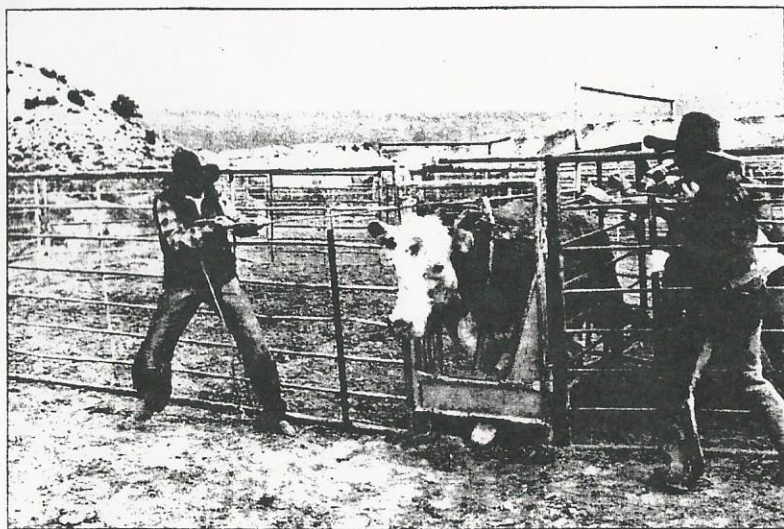


Capturing the Lives of Women at Home on the Range



Dee Dee Dickinson, left, and mom Polly put a cow in a stanchion on their Colorado ranch in a photo from Barbara Van Cleve's "Hard Twist: Western Ranch Women."

■ **Books:** Barbara Van Cleve's photos document the pioneer spirit—on horseback, roping steers and nursing babies.

By MICHAEL HAEDERLE
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

SANTA FE, N.M.—She was raised on a ranch in the lee of the Crazy Mountains, where in a good year, the grass grows as high as a horse's belly.

Ranching families dwelt there precariously in a world both beautiful and treacherous, only a drought or late-spring blizzard away from ruin.

But even after Barbara Van Cleve left to teach college English in Chicago, the land called to her, and she returned each summer to Montana to train horses and ride the high country.

Van Cleve's love of the West suffuses her new book of photographs, "Hard Twist: Western Ranch Women," which documents the hardships and joys of



JULIE GRABER

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ranching life as women know it.

The handsome black-and-white images, made by Van Cleve mostly between 1986 and 1988, portray women on horseback, roping steers, in kitchens and taking time out to nurse their babies.

Van Cleve visited ranches from the mountain foothills of Idaho and Montana to the hot plains of southern New Mexico. She brought her own saddle and helped

tend cattle, always keeping her camera ready. She also tape-recorded interviews with her nearly 50 subjects, asking them to reflect on their experiences.

"What I simply wanted to do," she says "was give the women a voice and recognition."

The book has earned favorable review in the New York Times and on "Good Morning America." Van Cleve was even featured in Interview—the one with Johnny Depp on the cover.

"I don't believe I make the best photographs of ranch life. . . . But I feel strongly about the rest of the country knowing about these remarkable women," she says.

Van Cleve, 60 and single, spends summers on the family ranch north of Bozeman, Mont., but she winters here in Santa Fe, N.M., where she has a small house and studio on 3½ secluded acres nestled in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo.

She's busy preparing a major show of the "Hard Twist" photographs at the Santa Fe Art Institute.

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Continued from E1

National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City, working feverishly with two assistants to print and mount 125 photographs for the March opening. (The book takes its title from ranching life—a "hard twist" is the tough Manila hemp used for lariats, or a small, muscular, compact person, Van Cleve explains. "They can be hard-used, but they never break.")

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Van Cleve's studio, a remodeled chicken coop and horse stall, includes a spacious darkroom with a hulking enlarger. The adjoining office is decorated with western memorabilia and her photographs.

She looks like one of the women in her book. A clear-eyed strawberry blond with a firm jaw, she wears western boots and trousers without a trace of affectation.

She is the eldest of four children born to Barbara and the late Paul "Spike" Van Cleve, who ran a cattle and dude ranch operation in the foothills of the Crazy Mountains in western Montana. At Otter Creek Ranch, winter temperatures sometimes plunged to 25 degrees below zero and 5 feet of snow drifted over the range.

"It was a wonderful kind of life," Van Cleve says. 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 says. "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."

Van Cleve took up photography as a way of capturing and conveying the beauty she found all 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."

Van Cleve attended a small Catholic college in Omaha and after teaching elementary school, took additional literature courses at Loyola University of Chicago before earning her master's in English at Northwestern.

After a stint as the women's dean at DePaul University, she became a tenured professor at Mundelein College, a small women's school in Chicago, where she taught Victorian literature and ran a photography program. She spent each academic year in Chicago before heading home to Big Sky Country.

"I had nearly four months every year at the ranch," she says. "I was able to ride and rope and train the

young horses. There was a lot of work, but I've always been a hard worker—it was something I grew up with."

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Back in Chicago, she took assignments to illustrate textbooks and started a small agency that sold stock photographs. "Photography had been a passionate avocation," she says. "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 Mundelein 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. 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 '80s, a Santa Fe gallery owner mounted an exhibit of her work. "It practically sold out, and that did it," Van Cleve says. "That's when I realized I had a little bit of ability."

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

She launched the book project in 1986 after a conversation with her

mother. "She said, 'Why don't you photograph ranch women?' And that's all it took," Van Cleve says. "I was off and running."

She focused on women from large working ranches, asking friends for recommendations (among the women in the book is her sister, Michele Carroccia). She often was greeted with suspicion by ranchers who felt misunderstood, 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," says Van Cleve, who was inducted into the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame in November in recognition of her accomplishments.

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

"It's a survival way of life," she says. "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 Van Cleve heard resignation in the voices of women who believe their ranching lifestyle is unfairly portrayed as damaging range land 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, Van Cleve doesn't see them as oppressed.

"These women are independent and strong," she says. "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, Van Cleve found. Getting her book published was another.

"The shooting took me about 2½ years," she says. "The rest of it was trying to get it published. That really makes you humble."

She finally showed her work to an editor at the Museum of New Mexico Press, who bought the idea.

Van Cleve has sent copies to the women who appear in it. "They're pleased," Van Cleve says 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.'"