

ROCKING P RANCH AND THE SECOND CATTLE FRONTIER IN WESTERN CANADA

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Enlisting the Nuclear Family, 1909–1925

Even more important than diversification, expansion, and hands-on control in sustaining Macleay ranches from 1906 on was the family approach. This corroborates Elliott West's view of the economics of this form of production as the mainstay of settler success in the American West:

The pioneer household was an economic mechanism of mutually-dependent parts ... a productive unit, often a remarkably effective and self-sustaining one. Fathers did the heaviest labor—sod busting, construction, and fence-building on a homestead ... and took off in search of other wage work when necessary. Mothers handled the multitude of domestic duties, cared for barnyard animals, gardened, and earned cash by washing, cooking, and sewing for others. Children filled in wherever they were needed ... the frontier's popular image is one of individualism and self-reliance ... but the transformation of the nineteenth-century West could be more accurately pictured as a familial conquest, an occupation by tens of thousands of intra-dependent households.¹

Because the Macleays' holdings were so much larger than average, their division of responsibilities was not exactly as Professor West outlines. However, the fact of the sharing of responsibilities and mutual dependence within the family relationship certainly was. The other person who

put heart and soul into the Macleay organization was Roderick's wife Laura. To treat her as some histories of the West have treated women in general—little more than an enigma, a sort of hazy figure hovering in the background—would be unforgivable.² Roderick himself gave due credit to Laura as his “right-hand man,” acknowledging most of all that no one other than himself played as important a role in the Macleay operation.³ She was well equipped to help him. At twenty-one she had graduated with a degree in business from Newport Academy and Grade School, with a course load that had included commercial arithmetic, commercial law, English composition, commercial geography, stenography, typewriting, and bookkeeping. As we will see, her willingness to apply her energies, and her education, to work on the ranch provides support for historian Mary Kinnear's argument that women in rural western Canada generally during the interwar period could actually gain something from rising to the difficult challenges of country life. These women, Kinnear believes, appreciated the self-esteem they achieved through their sacrifices and their contributions to the rural economy. They were able to feel that they were true partners on the land.⁴ From the time she met Rod in Vermont, Laura Sturtevant's life must often have seemed to her something of a whirlwind. Rod swept her off her feet during that short visit in November 1905. On 12 December, only a few weeks after they had met, the two were married in St. Mark's Episcopal Church, Newport. This was a particularly short engagement for those days, almost scandalous, when a reasonable period was required for just about everything. Like most other things in the Macleays' life, it was motivated by practicalities of time and distance. But it was still quite a plunge, especially for Laura, whose whole lifestyle would change dramatically and irreversibly.

When Laura left her socially refined home in Newport, family and friends predicted that she would last a year at most in the wild and woolly west. In January 1906 she moved with Rod into what by homestead standards was a reasonably nice five-bedroom house then on the home place. But she must surely have experienced cultural shock crowded in with a household of men.⁵ Sometime soon after her arrival the men expanded the house with an addition that became a dining room and kitchen. But this could only have provided minor relief to the heavy burden Laura carried in preparing three meals a day for the partners and up

to seven other men when the haying crews were at work. Laura no doubt felt isolated in those days as well and, for much of the time, lonely. She did not see another woman for seven months; there were no telephones or gramophones and the post office was eight to nine miles away at the Bar U. If there was time, someone would go to the post office every week, but often two or three weeks would pass before the mail was retrieved.

With her husband's support, however, Laura proved up to the challenge. From her arrival, she took charge of domestic functions. This was a daunting task. To feed the men, she had dried and canned provisions plus flour and other staples hauled in from High River, then the nearest town some twenty-five miles to the northeast, and less often from the village of Cayley (incorporated in 1904), which was about half the distance away in the same general direction.⁶ Travel in those days was slow compared to modern times. In the first decades of the twentieth century it was by horse, or horse and buggy, and after the automobile became common in rural districts in the early 1920s, the roads were so poor that it improved very little. Laura and Roderick's grandson explains that even in the early post-World War II period mobility in the Porcupine Hills was still severely limited:

A good road was any stretch of country with no gates to open and a few people living along the way in case you ran into trouble. A bad road had gates and no hope of help. The road down Happy Valley where Highway 22 [north to High River and Calgary] runs today used to be on the west side of the valley. It was a bad road. It was not actually even a decent trail. Nearly every mile there was a gate and we used to get out and line up the planks for creek crossings.

For weeks we used to compile lists of things we needed, just in case someone went to town. Twice a year Dad would make a major trip to Nanton [just 17 miles to the east] and bring back six months of supplies such as flour, dried fruits, coffee, tea, sugar and assorted dry goods. People used root houses, meat houses, milk cows, chickens and preserves. They were not dependent on how late the "super stores" were open or how well the shelves were stocked. Any trip to

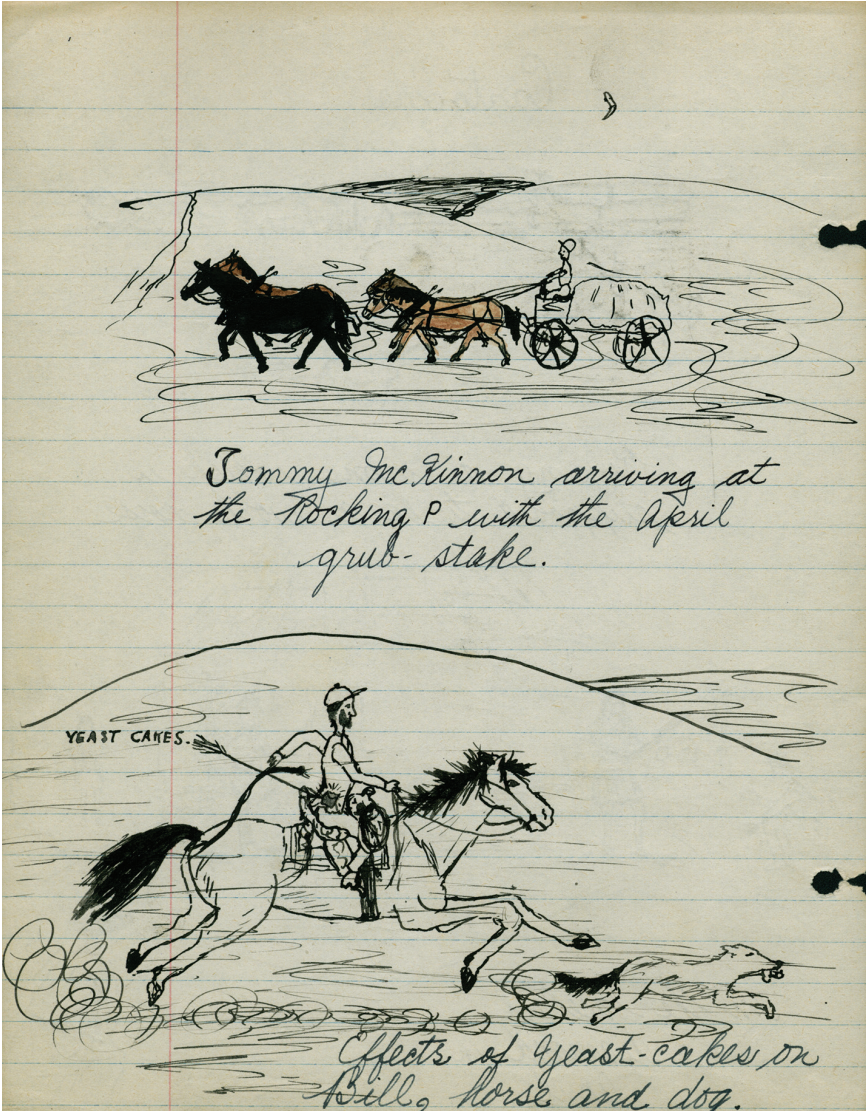


FIGURE 5.1. As this 1924 depiction suggests, after a rainy period, or during spring thaw-up, or when the snow was deep, it was more efficient to use the horse and buggy to transport people and goods than the early motorized vehicles. *Rocking P Gazette*, April 1924, 10. Property of the Blades and Chattaway families and their descendants.

Calgary was an overnight venture and mail was a sought-after treasure. Tobacco and whiskey actually created more trails than they are given credit for and I can't think of a one of us who has to open a gate to get to town today.⁷

Throughout more or less the entirety of Laura's life on the ranch, therefore, when particular provisions ran out or were missed on one of the widely spaced food runs, it was not possible for anyone to make a quick trip to the grocery store. During the winter, she got potatoes and other vegetables from the root house and beef and wild game from the meat/ice house.⁸ In the summer months she picked her vegetables from the garden about a mile to the east. In the early years, she worked without even running water. Originally the men carted in spring water in a barrel on a stone boat.⁹ In 1909 they drilled a well between the bunkhouse and the blacksmith shop to a depth of 100 feet. It had lots of water, but it had to be pumped by hand. The hole was drilled so crooked it wore out the rods quickly, and in October 1912 they drilled a new well; and then a storage tank, windmill, and waterline provided Laura with the luxury of running water for the first time to cook, launder, and wash.

Laura, and from time to time in the earlier years her cousin-in-law, Margaret Riddle—who would reappear from the East time and again over the next eight years to provide much-appreciated help and companionship—not only coped with cooking, cleaning, and doing laundry but also milked cows, seeded and weeded the garden, and kept, killed, and plucked chickens and gathered eggs. She also learned to contribute to the food supply in a way she had almost certainly never previously foreseen. Margaret appears to have been her teacher in this respect. The pair would take a buggy and a .22 rifle and head out after game. The results were significant. They managed to keep the larder well supplied with sharp-tailed grouse—a welcomed addition to the family diet when quick trips to the store were impossible. Laura became proficient with a gun and she continued to hunt on her own even in later years. A remarkably accomplished poem in the *Rocking P Gazette* of April 1924 was without doubt written to recognize this fact. Titled “The Little Twenty-Two,” it was written by Macleay ranch cowpuncher Tommy McKinnon.¹⁰



FIGURE 5.2. Roderick and Laura Macleay, in 1947, with their grandchildren. From left to right: Betty Blades (standing), Ernest (Mac) Blades (held by Roderick), Rod Blades (standing), Clay Chattaway (held by Laura), and Ethel Blades (standing). Property of the Blades and Chattaway families and their descendants.

I am going to get married very soon I expect.
The way we got acquainted was through the Gazette,
And all that she wrote me all will come true,
A bunch of prairie chickens and a little twenty-two.

She wrote me a letter so perfect and neat,
Enclosed with the letter was a photo so sweet,
She sure looks a real dandy and I hope it is true!
A bunch of prairie chickens and a little twenty-two.

She calls herself Jessie I won't tell you the rest,
To keep it a secret I think it is best,
But when we are married I'll show her to you,
With a bunch of prairie chickens and a little twenty-two.

Now all of you young fellows a warning do take,
And send in a nice little ad to the Gazette,
And I dearly do hope the same luck will reach you,
And get a nice girl that owns a twenty-two.

Don't get a flapper for you're sure to repent,
Get a nice little girl that is quiet and content,
One that will get out and rustle the dinner for you,
A bunch of prairie chickens and a little twenty-two.

I hope that nice letter wasn't really a fake,
My heart will be broken, my whole life's at stake,
For I am expecting the wedding to go through,
And get that nice girl that owns a twenty-two.

At the end of the poem there is an "Addition" announcing "with deep regret that the girl with the chickens and twenty-two has been wed for years—so this won't come true."

While handling all the tasks noted above, Laura raised and nurtured Dorothy and Maxine. In the remote country environment, this included performing duties the modern reader might overlook. "If you want your hair bobbed, trimmed, plucked, or curled, go to Mrs. R. R. Macleay at the Home Ranch," reads the *Gazette* of September 1924.¹¹ Over the years, as we will see, the Macleays dramatically expanded their land and livestock holdings, making the employment of a very large labour force necessary. In 1909 there were fourteen men and one woman on the regular payroll; by 1920 there were seventy-three. All of the employees had to be boarded because, as we will see, transportation systems were far too slow to allow men to commute from the nearest town.¹² At that point the Macleays also hired a cook. This was not always a sure thing, however: "**FOUND**, Amid great rejoicing on the Part of Mrs. R. Macleay and her sister after a strenuous month in the kitchen—one cook," the *Gazette* reported in September 1924.¹³ The sister was Gertrude, the widow of Rod's brother Dr. Kenneth. She visited the ranch quite often in the 1920s and stayed for extended periods. The March 1925 *Gazette* reports: "Our eighth cook left on the 28th, Bob Reeves taking him to Cayley. This makes an average



FIGURE 5.3. Daughter Dorothy with the twenty-two and her quarry. *Rocking P Gazette*, 29 April 1924, 29. Photograph property of the Blades and Chattaway families and their descendants.

of about one a month since Charlie Lung left last fall.”¹⁴ When a cook was available to help with domestic duties, Laura did not suddenly find time to sit around. She took on extra errands, including making the long and difficult run to High River or even Calgary for parts or equipment that Rod and the men required to keep the ranch running. “Mrs. L. S. Macleay has had a raise this month on account of extra freighting work done for binders and so forth.”¹⁵

Fortunately, as they got older the two Macleay daughters were able to share some of the load. Countless entries in the *Rocking P Gazette* document the full range of their activities at the tender ages of twelve through fifteen.

“Max and her pard [Dorothy] plucked eleven chickens on Jan. 25th, 1925.”¹⁶ “Egg production has increased this month. The first of February was celebrated by everyone having fresh eggs for breakfast.”¹⁷

No doubt the girls sometimes felt stretched by the pull between their barnyard chores and domestic duties on one hand and those they were required to undertake on the ranges with the hired ranch hands and their father, “the Boss,” on the other.

“Bert Beaucook helped by Max and her ‘pard’ moved 215 head of steers from Section 33 to the Mountain field Sept. 23.”¹⁸

“Home field worked by the Boss, Max and her ‘pard’ on Feb 19th. Fifty-six head were cut [out] and then taken over to the Bar S feed ground.”¹⁹

“R.R. Macleay, Stewart Riddle, Max and her pard worked the lake field on the 27, 28, 29 and 30th of December, cutting all cows and calves and thin cows and heifers.”²⁰

“Jan 30th was a very hard day for Clem, Max[ine], and her ‘pard’. They worked swift and fast at the Calf Camp separating the fat calves from the beef calves.”²¹

Undaunted, the girls at times rode out on their own:

“Max and her pard rode the west field ... and found 24 more calves that were missed when the field was rounded up earlier in the month.”²²

Both the Macleay girls’ cowhand talents and contributions were recognized in a poem in the *Gazette* appropriately titled “The Feminine Cowboy.” The author was Robert Raynor, the ranch handyman, who also had the unusual distinction of being a Justice of the Peace.

See the merry feminine Cow-boy
As she rides the meadows through,
Swings her quirt with careless joy,
While dashing off the dew.

Local news.

Jack Ribordy, Dunk Conrice,
The Boss and the two kids
moved the Beef Cows from the
South field to section seventeen
on Nov. 10th.

The Boss, Charlie Walters, Gray
and her pard. weaned the colts
on the 10th.

George Peddie, The Boss and Charlie
Walters moved the beef cows from
section 17 to section 23 on the 11th.

J. Mc Kinnor, Alabama and Ed
Orvis fixed the Spring at the Hughes
place on the 11th.

Bryan arrived at the Bar 3
from Willow Creek on the 7th.
He complained of the cold and
hit for town on the truck.

FIGURE 5.4. Dorothy and Maxine lending a hand with and without their father. *Rocking P Gazette*, November 1924, 5. Property of the Blades and Chattaway families and their descendants.

Riding down the quiet Vale,
Climbing o'er the hill,
They differ from the Cowboy male,
They never stop to roll a pill.²³

They wear the wide-brim hat,
And they love to roam
The range between the U flat
And the spot called home, sweet home.

They would rather be out riding
For the Boss of the Anchor P.²⁴
And on the snow be sliding
Than play golf with their Aun-tee.²⁵

As Professor West's description suggests, Laura, Dorothy, and Maxine Macleay's tendency to blur traditional gender roles while working outdoors was a widespread second frontier phenomenon. There are literally hundreds of examples, many in the foothills of Alberta, to illustrate this. On the CC ranch on Mosquito Creek near Nanton, Evelyn Cochrane's responsibility after she arrived from England was planting and nurturing the garden while caring for her children. She too was efficient with a gun and routinely shot prairie chickens and ducks and often defended the chicken coop from "mountain cats."²⁶ Other women attended to barnyard chores and the care of livestock. In 1901 Katherine Austin joined her husband Fred on their homestead in the Crowsnest Pass area, where they ran both horses and cattle. During that winter, Fred worked out at a lumber company in the Pass while Katherine cared for the baby, looked after their modest home, and fed and nurtured livestock—even donning her husband's clothing so that the milk cow would accept her. It was her milk, butter, and eggs that paid the taxes and much of the regular living expenses.²⁷ In the same area, Johanne Pedersen was frequently left alone to take care of the family ranch and her seven children while her husband worked as a freighter. Along with attending to her many domestic chores, she was known to "stack hay, stook grain, clear land, saw wood by hand and brand calves."²⁸ Jessie Louise Bateman of the Jumping Pound

district west of Calgary milked cows in an open corral in fair weather and foul. Apparently, she “could milk two cows to anyone else’s one.”²⁹ Her neighbour, Susan Copithorne, had come to Canada from Ireland as a child’s maid before marrying a rancher. She learned to milk cows, churn butter, and raise chickens.³⁰

It was not just on frontiers in western Canada and the United States that this situation occurred. It transpired in the same period wherever frontier conditions prevailed—even on the far side of the globe. At the time the family unit was shaping the cattle industry in western North America, it was also helping to initiate it in three extremely remote and isolated regions of the Northern Territory in Australia. While the climatic and ecological conditions were very different in those regions from those anywhere on the western American plains, the problems of starting a new cattle business where it had never existed before, and where capital and infrastructure were short, was virtually the same.³¹ The fact that female input proved just as versatile and as necessary thus helps us emphasize the importance of the latter circumstances. To take just one of numerous examples: near Alice Springs, William Hayes, wife Mary, and six children developed the Owen Springs and Undoolya cattle stations from the late 1870s forward. William reported that “the two girls participated” in running the station, “every bit as much as their ... brothers ... and they did not hesitate to undertake the same duties.” “I understand you acknowledge your daughters to be as good as yourself on the station?” a reporter once asked William. “I do, indeed,” he replied, “there is no phase of bush and station life that they are unable to tackle. ... They are thorough horsewomen, with or without saddles, and can muster cattle with the best men I ever had.” “Can they shoe a horse?” the reporter asked. “Of course they can shoe a horse.” “Can they brand cattle?” “Yes; and shoot and dress a beast when the beef has run out. They also break in colts and go out for a week or two at anytime with a couple of [cowhands] mustering cattle. They think nothing of camping under the stars and, in fact, can do anything with stock that men can do.”³²

Collaboration and support by all the members of the family were required to sustain the frontier ranch. In ignoring tradition and working both on the range and in the barnyard, Laura, Dorothy, and Maxine Macleay, like their counterparts living under similar circumstances in

other parts of the world, were just doing what they had to do to sustain their way of life. They were called upon to support a system of production and they accepted the challenge because there was little choice. Our next chapter illustrates the contributions Laura in particular made with respect to the strictly business side of cattle ranching. Her input in this area was, if not unique, certainly extraordinary.

