

THE CATTLE QUEEN OF MONTANA®

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Margaret Carlston, 1861-1931
"The Cattle Queen of Montana"

Much has been written about the men who tamed the West, but the tales that surround the Cattle Queen offer a glimpse of another, rarer and equally rugged breed of pioneer.

She could be found at four in the morning out irrigating below her ranch on Elbow Creek, her black boots cut off at the knee and later the same day hosting a fancy dinner party at her showplace home on the Mill Creek delta.

In the bootlegging days, the stockings under her full gingham dress were known to carry small bottles of home-brewed beer for the hard workers on a thrashing crew. The lazy went without.

"She had a heart as big as the great outdoors, but if you did her dirt, she never forgot it," Nikki Kolence, one of her surviving granddaughters, said recently from Butte.

She was mad at a judge one time, so the story goes, and pushed him off the sidewalk as she walked by in downtown Livingston. She cut quite a swath.

An orphan boy she raised wanted some rattlers to shake so she went out and bashed two snakes with a shovel.

Margaret Carlston - the Cattle Queen.

"She didn't need the ERA," her granddaughter said.

"When I was a little girl, we got caught in a real blizzard coming back to Elbow Creek one time. She drove the team of horses and told mother and me to get under a big bear rug in back.

"When we got home, she was a solid mass of snow, only her eyes shone through . . . she was tough."

Born in Sweden near the border with Finland in 1861, Margaret, then still a Peterson, immigrated to America in the 1870s. With a husband, Richard Carlston, in tow, she worked her way west in 1878 and spent nine years at Deadwood in the Black Hills of South Dakota, where she reportedly knew Wild Bill and Calamity Jane.



Deadwood SD 1876

The family, with two sons now, Lyman and Archie, came by wagon to the Jay Gould mining camp near Silver City outside of Helena in 1887.

Enroute, a group of Crow Indians took a fancy to her prize saddle horse, Prince, and untied him from the back of the wagon and took off. Mrs. Carlston sent her husband after the horse but when he didn't return, she left her two children and went to see what had happened.



"There was Grandpa and the Indians, roaring with laughter. Every time he would jump on the horse, the Indians would push him off," a granddaughter, Mona Roedl in Missoula, recounted.

"Grandmother walked up, jumped on the horse and rode off. The Indians were completely dumbfounded to see a woman act like that and they let her go . . . and Grandpa followed," she said.

With the savings from a boarding house she operated at the mining camp, Mrs. Carlston started buying cattle and set off on the course that was to give her a reputation as one of the state's foremost cattle ranchers.

It was a reputation that was not entirely favorable, according to several Park County old timers who remember the Cattle Queen from their childhood days.

None would call Mrs. Carlston a rustler, but the stories are sprinkled with phrases such as "her cows always had twins."



She bought a ranch on Elbow Creek about 15 miles south of Livingston at the turn of the century and arrived in the county in 1903, driving four sons and about 400 or 500 head of cattle. They came through fenceless land from Crow Creek Valley near Toston. Sandy Malcolm, who grew up on a neighboring ranch, remembers the "hardy, old gal" picking up a pet calf of his called "Mokie" on her way through with a herd.

"I got on bareback with mother, and I'd call 'Mokie' and the calf would turn back, but she would whip it back mercilessly," Malcolm said.

"I was five, but I remember it like it was yesterday. She was pretty handy with a bull whip," he said.

"My husband and I were building our first home on the flats of Elbow and she came and sat on the lumber pile and watched without a word - she was just hat ornery," Marion Melin recalls.

There were some scandals too, such as the unexplained disappearance of one of her hard-worked ranch hands, a man known as "the Indian."

But Malcolm, Mrs. Melin, her granddaughters and the others are all quick to point out that the frontier society was not the easiest place for a single woman to conduct business - and the Cattle Queen always handled her own and held her own.

"She had to take her part and fight with the men," said Olive Kauffman, who lived 'right neighbors' to the Carlstons. "My husband said he just couldn't out swear her."

"When she'd fire somebody, she'd tell him, 'you go to hell and when you get to Pine Creek, you'll be there,' Malcolm said. "She didn't much like the folks at the old church there."

An editorial in the Livingston Enterprise on her death in March 1931 put it well: "A woman sometimes had to forget those things often referred to as the finer expressions, forget the indoor occupations considered the forte of womankind, and be out in the open, driving cattle, managing farm work, long hard trips to other places to buy, to sell."

But the social side was far from crowded out. The Cattle Queen would sometimes entertain senators and the mayor at the Finlen Hotel in Butte, where it was rumored her boyfriend lived. She commissioned two large paintings of herself, one as a younger woman and another decked out atop a horse.

The paintings show a blue-eyed, light-haired, well-dressed woman. A stocky build and muscular neck in later photographs betray the long hours of hard work on the ranch.



Margaret Carlston and Prince

Some may recall the 1954 movie, Cattle Queen of Montana, but is unlikely the pistol-packing piece starring Ronald Reagan and Barbara Stanwyck was based on the real Cattle Queen.

The Elbow Creek ranch grew to 3,200 acres and prospered under her direction, in part because it had the first water rights on two ditches. Hard feelings over those water rights were the root of many of the neighbors' derogatory tales, Mrs. Kolence said.

"She was a great horse fancier, and raised a lot of dandy horses and quite a few good mules," Malcolm said. She reportedly imported her Percheron stallion, Prince from France, and sold quite a few horses to the Canadian government.

The Cattle Queen expanded the ranch operations into sheep and dairy farming in later years. The old stone milk house is still standing behind the foundations of the Mill creek delta home, on property now owned by Jim Warfield. The plaster has crumbled

and the walls collapsed the old root cellar in back.



Margaret Carlston, 1917

Warfield said a barn nearby was part of the set in the film "Rancho Deluxe" in the mid-1970s, and some boards from it were taken for finish work at Trailhead Sporting Goods before he burned down the collapsing structure.

Seems the Cattle Queen had set a precedent.

According to several accounts, the big, beautiful delta home - and the two-story Elbow Creek ranch house - were burned to collect the insurance. Bill Moore, who acquired the Mill Creek land from the Carlstons in 1929, told Warfield many years back that he saw them moving out the furniture the night before.

She kept a big metal chest in the house that she never let the boys look into; they thought it was full of money," Warfield said. "They couldn't move it out when the place burned, but the day after they got into the chest. ... and found old clothes."

What happened to her husband is not clear. He dropped out of the tales somewhere between the mining camps and Elbow Creek, but not before he fathered two more boys. Mrs. Kolence said he was "an inventor and dreamer" who died in 1917 in Philadelphia.

Lyman, Archie, Lincie and Wilbur - they're all dead now. Lyman was the only one of the Cattle Queen's sons who had children. His son Robert, died last summer in Las Vegas, Nikki lives in Butte, Mona in Missoula, Josephine in Billings and Myrna in Port Orchard, Washington. Two great grandsons in Nevada carry on the Carlston name.

"We were a little scared of her," Mrs. Kolence recalls. "She wasn't the grandmotherly type."

When a son would get in trouble, he'd hightail it into the mountains and hide out until she cooled. The Cattle Queen hit Lincie over the knuckles when he tried to snatch something from the kitchen before a fancy dinner at the delta house one night, and Lincie grabbed a tablecloth on his way out and pulled the settings to the floor.

"It was three weeks before he came down," the granddaughter said.

Those same hills were where the Carlstons had their stills and brewed ". . . some pretty good moon," Malcolm said. A lookout was posted at the mouth of the creek to send up a signal when the 'revenuers' were in the area.

The Elbow Creek ranch, owned now by Gary and Eileen Libsack, changed several times after Lyman sold it in 1946. Mrs. Libsack said the remains of an old still could be seen in the hills until an avalanche covered it with debris.

The decision to go into sheep in a big way in about 1917 led to a double disaster in 1920 when, after a long drought and winter, the bottom fell out of the sheep market and many banks failed.

Mrs. Kolence tells the story of the day the Cattle Queen's bank went broke and closed its doors for good. She had driven a buggy to the Old Pray station and ridden the train into town to deposit several thousand dollars from a livestock sale. The bank door had closed, but the bankers, knowing full well the closure was imminent, saw her coming down the street, opened the door and let her make the deposit.



Bank customers waiting outside closed bank

The Cattle Queen lost \$68,000 in the bank failure, but fought back and managed to hang onto the ranch, the granddaughter said. "She never trusted banks after that."

"The train crews were always fond of Grandma because when she liked someone she was very generous, and always took butter, eggs, meat and whatever produce she had, and probably things she baked for

them," Mrs. Roedl said she heard from her mother, Lyman's wife.

But woe befalls those she didn't like.

The Cattle Queen was late for the train after a day conducting business in Livingston, and was on her way to the station when she saw a man across the street whom she felt had done her dirt. She crossed the street and started telling the man how she felt in no uncertain terms.

After blowing the whistle several times, a crew member finally came and pleaded with her that the train really had to be going.

"They would never leave town when they knew she was there," Mrs. Roedl said.

In early 1931, aware that she was ill, probably with cancer, the Cattle Queen told her friends that she was going away to visit a sister in South Dakota. She died after an

operation in a hospital in St. Joseph, Missouri. Her son, Wilbur, accompanied the body back to Park County to be buried in the old Rosedale Cemetery, south of Livingston.

"An untiring worker, she asked no odds of any person, exercising an independence in life that was true of the women of the Old West," the 1931 obit read.

*Editorial/Obituary, The Livingston Enterprise, Livingston, Montana,
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A Pioneer Passes

A western woman, familiar for forty years in this section of the country-as possessed of a little black handbag and the stride of one systematic in the completion of a program outlined before leaving home-in every sense of the word a western woman, will be seen no more.

Mrs. Margaret Carlston came to Montana in a covered wagon. Her arrival was during the days when men were men, and when, in order to develop that ability for business conduct and legitimate money making, a woman sometimes had to forget those things often referred to as the finer expressions, forget the indoor occupations considered the forte of womankind, and be out in the open, driving cattle, managing farm work, long hard trips to other places to buy, to sell; conferences with buyers and the running of a big ranch.

Perhaps many people were inclined to look upon women of which Mrs. Carlston was true to type, as those who may have failed in the program of doing a woman's work in a woman's way; figuring that she had given over her life to the exacting demands of hard, cruel business; figured perhaps that the language of the olden day with its terms and its usage's had become so fastened upon the lips of those who accomplished things in the true old west, that the so-called finer fitness of things was forgotten.

Those who may have so judged only had a speaking acquaintance with Mrs. M. Carlston. Underneath that cloak of the old west, was a heart that appreciated everything that a lover of home, of life and of humanity revered. Although perhaps not possessing the so oftentimes shammed virtue of expressing confidence and friendship to forget it in a moment, this woman without a question admired that which was noble in man. She spoke his language perhaps, but she used the terms in a "person to person" manner that left no charge of any lack of respect, rather did she leave the impression of a fellow human.

About two weeks ago, Margaret Carlston spoke to the son with whom she made her home on the ranch near Livingston. "I am going away," she said. "I will be back about March twentieth, be sure and be here."

With that simple explanation so typical of her, she left for St. Joseph, Mo., never to return alive. She knew that a malady oftentimes fatal had seized her, but typical of the western frontier spirit, she said nothing of it. She went to a hospital, for what she considered a slight operation, and at a time when it appeared she had recovered sufficiently to leave for home, slumped over in a chair and the strong heart of a westerner, a typical western pioneer, left a body which had been thought rugged, to prove that biblical statement which reads, "No man knoweth the day or the hour."

A woman's work? Yes, Mrs. M. Carlston had done a woman's work and in a woman's way. Monday afternoon at the funeral services, four stalwart sons, Archie, Lincie, Lyman and Wilbur, grieved. They knew of the mother's program, of her toil, her love and her devotion. Testimony in abundance that this pioneer spirit that helped blaze the way to the Montana of today, had a heart of a mother along with the genius for business conduct, that helped make the record of the pioneer one to be remembered and appreciated.

Who would have pictured this hard working woman as one craving society, and yet she was buried Monday afternoon with the beautiful symbolic rites found in the ritual of the Eastern Star lodge of which she had been a member for many years. The work of that order, its precepts and its teachings she knew well. Its final services she appreciated and admired, and no doubt had Mrs. M. Carlston lived a generation or two later, she would have been active in the regular program of the organization.

But Margaret Carlston was born to pioneer. She was assigned to the development of a pioneer's program, to help with the program of living that crowds out the social side. She sacrificed these things that she might help to build the new west. In a woman's way? Yes, and more. In a manner that few women would be constitutionally strong enough to stand. Work? The hardest kind of work, together with doing everything a mother could be called upon to do.

Park County has lost a real character in the death of Margaret Carlston.

