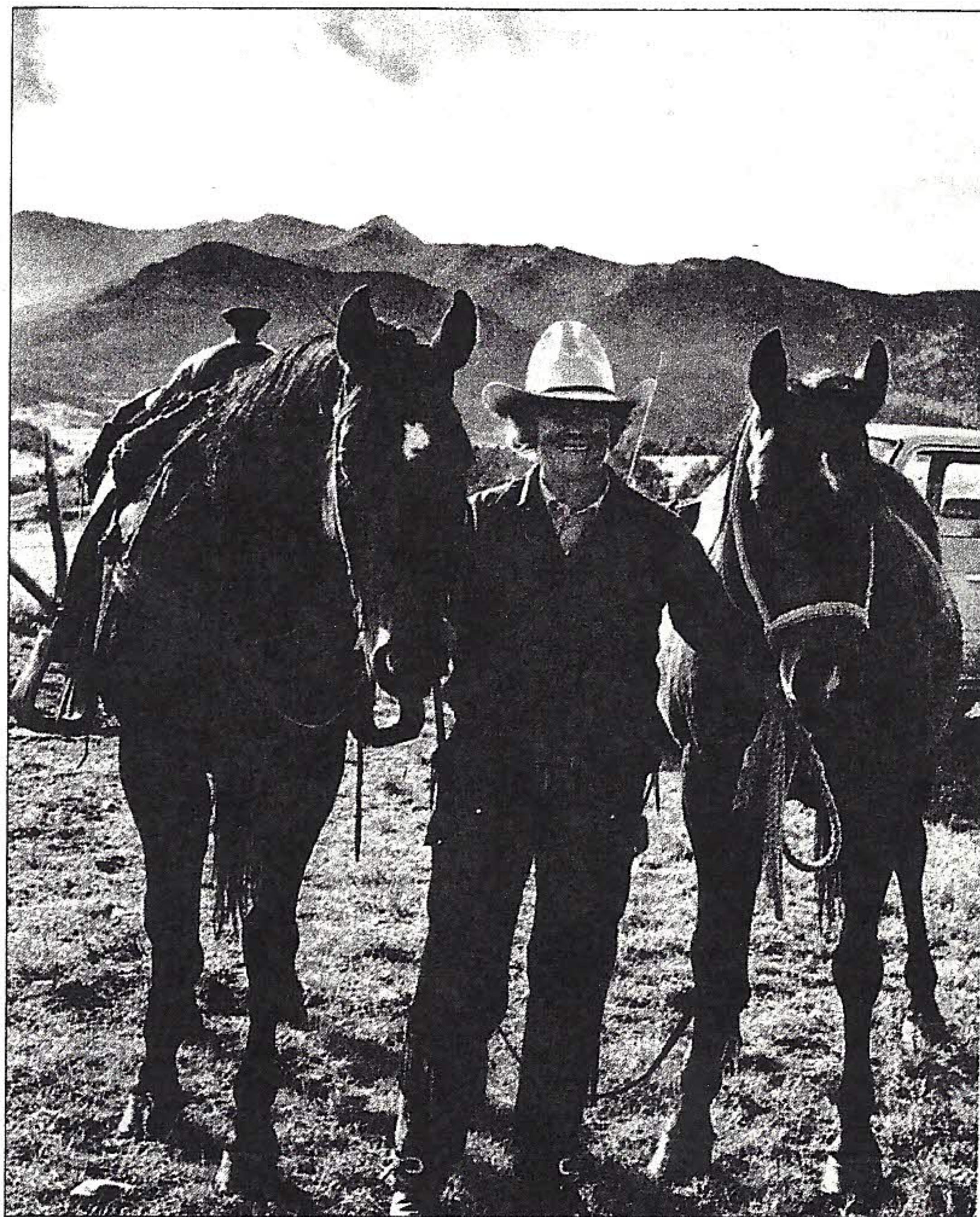


Barbara Van Cleve

Contemporary Ranch Women

Photographs and text by Barbara Van Cleve

*This article has been excerpted from Van Cleve's new book *Hard Twist: Contemporary Western Ranch Women* [1995 MUSEUM OF NEW MEXICO PRESS, SANTA FE, \$50]. The collection of 120 photographs documents 20 ranchers at work on the range and at home. Van Cleve [b1935] divides her time between a winter home in New Mexico and the family ranch in Montana. She has spent more than 15 years photographing and documenting ranch women from the Canadian Rockies to the borderlands of south Texas. This month she will be inducted into the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, TX, and in March 1996 her work will be the subject of an exhibition at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame, Oklahoma City, OK.*



ABOVE: BARBARA VAN CLEVE IN MONTANA WITH HER TWO FAVORITE HORSES, SHIZZERS (LEFT) AND HUERFANA, PHOTO © 1990 BY C.L. PHILLIPS.

RIGHT: MELODY HARDING, BAR CROSS RANCH, BIG PINEY, WY, © 1987 BARBARA VAN CLEVE.

Although small in stature, Melody is a "hard twist"—a 5-foot-4-inch mass of muscle and sinew, like rawhide that is dried or cured. Gentle with all animals and feminine in the best sense of the word, she says, "The freedom of this lifestyle is unlike any other occupation. You have a dual role: On the one hand, you have to be independent, and on the other, you have to be smart enough to blend in with what's happening [around you]. You can't be independent to the point of being stupid or bullheaded."

The notion that the West was settled by men has persevered in the idea that ranching and cowboying are the exclusive domain of men. The same pioneer spirit and gutsiness that compelled those early women migrants to follow their husbands and eventually settle the West is embedded in today's women ranchers.

I remember all the work Mother did, which I took for granted as I was growing up. She canned in the fall over the big wood-burning stove in the kitchen. It was hellishly hot in that kitchen! She churned cream by hand to

make butter; she made bread by hand weekly and ironed our clothes with "sad irons," heavy cast-iron weights heated on top of the stove. During the summer she cooked three meals a day for the hay crew of five to seven men, in addition to all the other work. In the fall she had to cook for the threshing crew who cut the oat fields and thrashed the kernels out so we had oats for our livestock. We also had a garden that required hoeing regularly, never a favorite task. She rode with my dad to help gather and sort cattle throughout the year. In the winter,

she drove the team, Bullet and Babe, while Dad fed hay to the cows and their calves. During calving time, Mother always had the back-room floor covered with several new-born calves, trying to keep them alive with house warmth, and the bathtub held a nearly frozen calf thawing out in tepid water.

Born and raised on a historical Montana ranch in an old ranching community, I became aware early in my life of who does double duty on a typical family ranch: the woman—mother, wife, widow, daughter, sister, aunt. So many of the ranch women whom I knew while growing up worked outside. They milked the cows, put up hay, helped with the fencing, drove the

team to feed cattle in the winter, rode, worked cattle and sometimes even roped. They did these chores in addition to all the housework.

Ranch women thrive on the



outdoors. They like the clean, fresh air and the sense of freedom and the sights and sounds of their vast western landscapes. They also work outside because they know that their work is essential to the success and survival of their family ranches. Contrary to public opinion, most ranchers are land-poor and can only dream of being money-rich. They depend upon the work of the entire family to survive.

The lifestyle of today's ranchers has been misrepresented in the media, and many were initially leery. However, because so many ranchers had read Dad's books [Spike Van Cleve, *40 Year's Gatherin'* and *A Day Late and A Dollar Short*] or knew his

BELOW LEFT: SANDY COOK ROSELUND, BLUE JAY RANCH, RUBY VALLEY, NV, © 1987 BARBARA VAN CLEVE.

A native Nevadan, Sandy and her husband Ray hope to buy the Blue Jay Ranch from her father. Situated on the east side of the Ruby Mountains in eastern Nevada, it is remote even by western standards. "You can't just run down to the store," says Sandy. "You have to go 70 miles at least."

BELOW: ANN HOLLAND DAUGHERTY, GAGE HOLLAND RANCH, ALPINE, TX, © 1988 BARBARA VAN CLEVE.

The Gage Holland Ranch is located north of Big Bend and encompasses rolling grass country with lots of rimrock sides. Originally acquired by Ann Daugherty's grandfather, the ranch was operated by her father until he died in 1992. Ann benefited from his lifelong ranching experience after she headed off to Texas Tech University, Lubbock, to obtain a degree in animal production. "It's important to keep the ranch going, [to ensure] that all of Daddy's work wasn't wasted effort. What purpose is there in life if you don't have someone to whom you can pass on the fruits of your life's work?"



BELOW RIGHT: MOLLY FLAGG
KNUDTSEN, GRASS VALLEY RANCH,
AUSTIN, NV, © 1986
BARBARA VAN CLEVE.

A debutante rancher? You bet! Molly is a dynamic, witty lady in her late 60s. She had just finished vaccinating 200 heifers the morning I met with her. She helps with the calving but does all the branding, vaccinating, earmarking and castrating herself. "I wouldn't turn my cows over to anybody else for anything under the sun," she says.

BELOW: RUBY GOBBLE AND GRETCHEN
SAMMIS, CHASE RANCH, CIMARRON, NM,
© 1987 BARBARA VAN CLEVE.

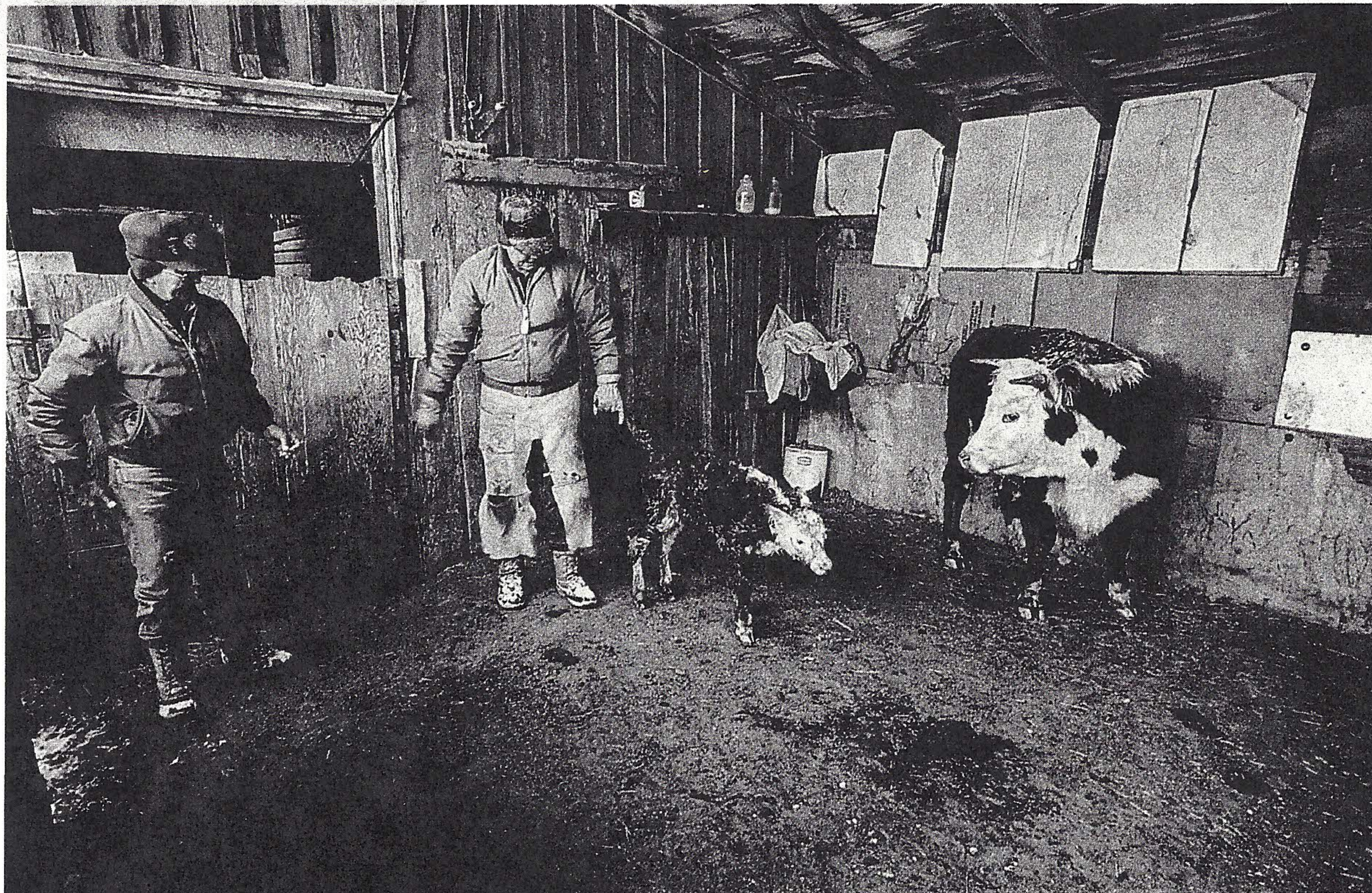
Along the banks of Ponil Creek in northeastern New Mexico, a former schoolteacher is ramrodding a ranch that has been in her family for four generations. Gretchen Sammis was born in the mahogany bedroom suite her great-grandfather brought to the ranch in 1867, and she says she expects to die in it. Today she and Ruby Gobble, her ranch foreman of 30 years, heat each room with wood-burning stoves. "City folk need to know that ranching is not all glamour," says Ruby. Adds Gretchen, "The only reason people ranch is because they like it. You sure can't do it for the money!"

name, they felt that I wouldn't betray or misrepresent them. Women ranchers welcomed me into their homes and allowed me to interview and photograph them during the eight years of this project beginning in 1986. I felt honored to be trusted so completely.

I drove thousands of miles to many ranches in an area more or less designated as the Rocky Mountains from Canada to Mexico. The women selected had to be on a real ranch—not just "40 acres and a dream"—where they raised cattle at least. There is one sheep rancher (many of the big, old-time ranches were built on raising sheep, although now most have discontinued the sheep part and concentrate on cattle), and there are two ranches where they also raise

horses or are restoring and cultivating habitat for wildlife and wildfowl.

I went back to the ranches at different times of the year so that I might photograph a wide variety





ABOVE: KAREN AND DAVE FARR, FARR CATTLE CO., DATIL, NM, © 1993
BARBARA VAN CLEVE.

Underneath a towering pile of thunderheads lie the Plains of San Agustin in west-central New Mexico, home to the Farr Cattle Company. On the subject of women's contributions to ranch life, Karen says, "Women bring compassion to ranching. When a cow is down for a long time, I tell the hired man, 'Keep her tail out of the shit, clean her up. If you or I were lying in bed, you know how good we'd feel about being kept clean.' The men don't see or feel that. They look but they just don't see."

LEFT: DEE DEE DICKINSON'S CALVING LOT FOOTWEAR, VERMILLION RANCH LTD., MAYBELL, CO, © 1993
BARBARA VAN CLEVE.

Polly and Dick Dickinson's ranch straddles the extreme southwestern part of Wyoming at the corner of Colorado and Utah. Dee Dee Dickinson, the youngest daughter of the family, is responsible for calving out all the heifers on the ranch. Says Dee Dee, "I'm responsible for calving because I enjoy it, and I figure nobody can do it better than I do because I really give a damn about it—I care!"

of approaches to seasonal activities such as spring roundup and branding, irrigating, haying, fencing, shipping, calving and winter feeding. Every rancher does things a little differently, especially in the southern parts of the Rockies. This is high-desert country, with not much water unless they bring it up out of the ground—a pretty expensive proposition.

I learned a great deal about different ways of ranching in the process of doing this project. Not wanting to "ride the grub line" (be a freeloader) when these ranchers were feeding me, providing a good bed and being so accommodating, I always offered to help do whatever work was needed. They usually took me up on my offer and outfitted me with a good horse (I had my own saddle, blanket, bridles, chaps, rope and spurs), which also enabled me to photograph them from on horseback while they were out at work.

These women were wonderful, warm, funny, good-natured, hard-working and generous to a fault. They have enriched my life greatly, and I am privileged to count them as friends.

Lastly, I owe my dad so much gratitude for teaching me early on about seeing the beauty in the landscape and weather and in the dirty, hard work required in ranching. At 6 years or so I was helping move cattle. I remember complaining to him because we hadn't eaten and it was 10 degrees. He said, "Red, I need you to help me here, so you might as well sit up and learn to see the beauty in it."

I never forgot that. And that day in January he showed me, for the first time, a mirage down on the low-country horizon and dancing particles of colored light in the frost haze. He taught me to see!

PHOTOS COURTESY THE ARTIST AND MUSEUM OF NEW MEXICO PRESS.