

Susan Urbanski

## The Farmer Takes a Wife

I signed on with a family owned and operated cattle ranch the day I married. I joined this clan with youthful thoughts of being a farmer's wife and living a romantic, simple life in the country. It turned out to be more like surviving military boot camp, then re-enlisting (over and over) again because you thrive on the vocation and the feeling of achievement. We are a clan working hard toward a common goal. Not unlike any other family group we have times when we are dysfunctional, diverse, and as strong as an NFL team. We have to blend the strengths and expertise of the changing participants year after year

We are made up of three generations. With more managers than workers, the oldest generation (boomer plus) likes to think they are in charge, but behind the walls of our own homes we admit the middle generation (thirty something) is the future and the youngest generation is just too young to have an impact yet. As a result, there are often conflicting plans that can be challenging: one group wants to fix a fence, another wants to clean the barn, another needs extra hands to load some hay. Sometimes we work in teams, other times as individuals. We live in close proximity of each other with some of the properties adjacent, others just over the hill, and one up the road a bit. Most mornings an informal meeting takes place at my kitchen counter. There is my nearly-retired-silver-haired husband, his retired-bachelor-curmudgeon brother, unemployed-goddess me, coffee, newspaper, and not a lot of talk. If our son, we call him "The General", stops in on the weekend you automatically know he has a firm plan in mind for each of us. When someone mentions going to town, I know they are headed to the feed store or the John Deere dealership, not the mall, ever. After all, this ranch is a business. We raise commercial and registered Angus cattle. The plan is to improve the herd with registered animals

in order to reap the rewards of higher sale prices at auction. But still, when I step outside and am surrounded by the peaceful and comforting sounds and sights of chirping birds, neighing horses, and ruminating cattle, it seems much more than a business. It's a lifestyle we treasure and take pleasure in.

The dark short days of winter are the slow season. One of us is up early to feed the herd, rubber boots crunching along the gravel driveway just as the dog darts ahead, catching the scent of nocturnal visitors. Trudging past the creek, where its banks have over run and flooded the pasture, you climb the hill through mud and muck to the barn. Here the cows, calves, steers, heifers, and the bull wait serenely. They have been loitering under the eaves of the barn in expectation of their first feeding of the day. Their sloppy manure surrounds the barn, steaming against the cold morning air. The cattle roam rolling hills that are dotted with stands of fir, cedar, maple and alder trees giving them protection against the elements. They graze throughout the day wherever they find a patch of grass or tasty leaves to eat. Twice daily, they make the trip to the barn for feeding, trudging along as if they are workers with a time clock to punch.

As spring emerges, the managers call a meeting of the minds to focus on the season ahead. Plans are made as to what tractor needs repair or upgrading-- timing is crucial. Implements are fine tuned to be ready to go when the weather is right. We need to be geared up in order to be successful in the season ahead.

Spring also brings calving season, and the calves are the crop that pays the ranch bills. We cannot afford to lose a calf to a coyote or a cow to mastitis. Cows like to find quiet secluded spots to deliver their offspring; for us, their guardians, it means constant vigilance to keep an eye on each expectant cow. Off and on throughout each day, I hike the hills, cross pastures, and

roam the woods counting heads and keeping an eye out for a new mother and babe, always with hopes of avoiding the need to perform some midwifery.

As the grass grows tall and becomes green waves in the breeze, we are as ready as possible for summer. It's haying season, if the weather predictions can be counted on. We cannot be caught in the rain with hay getting wet while it lies drying on the ground. Adrenalin is in the air, the pressure is on this is the time when our strength is in numbers and the stress can either hurt us or help us.

The tractors engines idle while implements are attached, roaring into gear as men and machines head out to do the cutting, raking, baling and stacking of the hay crop. It's hot, sweaty, itchy and scratchy work and each one of us helps as best we can. Some of us can fix anything or drive anything, while some of us deliver parts or a hearty lunch and cool water at just the right time.

The old adage "make hay while the sun shines" is our credo. We are out in the scorching summer sun day after day wearing jeans, a John Deere hat, and whatever you can find in your closet to keep you cool while keeping the chaff from the hay off your sweaty skin. We have sunburns, backaches, blisters, pinched fingers and even hay fever, but we keep going from dawn to dark for most of the summer.

Autumn rolls in and the trees glow with yellow, orange and red leaves. We can stand back to admire a full barn with literally tons and tons of painstakingly prepared and stacked hay bales silently standing at attention waiting to become the winter fodder for the herd. We have made it through the cycle again. We have taken vacation time from our real careers for this. It's a triumph of exhaustion and stress when we see the efforts of all our exertions.

At family dinners we discuss cow heat cycles, artificial insemination, hoof rot, deworming, and the price of baling twine. Jokingly, we tease the individual who was kicked by the calf during ear tagging and inoculating that day. We might even stop to remember the steer, affectionately named Sir Loin, being served for dinner--gruesome maybe, but satisfying. We continue again engaged in the recurring yearly cycle of gratification for our labors. It's not a lifestyle for the faint of heart. There isn't much glamour. For this clan, it's the satisfaction of working hard, feeling the connection to the land, and in the end each other.