

The Homestead at Rabbit Creek

Jean L. Johnson

*Pendant les années de la dépression,
l'auteure défriche sa terre et se construit une maison.*



The author returning from the hayfield, 1937

Rabbit Creek rises on the Rabbit Lake Indian Reserve and flows north to join the Little Red Deer River. For four miles it is closely flanked on the west by a long ridge which mounts in two steep slopes to a height of 4,800 feet and separates the narrow valley from the Forest Reserve. The hills which bound the valley on the east are more broken, and beyond them, the terrain is so wooded and rugged that it was known as the Horse Heavens, it being almost impossible to drive wild horses out of there. There was good grazing on both sides of Rabbit Creek and bunch grass grew on the steep slopes of the hills. In the dry summer of 1934, when the Bow Valley was burnt brown and almost every well had gone dry on the old Coleman Ranch where we lived, it seemed like a green paradise. That year a lease on the southern two miles of the valley was cancelled, leaving it open for homestead. When I heard of the cancellation I suggested to my husband, Laurie, that we take up a

homestead there. He wanted no part of it, and when I said that I was determined to homestead he told me I was on my own.

This was in the fourth year of the Great Depression — I had 70 cents — not enough to take me to Calgary on the Brewster Bus; but that was no obstacle. With my city clothes tied behind the saddle, I rode the 12 miles down to the home of our friends, the Rogers, left my horse there and was then at a point where 70 cents would pay the fare to Calgary.

At the land office in Calgary, Mr. Gossip got out maps and we studied the situation. Without the advice and encouragement of this kind man, the whole project would have been impossible. He told me that, first of all, I should take a lease on the valley — the east half of sections six and seven. Before I could homestead one-quarter section of the lease I would have to live for at least 90 days on land I owned

within nine miles, and this land must be half paid for. The land we owned on the Bow River was much too far away and was not half paid for; but the map showed that section eight which joined section seven on the east was Hudson's Bay land and was so rough and hilly that it would be very cheap. If I could buy the northwest quarter, which seemed to be much the best, live there for 90 days, then cancel a quarter-section of the lease and post it for two weeks, I would just have time to file. After Dec. 31 of that year, no more homesteads would be granted in southern Alberta. It was a tall order for one who had just spent the last 70 cents she had in the world. The yearly payment for the lease was four cents per acre. I was able to borrow money by promising to pay it back in two weeks, and lost no time in taking the lease. Then I began to negotiate for the quarter-section of eight (Township 28). When I got them down to \$2 per acre I pawned all my silver for \$160, closed

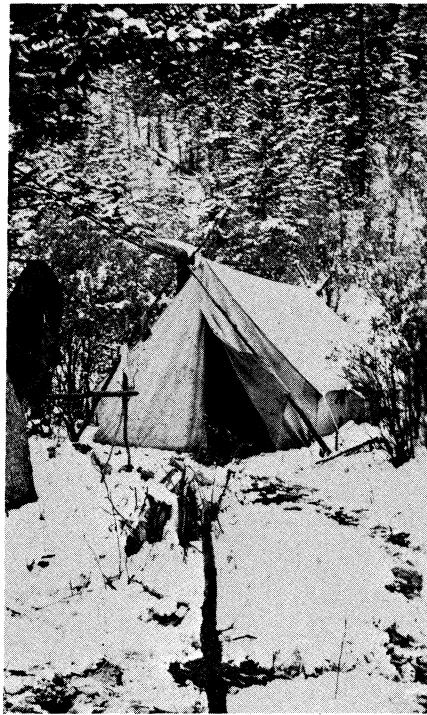
the deal and had the land half paid for.

As soon as I got home I approached a neighbour who had been admiring our three-year-olds, one of which was my own. I told him he could take his pick for \$40; he was happy to do so and chose a beautiful bay filly. I promptly paid my debt and put away a \$10 bill, the fee payable when I should file on the homestead.

Laurie and I rode up to look over my new estate. We found the survey pin about 200 yards north of a little creek which comes down from the east to join Rabbit Creek. We rode up the draw on a narrow game trail through dense, high willows and found a small opening beside the creek. It was a perfect site for my tent, sheltered and secluded — and it was on the land I had bought. In that area the cutbanks along both creeks are of Benton shale which has a tendency to slide. My little creek came out from under a slide, ran clear and cold for about 50 feet and disappeared under another slide. Only those who have know a scarcity of water can truly appreciate the beauty of a clear, running stream. I was ecstatic but Laurie said, 'With that heavily timbered hill going straight up south of your tent you will never get any sun'.

A few days later with our younger daughter, Peggy, placed with my mother, we started out at daybreak to trail the cattle north and set up camp. Laurie went ahead with team and wagon and all our camping equipment. Our daughter, Donna, who was five years old, helped me drive the cattle, a distance of almost 20 miles. Through the Indian Reserve there were signs of an old trail but it had given way to deep bogs and brush. Donna refused to give up her horse and ride on the wagon, so with the help of our good dog, Teddy, we managed to keep the reluctant cattle moving. We reached the valley which began abruptly where the Indian Reserve ended. There the cattle found themselves in good grass. Halfway up the lease the sulphur springs that oozed out from under a high shale cliff caught the fancy of the cows. They stopped there slurping the sulphur water and refused to go farther, so we went on.

By the time we reached the camp site Laurie had cleared a place for the tent and cut poles and tent pegs. We set up the tent and he lost no time in starting on the long trip home with the team and wagon. I gathered firewood, cut



Jean's Camp, 1934

spruce boughs for our beds, put the tent in order and hobbled the horses. Next I prepared a place for our campfire with rocks from the creek. A forked stick on either side held the green crosspiece to

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which a lard pail could be attached by a bit of haywire. We had our supper, placed a gallon jug of milk and a jar of butter in the cold creek and were in bed by dark. I was happy; I was living on my land and would be eligible to homestead in 90 days. Donna was tired

but happy; she knew that she would be riding every day. To her we were launched on a great adventure. We crawled into bed. An owl hooted softly from a tree nearby and we were both asleep in no time.

Again we were up at daybreak and I looked out anxiously for the horses. There stood my Sailor high on the hill across the creek with the first rays of the sun turning his buckskin coat to gold. Donna's white mare was not far off, so we saddled up and rode up the valley to see that the cows were not headed for home. We found all of them and pushed them much farther north. Then we had breakfast. We spent the week herding the cows, exploring the country and naming the coulees and points of interest. I had brought two books — for Donna, a Primer that I had used as a child in Ontario; and for myself, a small volume I always had with me — *Emerson's Essays*. It was now time to ride home, wash clothes, bake bread and churn butter — all in one day. My sister, Vivian, had arrived at the ranch and we were delighted to have her go back to the camp with us. She was much the youngest of my sisters with that child-like curve of the cheek which made her look even younger than she was. She loved the hills and the wilderness and had an infectious enthusiasm for all things in nature. No life was too rugged for her — she was fearless.

I decided to take along a packhorse. Among the other necessary items in the army packsaddle, I had placed a bucket full of eggs amongst oats. The bay stood like a lamb until I moved him, whereupon he lit into bucking, and eggs and oats flew in every direction. Unfortunately Jacob Swampy witnessed this debacle and was overcome with amusement. He had something to report to the other Stoneys but he only said, 'All white women crazy!' The bay settled down and the three of us rode back to camp.

I now spent the most carefree days I was to know there. The cattle were content — they made no effort to go south. We rode the hills on both sides of the valley looking for survey mounds, rejoicing over each we found as if we had discovered gold. Four square holes marked the corners of each section, with the earth from the holes forming the mound in the centre. Some had iron survey pins and some wooden pegs squared with an axe. Both types carried the numbers of township, range and section in Roman numerals, the pin at

the northeast corner marking the true boundaries of the section. The half-mile point was marked by two square holes. We managed to find all those which marked the boundaries of my domain in spite of the fact that all cuts were grown over except the one that ran south up the hill behind our tent. I used it to tell the time, for I was governed by the sun: to bed at dark, up at sunrise, lunch when the sun was over the cut.

Years later Vivian painted a picture under which she wrote these words: 'How the tall hills call to me — to seek — we two — our treasure trove and gaily fill these longest days as though this time would never end.'

Vivian went home taking Donna with her and leaving me alone for a while. I wanted to explore the country further so walked up my creek to seek its source. I had gone some distance into the hills when I entered a narrow canyon, startling a covey of ruffled grouse which could escape only through the entrance of the canyon because of the sheer rock walls. Now I could hear the sound of falling water and exploring farther, I came to a high waterfall which fell between walls of rock into a series of basins. Entranced by the sight I stood and admired it before returning to camp. How I hoped that this enchanting place was on my quarter-section! It was hard to estimate how far I had walked; but I claimed it for my own.

Always as I settled down to sleep I heard the owl softly hooting. When I awoke in the night, I listened for the bell on my horse — the clear, far-reaching sound of the old Swiss bell. And I listened intently as the sun came over the eastern hills. There is nothing

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more comforting when you are camping than the sound that tells you the horses have not strayed too far away.

Now that we had plenty of grass and water Laurie took 50 head of cows on shares, agreeing to do so before seeing them. Some were good healthy cows

but many were old swing-bags barn-yard types — and homebounds — every one of them. They were of all colours and breeds so that I was able to memorize them as we drove them slowly: red roan, pink roan, blue roan, Holstein, Red Poll, Angus and so forth. We had reached the Ghost River Flats when a friend, Lucy Landale, caught up with us. She had a bed roll and a few other things tied behind her saddle and she seemed to be homeless at that time. She wanted to come to camp with me, so Laurie returned to the ranch and Lucy and I took charge of the cattle. We got them to my valley but keeping them there was almost impossible. Our own cattle, far from welcoming them, put their noses in the air and moved as far north as they could go. It was the most miserable fall since 'nineteen and nineteen'. With every new snowfall the newcomers headed south. We were always wet and always cold. Every night we rubbed dubbin, called Skowhegan, on our boots and leather chaps singing as we worked, to the tune of 'Blue Again':

Skowhegan, let's Skowhegan
For we know darn well it will
snow again
And if it does we must go again
And so we Skowhegan

Although Lucy loved to sing, she was tone deaf; every note was either sharp or flat. She was a born mimic and wonderfully entertaining. She could imitate the howl of coyotes so exactly that she could fool anyone — even the coyotes. She wore her long, auburn hair wound around her head in braids. On her second evening in camp, she had washed her hair, and it was hanging loose, when hearing the sound of democrats coming down Rabbit Creek Valley, she ran and climbed up on a high bank overlooking the valley. Standing erect, and somehow looking defiant, with her hair shining in the western sun and blowing back wildly in the wind, in her bright blue blouse and jeans; I thought of Boadicea, looking out to sea. I was relieved when she said that it was only the Stoney, driving north. I didn't want strangers to be directed to my well-hidden camp by the strange sight of a maiden standing high, on the edge of the wilderness.

Laurie brought up some boards and a wagon-load of comforts. We laid a floor for the tent, he cut some logs and built walls about two feet high upon which we pitched the tent. It was a wonderful improvement; now we could stand upright. He set up an old box stove to warm the tent and allow us to

cook out of the snow, and a Winnipeg couch much more comfortable than the spruce boughs. It could be closed up in the daytime to give more room and make a place to sit. Never, I thought, has anyone been as comfortable as we are now. On one corner of the logs I nailed a Japanese orange box to hold some items and beside the couch we had a large orange box standing on end so that the partition in it made a useful shelf. This was covered with white oilcloth and held our few dishes, flatware, matches, candles and a flashlight. Our frying pan, saucepan and lantern hung in a tree. We now had a large tin receptacle which had once held five gallons of lard. It had a close lid and kept our bread, flour and other supplies safe from rodents. In those days you could find a set of teepee poles on almost any trail in the wilderness. Finding a set leaning against one of the large spruce trees, Laurie set up a teepee for our guests. Very few came, but those who did found a place to sleep.

The Stoney Indians came back from hunting and camped about 200 yards below the tent. Till late at night they sang and beat their tomtoms. They knew we were there — they know everything — but none came near and in the morning, with much chattering of women and barking of dogs, they packed their horses, folded their tents and went on south to Morley.

The cows kept giving us trouble; we rode every day; some we found miles away, some disappeared and were never seen again. At last my 90 days were up. We trailed the cattle back to the ranch. I went to Calgary and

'I now spent the most carefree days I was to know.'

cancelled the lease on the quarter-section adjoining my land. It was the best and widest part of the valley. It was posted for two weeks — two long weeks of dread for me. As soon as the time was up I was at the land office before the door opened. No one else

showed up to make a claim — there were no more than two people within nine miles of there, and I filed on my homestead. Mr. Gossip gave me one last piece of advice. 'When you are dealing with the Government,' he said, 'tell your story and stick to it. Most people say one thing, then hedge and waffle.'

Early next spring Lucy was married and Laurie took his team and went to work on the Lake Louise-Jasper Highway. Donna and I took the cattle north. It was difficult to get the calves to jump into the Ghost River but we got them to the range without any losses. As Laurie's father was staying at the ranch, I was able to hire a reliable girl to come there and take care of the children. I still rode home often to check on the girls, do a few jobs and get some supplies. Everytime I returned and entered the narrow head of the valley with its towering hills on either side I felt a contentment such as I had never known. Spring, summer and autumn I watched the valley and the hills change; I loved the autumn best of all when the red of the grease willow and the gold of the poplars gleamed bright against the dark spruce and pine.

I did not mind being there alone but this worried old Jacob Swampy who camped on the reserve a few miles south. Almost every day about noon I could hear the soft tread of his horse coming up the path through the willows. He would stop in front of the tent and look straight ahead till I come out. He never dismounted. I would hand him up a mug of tea and a thick slice of bread and jam. Before he left he would always say, 'Mrs. Laurie, you should not stay here alone.'

'I was happy: I was living on my land ...'

There are grizzly bears up here.' And he would point east up the creek. Then he would wheel his horse and be gone. Only on one occasion did I have a premonition that the grizzly bears were coming.

Before retiring I loaded the six-

shooter, wrapped a rag around the end of a stick and soaked it with coal oil. I had matches and a flashlight with the other things beside the bed and hoped that fire would scare away any bears that tried to come into the tent. I would shoot only as a last resort. I couldn't sleep. Suddenly the dog began growling, something he had never done before. I could hear something moving and a snort not unlike that of a pig. The growl rose to a snarl but my good Teddy did not leave his station in front of the tent. Finally all noises ceased and I fell asleep. Not long after that a huge grizzly bear was trapped just up the creek from where I had camped.

There was other life about the camp. Two tall spruce trees stood close by. Every night after I was in bed and all was quiet, I heard thump, thump, the sound of mice jumping out of the tree onto the tent. These mice, I am convinced, lived up in the spruce tree. They were unlike any mice I have seen — larger, with coarse heads. I found one in the milk. He had leapt into the narrow mouth of the jug that stood in the middle of the creek. It was a stone demijohn so I became aware of his presence when his tail appeared as I was making pancakes. Vivian always said that we ate the pancakes anyway. We did not! These mice picked up all the prune stones they found outside and put them in the little box at the foot of my bed. Pack mice, I called them. Thank goodness there were no pack rats. I tamed chipmunks so that they would take food from my hand. In an extra pair of jeans I had hanging in a tree they filled the pockets with a cache of pancake. Every day, just at mealtime, two Canada Jays came. They, too would snatch bits from my hand. Often as I rode up the valley in the evening there were small herds of mule deer high on the side of the hill. They would raise their heads and watch me, then go on grazing. Once I saw three bald eagles on the hill above me. They taxied for a short distance before rising in flight. Sometimes at dusk I would walk up along the creek and take a seat in the jackpines above. Then I would hear them coming — the wild horses, coming to drink from a wide stretch in the creek. They drank warily, raising their heads often, always the same bunch — a large chestnut and some bays, one with a blaze face. And every night I went to sleep to the who-oo-oo-oo of the owl and the rippling of the creek.

There were days when the cattle were missing and I hadn't time to go to the ranch for supplies. Then I ate bread and peanut butter three times a day. Occasionally I managed to catch a fish, but they were scarce. I shot a rabbit and made a tasty looking stew only to find that I could not touch it. I got a partridge once in a while and fried it in bacon grease; and I made bannock in the iron frying pan covered with a tin plate.

Maybe most people have been influenced by a book they read in childhood. For me such a book was *Robinson Crusoe*. I loved it. The idea of making do with what you had, the minimum of things to work with, appealed to me strongly. I found a sort of romance in simplicity, a challenge in living alone in the wilderness and a triumph in surviving and achieving what I set out to do. I remembered how Robinson Crusoe made bread; and with this in mind I roasted a mallard that Laurie had brought me. I cleaned and skinned it, then wrapped it in dough made of flour and water. I dug a hole and built a fire of dry willows on top of it. When the wood was burned to embers I placed the duck in a well-greased lard pail, put the lid on tight, scraped away the embers, placed the pail in the hole and drew the embers over it. After riding around the cattle for two or three hours, I dined on delicious duck.

There were setbacks. There were times when I worried about things at home, times when I felt like a failure. The pack-horse, old Box R, got away with hobbles on and it took me a week to find him. He had gone with

'I watched the valley and the hills change ...'

the wild bunch. As White Foot, a four-year-old, had been ridden only a few times, I thought he needed some experience and I rode him to camp. I was the one who got the experience. He hit out for his old range on the Dog Pound Creek. I awakened at 4



Jean haying on the homestead at Rabbit Creek, 1937

a.m. with a premonition that he had gone and tracked him on foot over hill and dale till I found him a few miles east. To track in grass you have to get your head down low for, at times, you see only the shadow in the depression of the hoof marks.

Then there was my abortive attempt to fence the north line of the lease. On the Indian Reserve at the site of an old abandoned cable rig I found great lengths of rusty cable among the grass and bushes. I rolled up two coils, which took every ounce of my strength as I lifted them, one on each side of the pack horse. Why Box R stood for this I do not know!

Back at the camp I managed to unwind the strands with great difficulty and with rust in my eyes and splinters of metal in my fingers. I cut about four posts and pounded them in with the axe, but couldn't stretch the cable tight. It was a sorry-looking sight. I gave up.

And so I served my time proving up with livestock instead of farming. I loved that valley, the only land I ever owned. I loved the creek which became known as Jean's Creek. I remember putting my hand on a tree, my tree, with a feeling of affection. After all the years I remember with nostalgia the sweet, fresh air and the

billowing of the tent where I slept more soundly than I ever have since. It was not all easy; but there I spent some of the happiest days of my life.

Other land had been thrown open south of the Indian Reserve and Laurie filed on a homestead there late in December, 1934. Laurie built on his land and we moved into the log cabin in the fall of 1936. From there I often rode up and went around the cattle and occasionally I stayed at camp overnight. In the summer of 1938 Laurie and a friend went up to the valley and fenced my homestead. I was not entirely on my own after all. ☉