry. She led me to a little cot fashioned out of an orange box, and daintily hung with muslin, and there I saw the first little Canadian baby.⁴⁴

Ranch women's vulnerability was illuminated by the conditions and risks associated with childbirth. However, it was also this circumstance that encouraged them to seek out solidarity with other women and strive to improve health care for themselves and their families. Despite the challenges and threats to their own personal safety, most women reinforced the significance of their contributions to their households while they were pregnant. A major theme of this book is that, as previous chapters have demonstrated, women were producers as well as reproducers, but their reproductive labour in the form of bearing and providing for the next generation of ranchers was an especially poignant part of the pioneer experience.⁴⁵ Indeed, providing a future full of opportunities for their children was the motivation behind many women's decision to ranch in the West. The first generation of ranch women garnered great respect from their contemporaries because of their dedication to mothering. Old-time cowboy T. B. Long eulogistically praised the efforts of frontier mothers, commenting that “those pioneer women were hardy, game and tough. I sometimes think they could stand more hardship than a man. . . . [Y]es these pioneer women accomplished miracles and yet they thought of it only in terms of their duty as homemakers.”⁴⁶ Yet perhaps pioneer mothering represented desire more than duty. Women came to the West desiring opportunity for themselves and their families and sought solutions to overcome the hardships involved in making this desire a reality.