

The Dude, the Ducks
and Other Tales

THE DUDE,



the Ducks



and Other Tales



Insights from Life in Montana

Lois Olmstead


REDEMPTION
PRESS

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2nd printing 2006.

Published by Redemption Press, PO Box 427, Enumclaw, WA
98022.

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ISBN 13: 978-1-63232-463-4

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2006901166

This book is dedicated to

Bud and Lorraine Bohleen





my mom and dad

who gave me the foundation for a life of joyful adventure
by loving me, each other and our Lord Jesus Christ.

They have let me be the “hired hand”
even when they didn’t need one.

For my dad, who still tells me how to drive,
and my mom, who still tells me to get plenty of rest—
I love you, and I trust you will see that love in these memories.

Contents

	1. Ranch Girl Goes Home.	1
	2. They Keep Letting the Dude Return	19
	3. Seasons of Ranching	27
	4. The Dude Gets a Promotion.	39
	5. I'm Not Athletic and I Can't Cook	55
	6. I'm Not Athletic and I Can't Cook—Really!	65
	7. More Proof	79
	8. The Olmstead Homestead.	91
	9. On Golden Pond	103
	10. And Then There Were Ducks	119
	11. And Then There Were More Ducks	131
	12. The Ducks Are Growing Up.	141
	13. Travelin'	157
	14. Colstrip.	171
	15. Life—An Adventure.	179



16. Looking Back 197

17. And Now 215

*Jesus said, “I am come that they might have life,
and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10, KJV).*



CHAPTER 1



Ranch Girl Goes Home



Most favorite of all the pieces of this columnist were the ones when I went home to “help” my folks. You will love meeting my mom and dad. I praise God for allowing me to be born in this family.

This week, I realized a special blessing. This blessing is the ability to turn into a kid again. Turning into a kid again at my age is quite an accomplishment. I do it by going home. By “going home” I mean going back to the ranch in the Shields Valley near Livingston, Montana (sixty miles from Yellowstone National Park), where I was raised and where my parents are still active ranchers. Robert and I love going for a visit. My parents tell their friends, “The kids are here!”

“Get your boots and hat,” my mom said the minute I arrived. “We have to feed a jag of hay.” I got my old jeans and a sweatshirt. I was pulling on my boots when she honked a few minutes later. I jumped into the old orange Dodge truck during takeoff. I managed to get in without being dragged underneath. We raced over the snowbanks and two ditches and swung around my dad in the tractor to get the gate in front of him.

“I’ll get the gate,” I said to no one. My mom was already out of the truck and had the gate open. She swung back in behind the wheel. Dad was yelling something to us as he drove by. We both nodded, but of course neither understood what he had yelled. We raced on to the next gate.

“Get the gate,” my mom said. “I’ll drive up to the hay corral. Keep those cows from getting out. . . .” she hollered out the window at me as she drove off. As I stood waiting for Dad, I thought, *I should write a book on*

gates. That has been my expertise since I was ten. And not one gate opens the same way. I think inventors must spend years trying to come up with creative, magical ways to latch ranch gates! I quit talking to myself and yelled at two cows coming my way, then yelled at Dad as he went tearing through the gate, “Don’t hit the cows. . . .” My next two thoughts were *Why does everything on this ranch have to be done in a hurry?* and *I suppose I don’t have to tell him not to hit the cows!*

While he loaded a big round bale onto the rod at the back of the tractor and then drove down into the pasture with the cows and calves looking like teenage boys at the lunch line, Mom showed up. Dad came back, hollering something to us from inside the cab on the tractor. Cabs are a wonderful modern addition to tractors, keeping out the heat and the dust, and on a day like today, the bitter-cold wind. “What’d he say?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I never know,” Mom laughed. “I can’t hear a word he says when I’ve got my hat on. I just try to read his mind.” At the barn he told us he was going to feed a bale of straw in the one corral. Then we were going to cut two cows out. (That means separating them from the rest of the herd.)

“Didn’t he just tell us that at the house?” I asked Mom.

“Yup. And that was what he just hollered to us from the tractor. He says he always had to tell you kids everything three times in order for you to get the job done right! Now he just does it from force of habit!” We went back to the house.

“We’ve got to hustle,” Dad said. He put a log in the stove and grabbed his hat. “You drive your pickup,” he told me with a grin. “We’ll save our gas.” Mom got in the middle and Dad jumped in. “Now don’t hit my tractor as you back out.” We were on our way to town for coffee with friends. (Another change in ranching I noted: town used to be much farther from the ranch than it is today!) As we neared the Trail Rite Inn, Dad said, “Get in the right lane and slow down.”

Ranch Girl Goes Home

Mom said, “Just follow that yellow truck. You have to slow down and then turn right at the stop sign.”

Dad said, “Just go in the first turn. Park by that brown truck.” By then we were all laughing.

“Here is what you do, Lois: If we both tell you the same thing, then do it,” laughed my mom.

“OK,” I said. Me, the dude, the kid.



I held my pen poised over the contest form at Rimrock Mall. The entry blank said, “Tell why your mom should be Queen for a Day at Rimrock Mall.”

My mom has been a Montana ranch wife for over fifty years. She and Dad raised my brother and me with hard work, discipline and lots of love. And we had fun too. My mom raised chickens and had a big garden. As I got older I realized that she didn’t do this for fun; it was our groceries. She still gardens. My family gets jars of Gram’s delicious fruits and vegetables in the fall. People always think she’s my sister when they meet us together because she looks so young. (I tell her that is great for her, but I sure must be aging fast!) She tells me, “You are only as old as you feel.” She looks great when she is all dressed up for church or dinner out with Dad. But the minute she gets home, she jumps into her Levis and boots. She looks great then too.

She can cook a delicious meal when ten people pop in unexpectedly. She told me the guest bed had been occupied thirty-seven nights in a row during hunting season by different visitors. I guess that is what motivated her to build a log guest cabin out behind the house. She peeled the logs, used the tractor and a forklift to lift them in place and even built the bunk beds and the outhouse (with a half-moon in the door to make it authentic).

The Dude, the Ducks and Other Tales

My pen is still poised midair over the entry blank. My mom drives the hay baler and leads a Bible study. My mom floats the Yellowstone River and vaccinates the calves. My mom can change a tire or pull a calf. She has shot deer, antelope, elk and moose. A black bear she saw is now a rug hanging in their log home which she and Dad designed. She went on a eighty-mile trail ride in the Teton Mountains a few years ago, slept on the ground and loved it. When I called her on her birthday last Sunday, she told me she had planted 250 baby Christmas trees the day before.

She laughingly told me about being out marking the new calves when an upset mom cow took after her and Dad. She had gotten off her three-wheeler a few minutes before. So Dad took a belly dive onto the hay wagon and Mom scaled the pigpen fence in one leap. Thankfully no pigs were there.

The entry blank is still blank.

What I appreciate most about Mom is her example of being a wife and a mother. Her faith in God through the good times and the bad has inspired my own faith.

I wipe a few tears from my eyes and crumple up the entry blank with a smile. My mom can't be Rimrock Mall's Queen for a Day. She hasn't got time.

Happy Mother's Day, Mom. I love you.



When my dad read the column about my mom, he said, "That was great. Now just don't get any ideas about Father's Day!"

Dear Dad: You know how difficult it has always been for me to follow your instructions. I remember how you'd give me directions for chores. You would tell me to give two flakes of hay to the horses, feed a bucket of grain to the 4-H calves and bring in three loads of wood.

Ranch Girl Goes Home

You would repeat it twice while I was getting my coat. Then I would race out to the barn, give the horses two buckets of grain, feed the calves three flakes of hay and bring in one load of wood. I should have listened.

I remember when you told me not to drive the old Plymouth because it didn't have brakes. But when Mom told me to get a jug of milk from the neighbors, I jumped into the Plymouth and zoomed over the hill. Going down the first hill I remembered what you had said, but it was too late. I drove like Mario Andretti over the hills and around the corners right into the Evanses' yard. I thought the only way to stop was to aim at something bigger than the car, so I headed for their barn. I only knocked out three cinder blocks. I jumped out of the car and looked toward home. I could see the cloud of dust billowing like a hurricane down our road. You made it in record time. I am sure you thought I was killed. I should have listened.

I was eight when you taught me to drive on the little Ford tractor. I guess I always had a heavy foot because I never left the house without ten minutes of driving instructions. (Even last week when I went to Wyoming to speak, you called to tell me how to drive. That was ten minutes long distance.)

I remember when I was driving from Billings to Livingston to teach sewing lessons. I had coffee with you one night before I drove the 100 miles back home. "Now, there's lots of deer on the road by Big Timber, so you drive slow!" you said.

I should have listened. A highway patrol pulled me over for speeding. When he came up to the car, I said, "Drats! My dad told me to watch out for deer. He didn't say a thing about patrolmen!" He didn't crack a smile as he wrote out my ticket. I thought you'd never find out. But you went to Big Timber to get your hair cut (they still charged \$1) and read it in their paper!

I think you lost most of your hair when I started to date. You told me where I could go and when. You checked on the boys' driving. You told me what time to be in and not to "park" in the yard after I got home. I didn't listen. You reminded me by blinking the yard light. I wasn't too worried about one blink, but three blinks meant my date had overextended his welcome.

You were very strict. And I certainly got a goodly number of educational lessons applied to my backside when I was young. (I still think I got more than Ron did!) However, strict as you were, I never had a single doubt about your immense love for us kids. You always let us know how much you loved us.

You taught us most by example. I think I was about ten when you and Mom gave your lives to the Lord. And every night before you went to bed, you knelt by that white footstool in the living room and prayed. Every morning, I would see you reading your Bible before you went out for chores. You taught me that living for the Lord was a daily walk, not just a Sunday affair.

When I went to college, I knew you were praying for me. After I got married, I knew you were praying for the two of us. Today, when you are busier and working harder than ever on the ranch, I know you are praying for our children, their wives and families, and us too.

I know you told me not to write about you in the paper. I should have listened . . . ?

Happy Father's Day, Dad. I love you.



I tell my friends I am going to the ranch "to help my folks." That could be stretching the truth. I think I go to entertain—I doubt I'm much help! The last trip I met a dangerous enemy. A new gate.

Ranch Girl Goes Home

It was a gate suitable for dangerous prison inmates rather than mere cows. It had a two-inch strap of iron bent in a circle fastened to the fence post. That fastened to an iron apparatus that included a taut spring and a slot for a straight piece of iron to rest in when the gate was closed. To hold this iron bar in place, it was necessary to slide a bolt through a hole.

On the first day in a freezing, howling Livingston wind, my dad jumped off the tractor and opened the gate. I watched as he pulled out the bolt, letting the ring of iron slide off the gate post and then opened the gate wide for the tractor to go through.

So when he approached it later—"I'll get the gate!" I hollered over the wind and the noise of the tractor as he drove through. It was a struggle. You really needed three arms to get this gate closed. God forgot and only gave me two. By bracing my leg against the gate pole when it got somewhat vertically lined up with the fence post and using a hammerlock on the top with my right arm, I used every ounce of strength in me to wrestle the iron ring over the post. Somehow I managed to get the iron bar into its slot. With a desperate prayer, I held onto the iron bar with one hand and slid the bolt into place. I stepped back. The gate stood. The iron bar was latched.

"That's the best gate on the place," my dad said later. "It stretches the gate good and tight. It's secure."

"Is there gate school somewhere?" I asked. "How do they come up with all these different mind-boggling latches?"

"Everyone just keeps thinking they can make a better one."

Well, now you will learn why I am the ranch "dude." The next day we went out to do the same thing we did the day before . . . the same thing my folks have been doing twice a day all winter. The only variants are how cold the wind was, how deep the snow was and how successful the mom cows were at giving birth without help. When we got to *the* gate, I jumped out of the pickup. "I can get it," I said confidently.

I knew what I had to do to unlatch the gate. Just pull the bolt out of the hole. The bolt that held the bar of iron hooked to the round iron circle that was over the gate post. I pulled out that bolt—and screamed!

That iron bar flipped up like it was hooked to a bomb. The spring that held the iron circle made a *whoosh* sound as it flew past my nose. In less than two seconds the before-taut gate was lying like a snake at my feet. I touched my nose with my gloved hand just to make sure it was still there.

My mom was in the pickup. When I got in, she said, “I knew that was going to happen. I knew it, but I just couldn’t get the window rolled down fast enough to yell. Are you all right?”

“Yup—and I am now wide awake too.” By then I was laughing. Fear does that to me. I was still laughing when we caught up to Dad. “You ought to harness the power in that thing,” I said to him. “You could energize an electric fence with the power in it!”

“You’ve got to be smarter than the gate,” he said to me with a grin.

“Don’t go there,” I retorted.

Me, the ranch hand.

No—me, the dude. The entertainer.



“I guess you couldn’t use a five-day planner in your line of work,” I said to my mom as our old blue truck bounced along a narrow road paved with mud and snow and hemmed by a barbed wire fence. This is our second annual Lois-goes-home-to-help-with-calving trip. I had packed a bag with old cowboy clothes and lots of winter wear and headed west with the blessing of He-who-married me.

The first night we had one new calf when we checked at 10:30 p.m., which is one hour past my bedtime. I slept through the next two calls at 2:30 and 5:30 a.m. I did manage to get up in time for breakfast.