



Elena Farr of Farr Cattle Company near Datil, N.M., brands calves in of 1993.



Ann Holland Daugherty works cattle on Gage Holland Ranch near Alpine, Texas, in this 1988 photograph.

HOME ON THE RANGE

Photographer chronicles ranch life for women

By Michael Haederle

Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

SANTA FE, N.M. — When she was growing up on a ranch in the shadow of the Crazy Mountains in Montana, Barbara Van Cleve says she realized life was

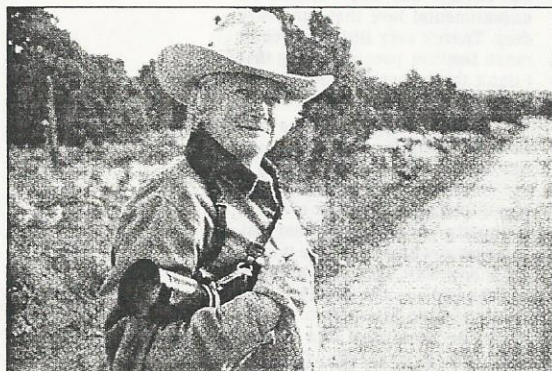
precarious, only a drought or late spring blizzard away from ruin.

Ms. Van Cleve has brought that awareness to her work as a documentary photographer, often returning to the theme of how people living on Western ranches survive in a beautiful but often unforgiving landscape.

Now she has produced a new book of photographs, *Hard Twist: Western Ranch Women*, documenting the hardships and joys of ranching life as women know it. The book's title comes directly from ranching life — a "hard twist" is the tough manila hemp used

for lariats — or a small, muscular, compact person. Explains Ms. Van Cleve, "They can be hard-used, but they never break."

The black-and-white images, made mostly between 1986



Special to The Dallas Morning News: Julie Graber

Photographer Barbara Van Cleve of Montana has put together a book on ranch women.

recorded interviews with her nearly 50 subjects, asking them to reflect on their experiences.

"What I simply wanted to do," she said, "was give the

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and 1988, portray women on horseback roping steers, in kitchens cooking and taking time out to nurse their babies. Ms. Van Cleve visited ranches from the mountain foothills of Idaho and Montana to the plains of southern New Mexico and West Texas. She brought her own saddle and helped tend cattle, always keeping her camera ready. She also tape-



Kim Davis Barmann picks up gear on CS Ranch near Cimarron, N.M., in this 1986 photograph.

Photographs by
Barbara Van Cleve

From her book
Hard Twist: Western Ranch Women



Jewell McAdoo Lutich checks the herd at the McAdoo Ranch near Sierra Blanca, Texas, in this 1988 photo. Photographer

Barbara Van Cleve was inducted into the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame for her work on ranch life.

Photographer chronicles women's life on ranches

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women a voice and recognition."

The book has earned favorable reviews in *The New York Times* and on *Good Morning America*. Ms. Van Cleve also was featured in *Interview* magazine. And the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City is mounting a major exhibition of photographs from the book that opens March 15 for a several-month run.

Ms. Van Cleve, 60, spends summers on the family ranch north of Big Timber, Mont., but she winters in New Mexico, where she has a snug house and studio on 3½ secluded acres in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristos.

She is the eldest of four children born to Barbara and Paul "Spike" Van Cleve, who ran a cattle and dude-ranch operation. At Otter Creek Ranch, winter temperatures sometimes plunged to 25 degrees below zero and five feet of snow drifted over the range.

"It was a wonderful kind of life," Ms. Van Cleve recalls. She credits her father, who before his death in 1982 was a well-known Western writer and raconteur, with teaching her ranching skills.

"He had me on a horse when I was 3," she said. "I learned to ride when I was extremely young. And then I went out with him when I was 6. I would be helping him move cattle. I spent a lot of time out there with him. I loved the horses, and I learned to love the land, no matter what the weather."

Ms. Van Cleve took up photography as a way of capturing and conveying the beauty she found around her.

"I really wanted to be able to draw or paint, but I just couldn't," she recalls. "Mother and Dad gave me a camera when I was 11, and that was my medium. I could make things and show them to other people."

With no prospect of inheriting the ranch, Ms. Van Cleve eventually

earned her master's degree in English at Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill. She taught Victorian literature in the Chicago area for more than 20 years.

She took assignments to illustrate textbooks and started a small agency that sold stock photographs. "Photography had been a passionate avocation," she said. "Nobody told me I could make a living at it."

In 1979 she put herself to the test. "I reached a point where I thought, 'I just have to find out if I have any talent.' So I kicked over the traces, literally." She left teaching and sold the agency, which enabled her to move to Santa Fe to begin working in earnest as a photographer.

"I photographed what I knew best, which was the ranch life," Ms. Van Cleve said. "I was told it wasn't really art, and people wouldn't buy cowboy and Indian photography. I was puzzled and kind of hurt, because I had a deep sense that my composition was strong."

Then in the early 1980s, a Santa Fe gallery owner mounted an exhibition of her work. "It practically sold out, and that did it," Ms. Van Cleve said. "That's when I realized I had a little bit of ability."

She is now carried by galleries in Santa Monica, Calif., and Aspen and Telluride, Colo., as well as Santa Fe.

She launched the book project in 1986 at her mother's suggestion, focusing on women from large working ranches. Her inquiries often were greeted with suspicion by ranchers who felt misunderstood by outsiders, but then she would mention she was Spike Van Cleve's daughter.

"When they realized I knew about ranching and that I understood the difficulties they're facing, I could literally see them let their weight down and relax, and then they'd open up," said Ms. Van Cleve, who was inducted into the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame last November in recognition for her accomplishments.

Ms. Van Cleve found in her travels that the pioneer spirit is alive and well.

"It's a survival way of life," she said. "They can't run down to the corner store. If they don't milk the cow, they don't have milk. To keep costs down, they bake their own bread, make their own butter and make their own cheese. Many of these women sew if they have time."

Yet Ms. Van Cleve heard resignation in the voices of women who think that environmentalists and journalists unfairly charge them with damaging rangeland or reaping huge profits from grazing on public lands.

Although married ranch women work at least as hard as their husbands and seldom receive much recognition, Ms. Van Cleve doesn't see them as oppressed.

"These women are independent and strong," she said. "There's an unsentimental love that runs very deep. There's very little divorce in ranch families, part of it being that I don't think there's so much 'me, me, me.'"

Making photographs was one thing, Ms. Van Cleve found. Getting her book published was another.

"The shooting took me about 2½ years," she said. "The rest of it was trying to get it published. That really makes you humble. I gave it to an agent back East. He took it to everybody and no one was interested. She finally showed her work to an editor at the Museum of New Mexico Press, which bought the idea."

Ms. Van Cleve has sent copies to the women who appear in it. "They're pleased," she said with quiet satisfaction. "One woman even said, 'You've shown the country what our life is about. I hope they'll come to understand and accept us.'"

Michael T'aederle is an Albuquerque, N.M., free-lance writer.