

BACK IN TIME

Growing up on a squirrel ranch

BY EVELYN BYRNE WILLIAMS WITH JANEEN SATHRE

I knew quite a few “squirrel ranchers” when growing up in the Applegate. My family was one of them, so I am quite qualified to clarify our status from the other kinds of ranchers and farmers here. Of course, the squirrel ranch name started because the disliked digger squirrels were already on the premises. There was no disgrace in living on such a place, but there was no income to be made from the squirrel. One could have some chickens, raise a garden and grow some hay for a milk cow, as we did, but rich you would never be on the squirrel ranch.

In 1930, my dad started working for the forest service at Star Ranger Station, just during the summer months or fire season. For about ten years, he was either at a guard station or up on Tallowbox lookout, so mother was left to run our ranch with the help of us children. I loved our squirrel ranch, but hated the work. Everyone had to do his or her part. My brother, Morris, ten years older than me, and my sister, Gladys, eight years older, had learned to milk the cow. I decided I didn't want to learn to milk, and I didn't! At a very young age, I made up my mind that I wanted to live in the country, but not do farming or ranch work.

One of my favorite activities was fishing. Since we lived so close to the river, we had many fish dinners. Morris taught me all the fishing techniques and we would have contests to see who caught the first, largest, or the most. Rainbow trout was our favorite.

Our dog, a shepherd we called Pat, also liked to fish. When he heard me getting my fishing pole from our back porch, he would go crazy with excitement. I had taught him to stay close beside me when fishing, and when I caught one I would throw the line so the fish would land quite a ways behind us. He would run and jump on the fish, paws firmly keeping it there for me to remove the hook. He and I had many happy times together.

Horses and cows were not for me. One time when I was about seven, my grandpa, whose farm was on both sides of the Applegate River, was going to cross the river with his mower and team of horses



Photo above: John Byrne milking a cow, a chore that daughter Evelyn chose not to learn at an early age. **Photo right:** Evelyn Byrne fishing on the Applegate River, one of her favorite “chores,” with Pat the dog.



on his way home from cutting hay all day. He had his derrick horse following in the back and wanted me to ride her across the river ahead of him. I told him I had never ridden a horse and he said it was about time I did. He put me up on her bare back and handed me the reins. I grabbed her mane and we started across. The moss-covered river rocks were my undoing when she slipped and slid in midstream. Off I plunged into the water, madder than a wet hen. Grandpa was laughing at me as my horse went on across. I ran home and told mother what grandpa had done and she only seemed to be relieved that I had not drowned.

I did like chickens. When dad built our chicken house and mother brought some baby chicks home, I was so excited. I helped with the feeding and watched them grow up and start laying eggs. I never complained about helping with the monthly cleaning of the roosts and floors. Black Leaf 40 (nicotine) was brushed on the pole roosts to kill chicken lice, and fresh straw or hay was put on the floors. It was interesting to see how the chickens reacted to the cleanliness. They actually talked all about it while scratching the straw or hay and preening.

I liked gathering the eggs each evening from the nests at the far end of the building. Sometimes, a hen wanted to become a mother and was found refusing to move from her nest of several eggs. I was happy if I was given permission by my mother to stay there while I watched over

the hen until the little chickens hatched.

In the mornings, mother had clabbered milk to pour over the store-bought “chicken mash” that had been put in the feed boxes. Those chickens were as happy as kids at an ice-cream social. They hurriedly gulped it all down before spending the rest of the day outside, nibbling green grass, hunting bugs, and eating the crushed oyster shells needed for their digestive systems. However, outside there were hawks to fear—they could quickly swoop down and effortlessly grab a chicken, especially a small one, and sail off with it for a meal.

I never wanted to witness when it was time for a chicken to become a chicken dinner or when all were past their prime. I usually made an excuse to go visit my grandma across the river. Later I would see some canning jars filled with those many chicken parts. I must admit, after some time, to liking the many meals of chicken noodles, dumplings, and soups from those dear chickens.

This story ends with the “old chicken-house” episode. I had come home from school with some leftover powdered poster paints that you could mix with water. I could hardly wait to get home to show my treasures to mother. But she wasn't there, so I decided to go ahead and surprise her by painting the back of our chicken house with a mural in all those wonderful

primary colors with some black and white mixed in. I climbed a ladder to start my masterpiece. I don't remember what I painted, but know it was very bright and colorful. It was finished by the time I heard mother coming in our car and I could hardly wait for her happy reaction.

I think she almost had a heart attack when she saw my mural from Palmer Creek Road before driving down our driveway. As she got out of the car, there was a frown on her face and I knew she was upset. She came to me and said my artwork could not stay there, so I had to get a bucket of soapy water and a broom to scrub it all off. She did lose her frown and, putting her arm around me, said it was a beautiful painting but it was not for the chicken house that could be seen by everyone driving on our road. I still don't understand why it was so bad, but I am happy to say my artwork was never forgotten—a faint and spotty coloring remained on the old chicken house for many years.

Seems I have strayed from the squirrels, but I truly enjoyed the chickens on our squirrel ranch.

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