



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>*



The Significance of Horses to Women's Emancipation

Horses were central to the lifestyle and livelihood of cattle ranchers and played an important role in dismantling constructions of gender roles in the West. A western icon, the horse was a means of transportation essential to the work, and recreation, of cowboys and ranchers. For women, riding and horses could be the ultimate gender equalizer. When mounted, a woman was as capable as her male counterpart. Pioneer rancher Agnes Morley Cleaveland reflected that “the cattle business in those days was conducted on horseback. Any rider who knew what to do was the equal of any other rider who knew what to do.”¹ Unlike the farming districts that were densely settled by homesteaders after 1900, ranching districts remained sparsely inhabited by necessity.² Thus, women who did not ride were at a distinct disadvantage if they lived on a ranch. Without the ability, means, or desire to ride, a woman's mobility was limited, her opportunity for social contact with other women was severely reduced, and she was unable to partake in the primary mode of production – cattle work. Evidence from Alberta ranching country indicates that women who rode, with or without a practical purpose, used this modality for enjoyment, personal fulfilment, and social interaction. This was true for the second generation of ranch women as well. Women and girls with access to horses conveyed a sense of fulfilment and contentedness in their lives in spite of the isolation and hard work associated with ranch life. This chapter will demonstrate

how the horse directly contributed to pioneer ranch women's ability to participate actively and equitably alongside their male counterparts.

In the male-dominated environment of the open-range period prior to 1900, women often were accepted and integrated into the ranching community through displaying their equestrian ability and being able to participate in the same working and recreational activities as the men. Riding was a valuable skill for ranch women to possess, whether they had come west as accomplished horsewomen or learned to ride upon their arrival. When Mary Ella Inderwick first arrived from eastern Canada as a bride, an informal initiation – often in the form of a riding evaluation – was a rite of passage for greenhorn women, as well as for men. In her correspondence to her sister-in-law in the East, likely written with future publication in mind, Inderwick asserted that her high status among the men was due in part to her abilities as a rider and that she took pleasure in the freedom provided by their acceptance of her riding the open range. She wrote that the cowboys “back me in all my schemes because I ride well. . . . I verily believe that if I did not ride they would have nothing to do with me, [but] as it is they are rather proud of me.”³ Women often surprised the men with their abilities. Many women recalled the pride they had felt after their initial initiation into the ranks of the western cowboy. Violet Pearl Sykes, who was at the time a guest on a working ranch, recounted her debut at a roundup where she had been required to cut a specific steer out of a herd of a thousand. According to her memoirs, she had surpassed the men's expectations:

Was I ever scared but I did not dare show it. Old Sammy was the perfect cut horse so into the herd of one thousand or more cattle I reined the old horse. . . . Sammy did all the work while I was riding for all I was worth. The herd hold boys were all watching to see how I made out which must have met with their approval and satisfaction because after that, they really put me to work whenever I went to the roundup.⁴

Evelyn Springett was also subjected to blatant scrutiny upon her arrival on the ranching frontier in 1893, and she was equally proud of herself for being immediately accepted as a suitable addition to the range. Her hazing consisted of being taken for a wild ride behind a team of fresh Hackney

stallions by the manager of the Winder Horse Ranch on her first morning as a young bride out on the range. She recalled both the ride and the praise that followed it:

To me it was a thrilling experience and one far more exciting than the fastest motor car. . . . Even though I was terrified I would not have missed the experience for anything. . . . My husband, watching it all, was furious with anxiety, but all Sharples [the manager] said on our return was “Why, man alive, your wife’s all right; she’ll do!” And from a Western man that was a high compliment.⁵

Most women were conscious of the fact that they had to prove their capabilities, and their spirit, to more experienced members of the ranching community, particularly to the cowboys who were the experts at working cattle and the supposed equestrian masters of the frontier. In addition, as scholar Nancy Young suggests, “the ability to connect with men both in task and conversation (“horse talk”)” helped women to integrate socially into ranching communities.⁶ Those who were competent riders and exhibited the willingness to participate in equestrian endeavours earned the respect of the men with whom they rode and, in short order, became accepted “hands” on the range.

The central role of the horse contributed significantly to the egalitarian nature of ranch work and to women’s elevated status. Mounted, a woman was equal in strength and prowess to her male counterparts: she could gather cattle, help with sorting and cutting out stock, rope cattle for branding and medical treatment, wrangle horses, break colts, and perform virtually any other task that could be performed from the back of a horse. One Montana ranch woman, left to manage the place during the spring of 1886 while her husband was on a roundup, found that she was much more capable of getting the work done than their hired man. In a letter that was later published she related how she confidently handled the demands of a diverse range of daily activities:

No sooner had he started than Van [the hired man] comes to me, and, in a coaxing tone of voice, persuades me to jump on my horse and drive in a bunch of mares for him. I had such a

nice ride after them, and helped a man, whom I didn't know, to drive some cows, which he had found near our place, part of the way home. Then I drove our mares in, unsaddled my horse, and went at what Jem calls my "Fetish" *i.e.* house cleaning.⁷

On moderately sized ranches that functioned with minimal outside help, women took on duties that were performed by cowboys and hired hands on the larger outfits. Equipped with a horse and the desire to contribute to her family, a ranch woman extended her sphere of influence to encompass more than the house and the barnyard, and she enjoyed the status and sense of self-worth that accompanied riding the range.

Women participated in many, if not all, of the ranching activities performed on horseback, and in doing so, they broke out of traditionally separate, gendered labour roles. Riding enabled women to enter the masculine domain as an equal. Not only did women sustain their families by performing duties within the home, but they could work on horseback independently or alongside the men to accomplish necessary ranch work. Most ranches employed hired help year-round and even the smallest ranches tended to hire cowhands or haying crews when necessary. However, operations capable of meeting their labour needs without having to hire excessive outside labour were able to conserve scarce capital resources. Wives, daughters, and sisters who were capable horsewomen, knew the lay of the land well, and had a vested interest in the care of their stock were often better equipped to perform ranch work than employed cowboys. It was this direct contribution to the primary mode of production that elevated women's status on the range, and it was the central role of the horse that made this possible. While their skills made them indispensable to the productivity of their family units, women and girls who were considered "good hands" earned respect that extended well beyond their family circle. Dorothy and Maxine Macleay, for example, garnered admiration as a result of their contribution to their family's ranching success; they were also lifelong horsewomen. According to one of their contemporaries, "both girls were known throughout the ranching fraternity and broader as being very capable and talented young women."⁸ Later, Dorothy's children were, like their mother, a fundamental asset to the ranch. They rode and performed any task that needed to be done. Accordingly, "this resulted in the girls as well as the boys becoming quite capable in the work involved

in ranching.”⁹ Their father “often remarked that he would try to arrange some of the jobs for weekends because the kids were better help than most men that he could hire.”¹⁰ The second and third generations of ranch women were born into an environment made egalitarian by the horse.

While women often worked hard to develop the skills they needed to perform alongside the men, ranch children in general were simply raised in the saddle. For most boys and girls, riding was as natural and essential an activity as walking. Cleaveland affirmed this: “Horses were an integral part of our lives. The day’s activity began no more by putting on one’s clothes than by ‘getting up the horses.’”¹¹ In fact, often before they could walk ranch children were placed on the front of a saddle, rocked to sleep by the swaying rhythm of a horse’s gait and soothed by the creaking of the saddle. As they grew bigger, children would graduate to doubling or even tripling behind their parents or older siblings. Independence was gained by riding solo and maturity marked by participating in the real ranch work. Elizabeth Lane emphasized the significance of riding in her children’s ranch upbringing. The family had a treasured “kids’ horse” named McGuinty who was a valuable asset as an instructor to the next generation of ranch hands:

All first six children learned to ride on him. The last learner rode behind the best rider until the day their father said he could ride alone and he was given the reins and told to go. When the children were allowed to join the older riders and McGuinty found himself with the other mounts he would snort and prance and make the children feel very proud of him. After they could ride with a sidesaddle or a stock saddle the children got other horses.¹²

A solid and trustworthy horse was invaluable as a first mount, but it was when a child graduated to a competent cow horse that they became truly integrated into the functioning of a working ranch. Lane remembered how important this step was for her children: “The great day came when a child was allowed to ride a well-trained cow pony whose quick turns and stops and swings from left to right was a test of riding.”¹³



6.1 HORSES WERE AN ESSENTIAL PART OF GROWING UP ON THE RANGE (1912).
REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

Ranch women's memoirs frequently reflect upon the nature of the relationship they had with their first horse – often a partner who was an indispensable, if sometimes infuriating, part of their early childhood. Acquiring her own horse made the ride to school more enjoyable for Carley Cooper: “I used to have to ride to school with my brother. We had two gates to open and he'd jump off to open the gates and when he jumped back onto the horse, sometimes he'd knock me off. I used to have to step on his foot, and he'd take my hand and pull me up and I'd sit behind him. When we got a little older I got a horse of my own and that was a lot nicer.”¹⁴ In an interview late in her life, Cochrane-area rancher Edna Copithorne laughingly remembered her first horse, a little black pony: “That was the only horse I ever hated. . . . [It] only had one gait and it was a slow one, oh I cried over that horse. . . . I soon ditched the old plugs and rode some smart ones to school.”¹⁵ Similarly, as children's horses were (and still are) notorious for outsmarting their riders, Constance Loree recalled the challenges of her first mount: “Daffy was a pretty, nice-gaited little pony but full of devilish tricks. He ran away with us, he rolled in rivers, he reared and bucked, and ran in and bit other horses' stomachs without missing a step. [My sister]

Mary and I loved him dearly, and rode him for years.”¹⁶ Providing children with mobility was a horse’s fundamental role, and reliability was a trait more favourable than fancy bloodlines or pedigree. Millie Blache, who was born on her family’s ranch on the Elbow River west of Calgary in 1896, had such a horse, “a pony which she rode to school named ‘Monday’ which was obtained in a trade with the Indians for 3 pounds sugar and 1 pound of tea.”¹⁷ These horses were children’s partners in work and play and endowed them with mobility and responsibility at an early age.

Horsemanship skills were passed down generationally. Learning to ride and care for horses was fundamental to becoming a productive, responsible member of a ranching family and community. Daughters as well as sons were educated in the ways of the horse. Loree, a lifelong rancher, remembered her father’s instruction in horsemanship as an integral part of her early childhood:

He was a lenient father, putting up with our “tom-foolery” as he called it, but in matters of horsemanship the rules were strict and his word was law. Any infraction such as bringing a horse home winded and sweating, and his blue eyes could turn awfully cold, and you’d better have a good excuse. He had learned in a harsh school that survival could depend on not making a mistake, particularly in regard to the horse you were riding. If anything happened to it you were afoot and helpless. We were taught to ride safely and well, to ensure our welfare and the horse’s. Riding was more than just sticking on and going fast. It was learning about the vulnerable parts of a horse: withers, back, stifle joint, mouth, and hooves, and how to prevent colic, founder, cinch gall, rope burn, and wire cuts.¹⁸

Loree’s mother also provided the young equestrian with instruction, by reciting rhymes to encourage good horsemanship: “Your head and your heart keep bravely up,/ Your heels and your hands keep down,/ Your knees keep close to the horse’s side/ And your elbows close to your own.”¹⁹ However, not all lessons came directly from a parent. Sometimes it was the animal itself that provided children with necessary instruction. Evelyn Cochrane wrote to her son about a visit she had made to a neighbouring ranch where she encountered a boy who had been “educated” by his horse:



6.2 JOSEPHENE BEDINGFELD ON A PONY – NOTE THE CHILD’S UNUSUAL RIDING SEAT (C.1913). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

“Poor little George has got a nasty sore place on his face, where the horse kicked him and broke his jaw. I believe he had been hitting the horse, for a stick was found lying beside him on the ground.”²⁰ This incident was a cautionary tale. The fact that Cochrane chose to relate it to her son indicates the importance ranchers placed on teaching their children good horsemanship, not only for the practical purpose of protecting a valuable asset, but for developing and demonstrating decent moral character as well.

Mounted work enabled girls to transcend gender divisions and perform equitably alongside their male siblings and it also gave them the means to provide their families with supplementary income. Historian Elliot West’s ground-breaking analysis of childhood on the frontier cites numerous examples of ranchers’ daughters who “hired out” as herders for neighbouring farms and ranches. Stock work was the most common form of employment for range-raised children, he argues, and “among the young, the demands of the frontier ate away at distinctions of age and gender.”²¹ Provided one could ride, there was no shortage of work for youngsters of either sex. Claude Gardiner, an Alberta rancher, had neighbours with young daughters who broke and sold horses. In a letter written to his mother and his sister, Barbara, before their upcoming trip to the West, he wrote: “Can Bab ride yet? I shall get her a nice pony. I have no problem



6.3 CAPABLE CHILDREN MADE SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTIONS ON FAMILY RANCHES (1925). *ROCKING P GAZETTE*, COURTESY OF CLAY CHATTAWAY.

with that as I know some people called Arnold who raise horses. They have several girls who ride and break horses and they can be trusted to have a good quiet one or two.”²² Whether they worked at home or were employed outside of the family, girls learned that they were valuable and productive members of their family units. And for girls, in particular, riding and a lifelong connection to horses assured them of an equitable position in ranching communities. It was this second generation of ranch women that most obviously benefited from the autonomy gained by riding for work and recreation.

Among the many hazards that could threaten a ranch’s livestock was the danger of cattle becoming mired in bogs or muddy watering holes. Without prompt assistance, cattle would weaken while struggling to get out and often perish. On extensive tracts of grazing land, it was only by chance that someone would discover a bogged-down animal. Therefore, having children capable of riding the range and performing competently in an emergency was a major advantage. As the sketch above from the handwritten magazine *The Rocking P Gazette* indicates, women and girls who were skilled with a horse and rope were assets to the family ranch. The Macleay sisters used the *Gazette* to record their exploits on the ranch during the 1920s and in doing so provided insightful documentation of women’s contributions to the family ranch. In this incident, the “staff” –

that is, the owner's daughters Dorothy and Maxine Macleay – are seen rescuing a cow with the aid of their governess.

The girls roped the animal around her head and front legs in order to drag her out, while the governess “tailed” the cow to encourage her to get up.²³ The community at large also benefited from women with expertise in handling a rope. The Morris sisters in the Pincher Creek district used their talents to assist their neighbours. As Nettie Smith, the daughter of homesteaders, recalls: “One day one of our cows ran into the lake to get away from the heel flies. We couldn't get her out to milk her. The Morris girls came riding through. They took down their lariats, rode out into the lake[,] lassoed the cow and drug her out. How I admired their skill!”²⁴

In most households, it was one's age and accomplishments, rather than one's sex, that determined a person's status and responsibilities within the family. Boys and girls alike were given tasks that contributed to the family's livelihood and well-being. Even when some families attempted to maintain rigid barriers of gender differentiation, the equalizing factors of frontier existence – such as independence and practicality – usually acted to blur the lines between boys' and girls' activities. Agnes Mary Gibson was raised in such a family. Left to her own devices on the range with the same burden of responsibility to bear as her brothers, she adapted to the situation, which enabled her to perform as an equal despite the prohibitions on her behaviour:

An only girl with six brothers, Agnes was something of a tom-boy in spite of the efforts of her Victorian-minded parents. They were determined that she should ride sidesaddle like a lady, but since they had no proper saddle, she was expected to ride that way on a western stock saddle. To please them she would start out that way, but as soon as she was out of sight of the house, she was astride the horse like her brothers.²⁵

Gibson later went on to become a very accomplished horsewoman, competing and excelling in riding, jumping, and driving events. Similarly, Cleaveland worked alongside her brother: “Although I rode sidesaddle like a lady, the double standard did not exist on the ranch. Up to the point of my actual physical limitations, I worked side by side with the men,



6.4 HORSES PROVIDED FUN AND FREEDOM (1922). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

receiving the same praise or censure for like undertakings.”²⁶ For Bessie Park MacEwan, who had been trained to ride at her family’s stable in Scotland, moving to Alberta in 1906 gave her unprecedented freedom when her father conceded to the ways of the range: “At first I used Mother’s side saddle, but one day Father weakened and brought home a lovely Australian saddle for me. Previously he had said it was unladylike for a girl to ride astride. I also rode a little racing saddle. I learned to break the odd horse and even broke a cow to ride (bareback).”²⁷ Girls took advantage of the freedom to work and play unsupervised and they, and their families, discovered that they were equal to the demands of the frontier.

By performing key jobs and routine chores on horseback at home, girls learned skills that enabled them to fulfil other ambitions, such as competing in horse shows and rodeos. Augusta Hoffman, whose family moved from the United States to ranch near Wood Mountain, Saskatchewan, in 1905, recalled that “at the age of thirteen I took over the job of mowing and raking the hay. . . . I was the one that did all the riding to look after the horses and cattle.”²⁸ The same year that Hoffman took on greater responsibility on the ranch, she proudly earned her first dollar by riding in a ladies’ horse race.²⁹ By the turn of the century, as communities and recreational activities became more organized, there were a number

of riding events that women and girls could partake in. Ladies' races and relay races were common at local fairs. Women entered their own saddle horses or were offered mounts to test against one another to the delight of the crowds. In the public arena, women and girls proved themselves as talented performers, athletes, and riders alongside their male counterparts. Those who could ride, and ride well, earned status and recognition for their accomplishments.

Armed with equestrian ability and the spirit of the frontier, women obtained new-found independence and income by performing in rodeos and exhibitions. The widely popular and seminal western performance show "The Real Wild West," directed by Buffalo Bill Cody, represented women who had acquired their skills on working ranches. As Glenbow Museum curator Lorain Lounsberry writes, "Most of Cody's troupe was neither rich nor famous when they were hired – they were regular people who had skills you needed in the western cattle country."³⁰ Though the rodeo circuit was certainly not profitable for all, competitive riding was a viable way for women to earn a wage. Flores LaDue, perhaps the most famous Canadian performance cowgirl, used her income from trick roping and riding to help pay for the Alberta ranch she and her husband, Calgary Stampede founder Guy Weadick, purchased in 1920.³¹ Though the adventurous, travelling career of a rodeo cowgirl was far removed from the realities of ranch women's daily existence, the public image they presented did accurately reflect the skills that many female ranchers possessed and the sense of independence that went with them. At larger shows and rodeos, women participated in races as well as roping competitions, trick riding, and even dangerous and once strictly male-dominated events such as bronc riding and steer wrestling. Cowgirl poet Jeanne Rhodes pays tribute to rodeo rider Fannie Sperry in a poem that depicts Sperry's transition from a hardworking ranch-raised young girl to a reputable performer to an independent business woman, and her lifetime of activities that centred around the horse:

At an age when many children clutch a doll in either arm,
Fannie Sperry captured mustangs that ran wild behind
their farm.

Brought them home and broke and trained them, sold
them to the folks around,

Who were sure that, trained by Fannie they were trust-
worthy and sound.

First she rode at local horse shows where they passed the
hat with pride,

Cuz she stayed with bucking horses that the cowboys
couldn't ride;

Then she rode in ladies' relays, racing finest thorobred
[sic] horses,

Changing mounts and even saddles as they sped around
their courses . . .

Her reputation solid and her fame now spreading wide,

The budding sport of Rodeo sought her out to ride;

When Calgary, Alberta, had its first Stampede event,

The finest were invited and Fannie Sperry went . . .

For ten years Bill and Fannie toured their own Wild
Western Show,

And then retired as outfitters – showed hunters where to go;

And when Bill died in '40, Fannie ran the business still,

For *steel* was in her spine long before she met old Bill.³²

It was not until a series of fatal accidents combined with the economic pressures of World War II – which made it difficult for rodeo organizers to provide a men's and women's string of bucking stock – that women's bucking events were terminated.³³ Thanks to their horsemanship skills and their desire to test the boundaries of acceptable female behaviour, the



6.5 PERFORMER FLORES LADUE WAS SKILLED WITH A ROPE AND A HORSE (C.1912). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

indomitable women who partook in these events demonstrated to mass audiences that women of the range were equally as capable as the cowboys.

For most women on ranches, horses were an important tool of their work, but most fundamentally the horse provided women with mobility – and thus freedom. The expansiveness of the range made it imperative that women use horses as a means of transportation. Women learned the layout of the landscape from the back of a horse, confidently covering miles of open country at the reins of a wagon, democrat, or sleigh. Genuine horse-powered transportation was critical. Riding provided a means of escape from the solitude and isolation of ranch life. Whether it was riding to get the mail, travelling by wagon to the nearest centre for essential supplies, or riding to neighbouring ranches for social calls, women depended on the horse to keep them connected to their community. For, as Monica Hopkins noted, “a neighbour is anyone within a radius of 20 miles.”³⁴ Even women who had no previous experience learned to ride and drive if



6.6 POPULAR SCHOOLTEACHER ISABELLE LAWSON WAS GIFTED A HORSE AND SADDLE BY THE COMMUNITY (1907). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

they wished to have an independent means of travel. Hopkins did not even know what a democrat was upon her arrival in the West, only that it was an item her husband “deemed necessary now that there was to be a woman on the ranch.”³⁵ As she soon learned, “the democrat turned out to be a cart on four wheels with two seats and I discovered we were going to use it right away as we intended to go home that day. . . . I felt somewhat as if I was sitting on the box seat of a carriage at home.”³⁶ Not long after, Hopkins began to ride and drive on her own, exploring her new surroundings and becoming acquainted with the other women in the Priddis area.

The means and the ability to ride enabled women to actively engage with their peers and their community. Having access to horses and the opportunity to ride often made the difference between relishing the frontier experience or suffering from a sense of isolation and loneliness. In the late 1800s in New Mexico, Cleaveland, who ranched with her mother and siblings, witnessed the isolation endured by women who did not have a purpose to ride every day: “Not many of our woman neighbors got about

as did my mother and her daughters. Not many had reason to, with their menfolks [*sic*] to carry on the responsibility of looking after their cattle. It was this deadly staying at home month in and month out, keeping a place of refuge ready for their men when they returned from their farings-forth, that called for the greater courage, I think.”³⁷ After a visit with several women who had been driven to her ranch in a wagon by their husbands, Hopkins observed that “those who do not ride and are dependent on their men folk to take them about evidently do not get taken out very much; they seemed to think it was a great occasion. I’ve decided that I am not going to be dependent on anyone so I ride nearly every day, generally just around the place but I have been out on the range alone.”³⁸ When women did not ride, it not only limited their mobility but severely restricted their means of entertainment. Inderwick, for whom transportation and recreation revolved primarily around horses, mused about a neighbour: “I often wonder how Miss Smith passes her time, having no household duties and not being a very ardent horse woman.”³⁹ Women who did not ride were also not as easily integrated into ranch society. Both Evelyn Springett and Dorothy Blades acknowledged that the well-being of the governesses employed on their ranches was directly linked to their aptitude for horseback riding. Springett remembered one governess whom the children loved to tease, especially when on “horseback where she was both unhappy and insecure.”⁴⁰ On the Rocking P Ranch, the Macleays went through a series of “school marms” before they found one who was suitable: an English-woman who liked horseback riding and stayed a long time.⁴¹

Evelyn Cochrane was one of many women who accepted the fact that they would have to ride and be flexible – and to adapt to any situation that may present itself – to maintain friendships. Her days on the CC Ranch west of Cayley were filled with riding. Cochrane’s diary is a record of rides for cattle work, hunting, and business engagements, rides for routine chores such as fetching the mail and shopping, and frequent rides for the pure pleasure of exploring the range and making social calls. The incredible distance between ranches did not hamper her ability to make impromptu visits to keep in touch with the other women in the district. In a letter, she detailed her visits to three neighbouring ranches; each visit reveals pertinent information about the nature of frontier social calls via horseback. Travelling alone, save for the company of her dogs, Cochrane found her hostess at the first ranch occupied by washing, so, after a brief

visit, she moved on. Arriving unannounced was standard range protocol and visitors were typically welcomed warmly. However, the visitor took the chance that her hostess may be preoccupied or may not even be home to welcome a weary traveller. For a confident horsewoman like Cochrane, the unpredictable nature of range travel was simply part of the experience. The next morning, following an overnight stay at the Oxley ranch, she found that her dogs had accompanied a passing wagon heading south for coal – “so I had to saddle up quickly and go after them. I caught them in about 4 or 5 miles, but it was all out of my way.”⁴² As she passed through Pine Coulee on her way to her next stop, the dogs killed a coyote; unexpected adventures required women to adapt to the situation at hand, particularly when travelling alone. Then it was on to the Norrish ranch to visit “Francey & Co.” Cochrane wrote, “They have got a little pony to ride, and they quarrel all the time who is to ride it, and which saddle is to be put on. It seemed a long suffering creature. Francey is afraid herself to ride and yet does not like the others to get up.”⁴³ Evidently, Francey Norrish had not yet been conditioned to the essential role of the horse in her own potential enjoyment of the frontier experience; thus, her mobility and her opportunity to socialize with other women were likely considerably more restricted than Cochrane’s. Embracing the adventures that accompanied frontier experience went a long way in relieving women’s boredom and encouraging their independence.

For all the freedoms and pleasures it afforded ranch women, travel was not without its hazards and hardships. Women had to have confidence to travel through remote cattle country. Inhospitable terrain, weather conditions, wildlife, and unpredictable range cattle all presented challenges. During the open-range period in particular, feral cattle were among the most dangerous things a traveller could meet. Gladys Baptie recalled an encounter with a gathered herd of cattle: “I remember one day my mother, sister and I went to [the town of] Cochrane with a one horse buggy and six riders escorted us thru’ the cattle, as the big steers would have attacked us.”⁴⁴ Having children limited women’s mobility and created additional worry when travelling. Hester Jane Robinson remembered the “lonely life” she and her children spent on the ranch near Bragg Creek, Alberta, while her husband rode the range moving cattle for his father. On the return trip from a rare visit with a neighbour across the river, Robinson’s baby daughter was thrown from the wagon and almost drowned.

Mother let the baby drop into the river – luckily up stream, and as Kathleen floated under the democrat she washed up against one wheel. Joe, with great presence of mind and taking a long grip on the reins, grasped Kathleen's long clothes still maintaining control of the colts. I calmed myself with a half glass of brandy, then nursed the baby and she slept for 12 hours!⁴⁵

Many ranch women faced this dilemma: staying at home meant enduring isolation, while travelling could mean putting themselves and their children at risk.

Women raised in the West were often more comfortable travelling in remote areas than those who were recent arrivals. Growing up on the cattle frontier had prepared Violet Pearl Sykes for negotiating the multiple challenges associated with range travel. Her confidence and skill with a horse meant she was capable of overcoming the obstacles associated with seemingly simple routines, such as getting the mail:

I was more or less elected to ride up there [the NWMP Barracks] to see if there was mail. The distance from the ranch to the barracks was ten miles over the bench top. By going over the bench top one did not have to ford the river twice nor open the wire gates[,] which was a real effort for a girl. There were so many dead cattle from the hard winter that I found them very useful in helping me find my way about the prairies. At the fork of the road there was a dead Texas steer with huge horns and that was my sign to turn to the river bottom on the trail that led to the police camp.⁴⁶

Tenacious women were entrusted with jobs that gave them mobility and adventure. One of these women was Sykes; another was Lucy Seymour of Claresholm, who recalled wild driving experiences. Seymour's husband broke teams of work horses to supplement the family's livelihood on the ranch. He would start the colts in June and then send her to town with them pulling a wagon by mid-summer. Once the horses were quiet, they would be put to work on threshing operations in the fall. Laughingly, Seymour admitted that the horses would usually buck most of the way to

town – an occurrence that obviously did not faze her.⁴⁷ Women adapted to the circumstances of ranch country by learning how to ride, drive, and handle horses under frontier conditions with confidence, and these skills diminished their sense of isolation and the helplessness associated with immobility.

Even after the advent of motorized vehicles – which began to share the range with horses around 1910 – horses remained a vital mode of transportation in ranching country.⁴⁸ Transportation by horseback was simply better suited to the conditions of travel, particularly in the foothills ranching districts. The earliest cars were not hardy enough to access many remote ranches and rural road conditions were impassable by vehicle much of the time. When Catherine Bond Dick began ranching with her husband on Willow Creek in 1914 they used a four-horse team to travel to High River twice a year for a “grub stake.” She recalled that “later we had a car and then it was we wished for better roads, fewer, gates and no mud holes.”⁴⁹ Progress in the form of technology did not suit pioneer rancher Bob Newbolt. In his memoirs he reflects with hostility on the “intrusion” of farmers into ranching country – and also curses his motor car. He would run it right through farmers’ fences and gates if they were in the way of the trail; often the “bally” car got stuck in the mud. Newbolt divulged that his wife “soon learned to take along her tatting or knitting; she would have something to occupy her time while I walked to get someone to pull my motor car out of a mud hole.”⁵⁰ Constance Loree recalled that, in the 1920s, “even the [twelve-mile] drive from Nanton to the ranch was an adventure with those early cars that overheated on steep grades. The road was graded as far as William’s Coulee [five miles]. After that it was little more than a broad trail which angled off to the left past the old buffalo jump and up through the hills, with wire gates to open. It was impassable in wet weather.”⁵¹ Like other ranch women, Loree and her mother and sister used horses as their primary mode of transportation between the “homeplace” and their summer ranches in the Porcupine Hills, even if it entailed some challenges:

Mary and I carried some strange burdens on those rides. Once it was the bread dough, which wasn’t quite ready for the oven, another time a kettle of citron marmalade carried between us on a broom handle. One late fall exodus from the ranch involved

two very large cats, each stuffed in a flour sack, squalling and spitting. How the horses hated that! We decided that there was one advantage to riding a wild horse – you didn't have to carry as much.⁵²

When one's business was cattle and horses it made sense to use genuine horsepower for most necessary travel. The guest book from Trail's End Ranch indicates that, as late as the 1930s, much of the travel to and from the ranch was done on horses – and clearly with good reason:

May 23rd D.C.I. on horseback, found the longest way round was *not* the shortest way home. . . . July 5th F.W. Ings bad journey down. Had to leave car in the mud. . . . Oct. 11th Came up to move cattle Constance and E.H.I. on Slick and Pilot. . . . Oct. 20th Gathered cattle at Sunset & cut out calves for weaning. . . . Oct. 31st Constance E.H.I. Kelly brought up 12 heifers to Sunset & 1 D K heifer took in the calves that had broken out of the weaning pen. Travelled the old trail & lunched on a lichen covered rock . . . ginger bread & apples.⁵³

Practical, versatile, and enjoyable, horses were an integral part of ranch operations long after vehicles were in use.

Just as they contributed to women's engagement in their working communities and facilitated the mobility necessary for creating networks of social support, horses were central to the recreation and social activities of early ranchers. From imported pastimes such as polo, racing, and hunting with hounds to informal pursuits like camping and picnicking, the horse facilitated much of the recreation in fledgling ranching communities. The presence of equestrian sports on the frontier created a familiar social atmosphere for ranchers of British and Eastern Canadian origins, many of whom were already entrenched in an equestrian culture. Polo matches and horse races were important and well-attended social events. Even Monica Hopkins, who as the daughter of a clergyman would never have attended the races in England, looked forward to the Millarville Races – “the chief social event of the year out here.”⁵⁴ Horse sports had a levelling effect on the frontier. Whereas in England and the East many horse

sports were accessible only to the upper classes, thanks to the surplus of inexpensive horses on the frontier “even quite poor people could now indulge in the tastes of gentlemen.”⁵⁵ Women were active participants in all equestrian activities. In the ranching district immediately west of Calgary, the Blache sisters were known for their equestrian pursuits: “Fox hunts and paper chases were two of the exciting sports enjoyed by Beatrice and Millie. They were both excellent horsewomen and would ride side-saddle over the paper chase course. It was a cross country race laid out by bits of paper which were to be followed over the course jumping over fences, creeks, brush, and other obstacles.”⁵⁶ There is evidence that from their earliest arrival, in the 1880s, women rode out with the men to pursue coyotes or wolves. Some women garnered reputations as particularly skilled and daring riders, much appreciated by the men in their company. In his memoirs, pioneer rancher Fred Ings extolled the abilities of his neighbour Evelyn Cochrane:

Some of the ladies in the country were keen coyote hunters, but none could imitate Mrs. Billy [*sic*] Cochrane. She had ridden to hounds in England with the Quorn pack, and was a good horsewoman and a fearless one. She always rode an outstanding horse. . . . How she was able to mount as she did, without help on a side saddle was a puzzle, but she could, and this Fox horse stood nearly sixteen hands high. She seemed to spring into that saddle with perfect ease, and once she was away, with her light weight, there were few of us who could keep up with her.⁵⁷

Ranchers tested themselves and their horses against one another in equestrian competitions. Jumping events, horse shows, and gymkhanas were as common as rodeo in fledgling communities. Ings remarked that “though the horses for our cow work were trained for roping and such, we still liked to have them jump and perform, according to more civilized standards.”⁵⁸ Women excelled in these competitions and competed against the men. Whether they showed horses for their conformation and breeding potential (like Mabel Newbolt, who was instrumental in importing high-calibre show horses) or they rode for sport (like Minnie Gardner, who awed the crowds with her bravery, jumping horses to daring heights), women were



6.7 MINNIE GARDNER JUMPING SIDE-SADDLE TO IMPRESSIVE HEIGHTS (C.1900–03). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

critical in creating and maintaining a recreational horse culture in ranching communities.

Women also used horses for informal pursuits such as exploring the wilderness that surrounded frontier ranches. Writing of children and horses on the frontier, Elliot West suggests that not only did horses provide children with companionship, entertainment, and mobility, but “horses expanded their opportunities to push out into the land; wild and tame creatures were part of the landscape that excited their curiosity.”⁵⁹ One ranch-raised child who, like many of his contemporaries, attended school in the nearest town during the winter months wrote of the strong pull of the horses and the hills: “We never learned to swim or play tennis, because we headed for the hills and those cow ponies as soon as the end of June came.”⁶⁰ Women, similarly curious and excited by the landscape, turned to horses as their means to engage with the wild. In Montana, Isabel Randall used her capabilities as a horsewoman to treat a less mobile friend to a holiday: “I brought Mrs. B— home with me to stay a few days, to have a little rest, which she much needed. She stayed with us about a week, and, when my work was done, I drove her about in the buggy; we went on some most beautiful drives, either up in the mountains or down



6.8 HORSES PROVIDED TRANSPORTATION FOR SOCIAL EVENTS, LIKE BERRY PICKING (C. EARLY 1900S). REPRODUCED WITH PERMISSION OF GLENBOW ARCHIVES.

by the river.⁶¹ Hopkins and her friends camped in their free time. Riding and leading pack horses, they were able to trek deep into the mountains for days at a time. Their rustic adventures included fording rivers, fishing, and traversing steep trails.⁶² Not all outings were that adventurous, but they were equally pleasurable. The use of horses enabled day trips into the foothills for picnics. Community outings would see the rough trails into the hills lined with democrats, wagons, and riders.⁶³ Horses were also used to gain access to the much-sought-after wild berries. Berries were an important part of the pioneer diet and women used berry picking as an excuse for a purposeful visit. While her family saved the berries closest to the ranch house for their visitors who did not ride, Constance Loree recalled how her mother had taught her daughters how their horses could help them to reach the best berries, which grew on the topmost boughs:

Mary and I got very bored picking berries except for saskatoons, which often grew on such high bushes that we could stand on our saddles and strip the berries off in handfuls. . . . Poor Mother always wore her English riding boots, which had slippery soles. So often she would just get her pail filled, and she'd slip

and fall. All that work for nothing! It wasn't easy carrying two pails of berries home on horseback. We usually sat in a handful of them and the saddles were stained purple. A lot of work went into a winter's supply of jam and preserves.⁶⁴

Women's exploits were made easier by their ability to ride. They enjoyed the freedom to socialize and to explore the wilderness that served as their backyards.

On top of providing women with the ability to contribute and participate as equals in ranch activities, equipping them with the independence and gratification of mobility and serving as a form of recreation, the horse brought deep pleasure and comfort to many women through both its intrinsic nature and the practice of riding. Mary Inderwick wrote, "I do believe I could take pleasure in riding if I were a deaf mute. . . . If you could only feel the rocking motion of a good lope through the grass and hear the creak of the saddle, and see the horse's fresh look after a long ride at this pace."⁶⁵ Women used riding as a release from their everyday burdens and an escape from their sometimes stifling domestic duties. Edith Ings fostered in her daughters a love of horses that extended beyond their work on the ranch:

For Mother there could never be enough riding. Even if she was tired after a day's housework, a ride would restore her like nothing else. Bad weather didn't deter her; she loved riding in the wind and rain and could stand cold better than anyone. She was the ringleader in our adventures, and sometimes we found her a bit daunting. Mary and I might be asleep in our beds and be jolted awake by Mother's "Girls! Girls! Get up! It's a perfect night for a ride." . . . Her horse was usually fast and frisky, and we had a time to keep up to her. She wasn't the type of mother who said "Now children, be careful." It was more like "here's a flat place. Let's gallop!"⁶⁶

Women used horses to explore their territory and make themselves familiar with their home range, developing a sense of place and comfort in their new environment. Inderwick described her own horseback explorations:

“Often, I ride alone and then I see such wonderful things. I come suddenly on a small pond with ducks, a pond I must have been the discoverer of, as no one knew of it and all wanted to see it. But I have absolutely no bump of locality and I never could find it again.”⁶⁷ Newly married Catherine Bond Dick similarly learned to feel at home on her ranch through the miles she spent in the saddle: “It was the most beautiful country I had ever seen, ‘God’s Country,’ and it suited me exactly. . . . Ward said, ‘Whenever I saddle up to go anywhere, you come too.’ . . . So that was what I did, and by fall I knew every coulee, drift fence, creek, and spring on our big range.”⁶⁸

One of the most common reflections in ranch women’s memoirs and personal histories is the significance of the horse in their lives. Rancher and rodeo cowgirl Fannie Sperry spoke of horses as the most important influence in her life, a sentiment shared by many ranch women: “I was born March 27, 1887 on a horse ranch at the foot of Bear Tooth Mountain north of Helena, Montana, and if there is a horse in the zodiac then I am sure I must have been born under its sign, for the horse has shaped and determined my whole way of life.”⁶⁹ It was the intangible pleasures associated with the horse that provided so many women with enjoyment and instilled in them an intense appreciation for the ranching lifestyle and western environment. According to Lewis Thomas, who was raised in a pioneer ranching community in the Alberta foothills, “the horse was the divinity of a special cult.”⁷⁰ Fortunately, this “cult” was open to members of both sexes, all of whom, out of necessity and an intrinsic love of the horse, centred their livelihoods and the majority of their social activities on horses. The horse – whether providing a means to participate equitably on working ranches, the responsibility to be a productive member of a family ranch and the community at large, the freedom of mobility on isolated ranges, or the simple pleasure of a gallop across open range – defined a way of life for early ranch women. Horses and the physical and psychological freedom they provided on the frontier enabled women both to overcome gender barriers and to participate as equals in the development of ranching communities.

