

## ■ Montana Episode

# Caroline Lockhart on the Dryhead 'Happily-Ever-Aftering' on a Montana Cattle Ranch

by John Clayton

**W**hen authors of early Westerns portrayed characters living happily ever after, they typically showed them moving to a cattle ranch. In real life, the authors themselves seldom embarked on such quests. After publishing *The Virginian* in 1902, Owen Wister bought property in Wyoming, but he never lived there full time. Zane Grey, author of *Riders of the Purple Sage* (1912) and other novels, and Clarence Mulford, who wrote the Hopalong Cassidy novels, likewise vacationed in the West but continued to live on the coasts. Even Montana authors such as B. M. Bower and Charlie Russell lived in

town, relying on memories of ranch life and the occasional visit. After all, ranching in the early 1900s involved isolation, financial gambles, and a great deal of hard labor.

One exception to this pattern was Caroline Lockhart. Lockhart wrote bestselling Westerns in which good triumphs over evil: the villains meet brutal ends (bankruptcy, a pit of rattlesnakes), and the heroines—and Lockhart's work is notable for female protagonists—marry and buy ranches. Dramatically, Lockhart herself eventually followed her heroines' lead.<sup>1</sup> After publishing six well-received novels and serving a successful though controversial stint



Park County Archives, Cody, Wyoming

Western writer Caroline Lockhart moved to a cattle ranch in the remote Dryhead region of Montana in 1926 to live out the dream she had portrayed in her novels. In real life, few authors who wrote about ranching ever lived on a ranch full time. In this photograph of her spread, Lockhart helps a man, identified only as Joe, set a fence post.

as editor and publisher of the *Cody Enterprise*, Lockhart decided to pursue “what I wanted all my life.”<sup>2</sup> At age fifty-five, she bought land in the remote Dryhead region east of the Pryor Mountains of Montana with the intention of developing and running her very own cattle ranch.

BORN IN 1871, Lockhart lived for five years on a farm twenty miles south of Topeka, Kansas, and another five years in the nearby town of Burlingame. Her father, Joseph C. Lockhart, a dealer in cattle and land, then moved the clan to Sterling, Illinois, and next to downtown Topeka. Following prep school in Pennsylvania and a brief stage career, the rebellious Caroline found celebrity as a Nellie Bly-style journalist at the *Boston Post* and *Philadelphia Bulletin*. As a “stunt girl,” Lockhart went to the bottom of Boston harbor in a diving bell, jumped out a third-story window into a firemen’s net, and was committed to a Home for Intemperate Women. Though she never married, she rarely lacked a lover after 1897—and oftentimes juggled more than one.<sup>3</sup>

Lockhart called herself a “cowboy girl” and wrote sentences such as “I ought to know, for I was born out West myself, in a place the natives call ‘Topekee,’ Kan.” Telling eastern friends that she missed wide-open spaces, she moved to Cody, Wyoming, in 1904. After publishing six novels, she bought the town newspaper in 1920, using it to crusade against Prohibition, hypocrisy, and a “mid-westernizing” influence that she claimed was crowding out the wonderfully “unique and picturesque” cowboy culture. In late 1925, together with her boyfriend, a former jockey named Lou Ericson, she bought a ranch she named the L Slash Heart in the Dryhead region of Montana. Cut off from civilization by the mountains to the west, the Crow Indian Reservation to the north, and the impenetrable Bighorn Canyon to the east, the Dryhead was a full day’s ride from the nearest train station in Kane, Wyoming. In moving to the L Slash Heart, Lockhart sold the newspaper with a plan to return to writing fiction in a ranch environment of “peace and healthy outdoors life.”<sup>4</sup>

It sounds a little like the happily-ever-aftering of her novels, but it was just one part of her ambition. Influenced by both her father’s success in the cattle business and her



Park County Archives, Cody, Wyoming

Lockhart, a great defender of “unique and picturesque” cowboy culture, called herself a “cowboy girl.” In late 1925, she purchased with her boyfriend Lou Ericson (above) the ranch she named the L Slash Heart.

own romantic views, Lockhart set out on a quest to make the ranch a financial success. In her struggle to profitably re-create a world she had first created in fiction, Lockhart would meet formidable challenges.

ONE OF THE first problems Lockhart encountered was finding workers. She and Lou Ericson managed to hire an old man named Clay Jolly to do chores: chopping wood, milking cows, and the like. They tried hiring neighbors to help with haying, cattle tending, and cabin building, but the labor pool was limited, especially given Ericson’s temper and inexperience. Eventually, they put together crews of drifters, neighbors, and workers recruited in Cody or Lovell. Though new employees kept showing up, few lasted long.

The domestic situation posed additional challenges. The ranch represented the culmination of Lockhart’s dream and was purchased with her inheritance, but she was also the only woman on the place. That made her the cook. One of her literary friends was amazed that this wealthy and ambitious woman had voluntarily entered “the laboring class.”<sup>5</sup> For a few months during that first

are reprinted in Lucille Patrick Hicks, *Caroline Lockhart: Liberated Lady* (Cheyenne, Wyo., 1984).

3. “JC Lockhart’s big ranch,” undated clipping, box 4, Lockhart Collection, second accession, AHC, Laramie. The second accession of Lockhart materials includes scrapbooks collecting much of her journalism.

4. Caroline Lockhart, “She Rides a Broncho,” circa 1895 clipping, likely from the *Boston Post*, box 6, Lockhart Collection, second accession, AHC, Laramie; *Cody (Wyo.) Enterprise*, November 3, 1920; Lockhart diaries, September 21, 1925. “The Cowboy Girl!” was Lockhart’s proposed name for an autobiographical novel, as noted in an undated clipping, box 4, Lockhart Collection, second accession, AHC, Laramie.

5. Paul Eldridge, “Woman on Horseback,” an unpublished mid-1960s eulogy for Lockhart, quoted in Hicks, *Caroline Lockhart*, 570–71. See also Lockhart’s diaries for 1926, partially reprinted in *ibid.*, 237–46.

1. Lockhart was not the *only* early Western author to move to a ranch, merely one of the more flamboyant. Ironically, another author-rancher, Will James, owned a spread just fifteen miles from hers.

2. Caroline Lockhart diaries, November 13, 1925, folder 2, box 4, Lockhart-Furman Collection, MS 30, Buffalo Bill Historical Center, Cody, Wyoming (hereafter BBHC). The original diaries reside in the Caroline Lockhart Collection (hereafter Lockhart Collection), American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie (hereafter AHC). Some

The road into the L Slash Heart, pictured at right in October 2002, curves down to the ranch buildings with a view of the Bighorn Mountains to the east.



Courtesy the author

summer of 1926, Lockhart reveled in her new surroundings. But she soon tired of preparing three meals a day for a crew of hungry men, in part because this drudgery left her no time to write.

Fortunately, Lockhart had money enough to relieve her domestic burdens: she hired a cook, Lou Ketcham. Unfortunately, she was still stuck in a two-room cabin with her new hire, who was quite a chatterbox. Throughout her years on the ranch, Lockhart switched between the unhappy solutions to the dilemma of whether to put up with the hassle and expense of hiring a cook or to sacrifice her time, energy, and literary aspirations to do the work herself. As a result and despite her intentions, Lockhart published just one final novel.

Another problem was that Ericson was her partner in both business and romance. When the romance soured, so did ranch life. By the spring of 1928, Lockhart had become infatuated with one of their hired men, an ex-convict much younger than she then going by the name Bill Poole. The love triangle in such close quarters put Poole and Ericson constantly at each other's throats. Finally, that July Lockhart asked Ericson to leave. Before he finished packing, the two men got into an argument in the bunkhouse. (Poole claimed Ericson was packing up one of Lockhart's saddles; Ericson claimed Poole bragged of his intimacy with the boss-woman and that he would soon own the

ranch.) Ericson ran into the house, grabbed a rifle, and shot Poole. He was ready to fire again when Lockhart dashed up. The bullet had caught Poole's arm, which bled profusely. They all piled into the car and drove through the night to get Poole to the hospital in Billings. For the rest of the month, Lockhart had to finish putting up hay without either of her top hands.<sup>6</sup>

Though she was exceedingly frugal, Lockhart often made mistakes in her calculations, as she did when she overpaid that year's haying crew. Furthermore, at least one of her friends noted that all sorts of males tried to take advantage of Lockhart in business dealings because of her gender.<sup>7</sup> She herself always hired men to run her cattle operation. And for Lockhart, a woman so in love with the cowboy image, the best man for the job was often the best man for her heart as well. When, after a year, Bill Poole too had to leave (jealous, hotheaded, and drunk, he proved a far worse manager than Ericson), she hired as her new cattle boss a longtime Cody-area hand named Dave Good. In a few months, she also seduced the Will Rogers look-alike; this relationship was to be the most stable and long-lasting romance of her life.

It was a partnership but hardly the union of souls portrayed in novels. Lockhart and Good never married; they had little in common except the ranch. Both felt fully invested in its success, yet Lockhart never gave Good any

6. Lockhart diaries, July 7, 1928 (Poole's version); *ibid.*, July 20, 1928 (Ericson's version); "Shooting Affray at Wyoming Writer's Ranch," undated *Lovell (Wyo.) Chronicle* clipping, box 6, Lockhart Collection, second accession, AHC, Laramie, reprinted in Hicks, *Caroline Lockhart*, 261.

7. Merwyn "Pete" Spragg, untitled, undated manuscript (a memoir of his time on the Dryhead), p. 114, in the Lockhart files of the archives of the Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area (BCNRA), Lovell, Wyoming. The L Slash Heart is now part of the BCNRA.

8. Spragg manuscript, p. 133.

9. Caroline Lockhart to Jay Adler, September 9, 1948, folder 2, Jay Adler Papers, SC 1299, Montana Historical Society Research Center, Helena.

10. Caroline Lockhart, *The Man from the Bitter Roots* (Philadelphia, 1915), 321-22.

11. Donald Worster, *River Running West: The Life of John Wesley Powell* (New York, 2001), 340. Regarding other such schemes, see, for example, Lockhart's diaries for June 8, 1933, and the experiences of Lucy Morrison Moore, best documented in Nell R. Morrison's untitled manuscript comprising the majority of a book authored by Bob Edgar and Jack Turnell, *Lady of a Legend* (Cody, Wyo., 1979).

ownership stake. She frequently told him she wanted him to take more responsibility but almost as frequently over-ruled his decisions.

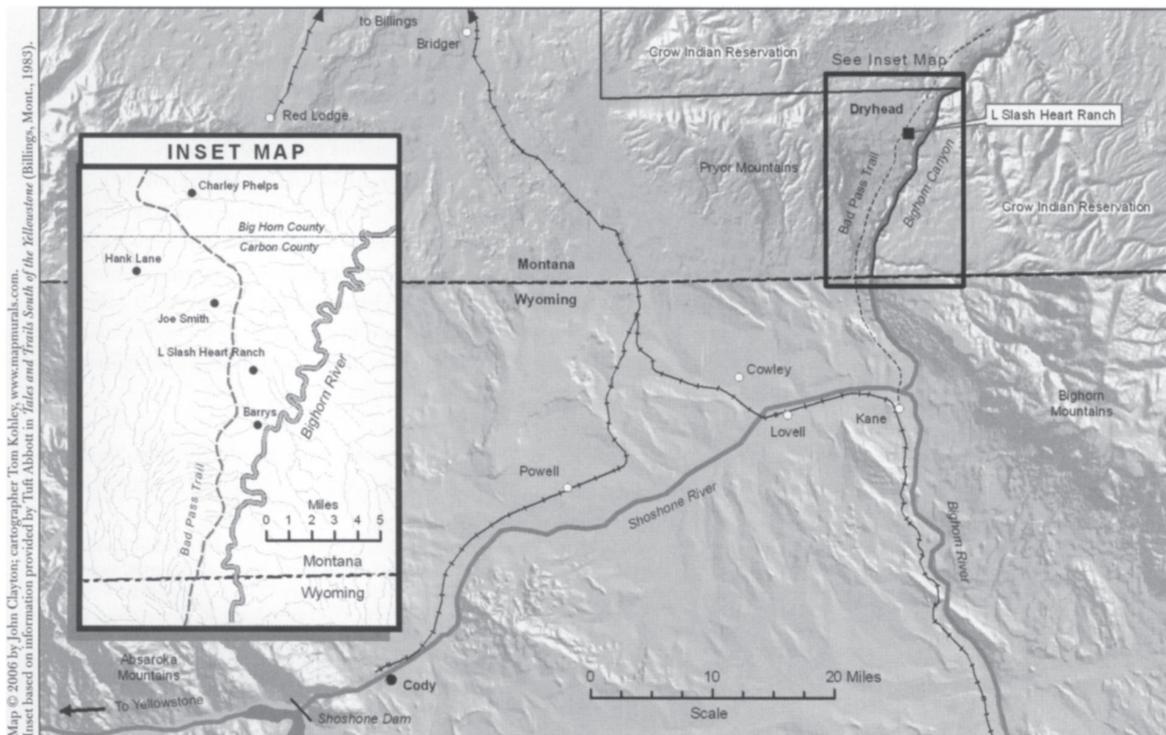
Like many movie cowboys, Good was the strong, silent type. He was stoic, laconic, uneducated but cattle-wise, and endowed with an incredible capacity for hard work. It is no wonder Lockhart loved him: he embodied much of the hero archetype she had set in print. Yet not all who dress the part fit it, and indeed the L Slash Heart was briefly home to several wearers of “fancy inlaid multicolored boots, all shined up so they looked like a freshly painted circus wagon.”<sup>8</sup> Surprisingly, the person who hired these wannabes was not Lockhart, but Good, the hardened cowboy. In other words, in this case at least, the cowboy was as vulnerable as the naïve novelist to misinterpreting the trappings of the cowboy mythology.

Outsiders have long believed that despite Lockhart’s money, it was Good’s native talents that kept the L Slash Heart afloat. On the other hand, though effective with animals, Good lacked business sense and sometimes mistreated employees. His judgment and skill may not have been any better than hers.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, anybody’s managerial skills might have been trumped by the declining prices and poor weather of the 1930s. These difficulties led to a second type of problems.

**R**ELATIONS with government proved problematic for Lockhart throughout her time on the Dryhead. Valorizing the hero of her 1915 novel *The Man from the*

*Bitter Roots*, Lockhart wrote, “Like many people in the West, Bruce had come to have a feeling for some of the departments of the government . . . that was as strong as a personal enmity.” The government Bruce hated “spent millions on useless dams, pumping plants, and reservoirs” and employed “hordes of ‘foresters’ or ‘timber inspectors’ and inspectors inspecting the inspectors.”<sup>10</sup> These political diatribes clearly belong to the author herself, a keen social Darwinist who, as she aged, became increasingly disgusted with the government’s support of people she called deadbeats and chiselers.

Despite Lockhart’s contempt for those who depended on government largesse, she herself took advantage of it when it suited her. Most of the arid and inaccessible Dryhead had never been homesteaded even by 1926, so as Lockhart was buying the L Slash Heart, she filed an application to homestead an adjacent parcel of unclaimed land. By listing Ericson as the ranch’s official buyer, Lockhart was able to pose as a property-less homesteader. She later told hired hand Clay Jolly and cook Lou Ketcham that if they would file on adjacent properties, she would purchase their land once they proved up. This was not the way the Homestead Act worked in literary mythology (or, for that matter, in political mythology). It had been designed to help poor families establish farms and ranches. But in real life, homesteading laws had always been “poorly drawn, easily subverted, and hopelessly incongruous,” and Lockhart had known plenty of people who engaged in similar schemes.<sup>11</sup> It seems that fraudulent homesteading was



Map © 2000 by John Clayton; cartographer Tom Kohley, www.mapmurals.com. Inset based on information provided by Tuft Abbott in *Tales and Trails South of the Yellowstone* (Billings, Mont., 1983).

seen as a victimless game, something like cheating on one's income taxes today.

Tax avoidance was another problem Lockhart faced, and it almost ruined her idyll. A week after Ericson bought the main ranch from James Wasson in November 1925, they had to hastily change their sale agreement. Lockhart had put up \$500 cash, with another \$1,750 to come after Wasson proved up on the land that he had been homesteading. Then Wasson realized that the government would not give him a patent for the land if he had already sold it. At this point, the ranch had been inhabited for almost twenty-five years—seventeen of them by Wasson, but he had never officially owned it. Why? Probably because once he did, he'd have to pay property taxes on it.<sup>12</sup> The documents were changed to read that Ericson was leasing the outfit for \$500; they made a handshake agreement for the subsequent sale.<sup>13</sup>

An even more serious threat was the state of the ranching economy. Almost immediately after buying the ranch, Lockhart ran into financial difficulties caused by low prices, high costs, overgrazed range, cold winters, hot summers, and plagues of grasshoppers. Between 1925 and 1932, she burned through her inheritance and maxed out loans at Cody banks. By 1933, she was laying off employees and worrying that she would have to sell her cattle. Then, finally, she secured a loan from "the Regional Bank—whatever that is—at Helena," a regional branch of the Federal Reserve Bank.<sup>14</sup> Though Lockhart abhorred Franklin Roosevelt and her fiction portrayed bankers as local actors, Roosevelt's federal bank saved her dream.

Lockhart's next run-in with the government occurred when she and her employees sought to prove up on their homesteads, an action that drew protest from the neighbors and led to a protracted battle with the General Land Office. In an October 1933 hearing, various neighbors offered plenty of damning testimony, charging that Lockhart, Ketcham, and Jolly never actually lived at their homesteads but at the comfortable ranch house; improve-

ments on the homestead properties had been made by ranch crews rather than the homesteaders; the homesteads were fenced with Lockhart's main lands and grazed by her cattle; Lockhart had promised to buy Ketcham's land; and that Ericson had "purchased" the main ranch as a Lockhart-manipulated stooge, as proven by the fact that Lockhart bought it from him just a few months later. All these acts were illegal.

In rebuttal, Lockhart lied. "My job is writing books and the last thing I had in mind when I came into the Dryhead was filing on land or engaging in the cattle business."<sup>15</sup> She claimed that Ericson was just her driver not her boyfriend; she loaned him money to buy a ranch and had to take ownership when he couldn't repay it. She admitted that now that the ranch was proving so unprofitable, she was having regrets about everything.

It is not clear if that regret was genuine. It's one thing to regret making a loan to your driver. It's another to regret your grand plan to live happily ever after. Nevertheless, Lockhart dug in deeper.

Her financial struggles taught her that only the biggest ranches would survive, so she sought to acquire homesteads and other parcels to expand the L Slash Heart. When the land commissioner ruled against her, she filed appeals, lining up political support from influential people she had known as a newspaper publisher until a high-ranking General Land Office official granted the patents to two of the homesteads.<sup>16</sup>

Though Lockhart prided herself on her novels' authenticity, she had never depicted anyone homesteading this way. This departure from the mythic ideal did not seem to trouble her. She was too caught up in her quest to become a cattle queen. Her behavior did, however, trouble her neighbors. They heard her boast of a plan to dominate the Dryhead. They believed it represented an all-or-nothing struggle for their future.

**N**EIGHBORS proved perhaps the biggest thorn in Lockhart's side. Apparently, Lockhart had hoped



Detail, Park County Archives, Cody, Wyoming

When Lockhart's romance with Ericson ended, so did their partnership. He was replaced in her affections and ranch management first by Bill Poole, then by Dave Good, pictured above. Lockhart and Good struggled through the 1930s to make the ranch economically viable.

12. Lockhart diaries, November 20, 1925. See also "Cultural Landscapes Inventory" and miscellaneous other documents collected in the "Lockhart Research Notebook," BCNRA, Lovell.

13. Lockhart diaries, November 20, 1925. See also the untranscribed Rufus Snell oral history, February 22, 2000, tape 2, side B, BCNRA, Lovell, which discusses Wasson's motivation in hinting that many Dryheaders did the same thing.

14. Lockhart diaries, March 23, 1933.

15. Quoted in Mary Shivers Culpin, "Caroline Lockhart Ranch: Big-horn Canyon National Recreation Area," Regional Historic Preservation Team report, Rocky Mountain Regional Office, National Park Service, October 1981, p. 19. Lockhart's diaries clearly show that these were in fact the first things on her mind. All the hearing testimony is in folder 4, box 2, Lockhart-Furman Collection, BBHC, Cody.

16. Hicks, *Caroline Lockhart*, 343, 670. Warned that Jolly would lose his homestead case, Lockhart had him transfer the claim to another friend of hers.



Park County Archives, Cody, Wyoming

Like the hero of her 1915 novel *The Man from the Bitter Roots*, Lockhart disliked government. She discovered, however, that unlike their fictional counterparts, real-world ranchers had to maintain complex and increasingly dependent relationships with government agencies. Neighbors proved another thorn in Lockhart's side, with competition for the Dryhead's sparse resources sparking vandalism, rustling, and bitterness. Here she is visiting Tuff, Jennie, and young Pistol Abbott at their homestead.

that by leaving Cody she would free herself of the petty squabbles that had marred her life there. As it turned out, these fights resulted less from Codyites' small-mindedness or Lockhart's position as newspaper publisher than from her own character.

On the Dryhead, Lockhart's disagreements were exacerbated by competition for resources. Most of the area's ranchers grazed their cattle on the surrounding unfenced government land. When she fenced some of it off, Lockhart threatened their livelihoods, just as more homesteaders moving to the Dryhead threatened Lockhart's ranch. In the long run, no individual homestead plots would survive, but the question remained which successful survivors would acquire their broken neighbors.

Tensions ran high. Lockhart's chief complaint during her first ten to fifteen years on the ranch was about people cutting her fences. Since no culprit ever emerged, we have to guess at motives. Some fence cutting was justified: when Lockhart first arrived she fenced across the county road. These illegal fences were legally cut—and the associated resentments may have led to the later vandalism.

Lockhart's gender may have also played a role in her problems. For example, it appears that fence cutting and other depredations increased during the time Bill Poole spent in the hospital; when the confrontational Poole returned, lawbreaking waned. Poole was an eye-for-an-eye type of guy: suspecting one neighbor had butchered a Lockhart calf, he butchered one of theirs. Suspecting another of butchering a Lockhart steer, he stole three of the man's chickens. But Lockhart was disappointed in other men after Poole left the ranch. To her, even Dave Good—though she admired his courage in the face of

physical challenges—lacked the courage to stand against neighbors on principle.

It's one of frontier fiction's chief fascinations: with law enforcement so remote as to be nonexistent, how does an individual defend property and right injustice? In fiction, heroes meet this profound test of character, but on the Dryhead Lockhart found no man who would stand up for her—and though she stood up for herself, as a woman she was not taken seriously. She tried to take matters into her own hands, including an attempt to contaminate a neighbor's spring, but increasingly she felt obliged to turn to professional law enforcement, which also let her down.

In 1928, Lockhart found cattle belonging to a neighbor named Joe Smith in her pastures. The gate was closed; they must have been put there illegally. She shooed them out. The next day her fence was cut. She never managed to have Smith prosecuted. In 1931, she believed her neighbor Hank Lane was cutting fences, but despite her ongoing belief that the U.S. Forest Service was about to prosecute him, it never did. Lane was arrested for rustling in 1937 but apparently never convicted. Once or twice during those years Lockhart convinced a deputy sheriff or brand inspector to come all the way out to the Dryhead to investigate a situation; the trail was always too cold.

In 1933, Lockhart wrote to Joe LeFors, who had gained fame for his detecting in the Tom Horn case, helping Wyoming cattle ranchers beat back rustlers. When LeFors responded by basically asking how much money she could pay, Lockhart was horrified. This was about injustice! Where was the heroism? She did eventually pay LeFors to visit, and his testimony—he had “never in all my experience seen so many unprincipled, conscienceless

scoundrels congregated in one small community”—may have helped win her homestead case, but he did nothing to curb the Dryhead’s lawlessness.<sup>17</sup>

Attorneys were not much help either. Lockhart tried suing Joe Smith over a water dispute, ex-boyfriend O. B. Mann over their failed agreement about winter range, and another neighbor named Carl Abarr for continually putting his sheep and cattle on her pastures. Each action required a lengthy trip to a hearing in Red Lodge or Bridger—often more than one if there was a postponement—and she had trouble finding friendly witnesses. None of these lawsuits ever brought her satisfaction.

In the 1930s, peace never came to the Dryhead. It arrived only with the war: during the early 1940s, urban job opportunities prompted many Dryheaders to sell off their homesteads. Several of those who departed were Lockhart’s bitterest enemies, and the increased availability of land lessened the competition among the people who remained.

**B**Y THE 1940s, Lockhart herself was over seventy years old. Her burning ambition had been at least partially sated by press reports that described how her cattle topped various markets. Her cattle bringing a sale’s highest price, Lockhart felt, proved her success as a rancher.<sup>18</sup> She had suffered a stroke and was losing her eyesight. Her manager, Good, was beat up by years of cowboying and convinced (incorrectly) that

17. LeFors is quoted in Necah Stewart Furman, *Caroline Lockhart: Her Life and Legacy* (Seattle, 1994), 154. Another possibility why law enforcement continually let Lockhart down is that *she*, rather than the neighbors, may have been the primary lawbreaker. Biographer Lucille Hicks finds numerous rumors of Lockhart’s illegal behavior.

18. Various clippings, mostly unattributed and undated, from Lockhart’s scrapbooks, box 6, Lockhart Collection, second accession, AHC, Laramie.

19. Lockhart diaries, January 30, 1942.

20. Lockhart diaries, November 27, 1934.

21. We’ll keep the dull anticlimax in the note: in 1950, at age seventy-nine, the increasingly feeble Lockhart sold the ranch. She and Good (who outlived her by two years) returned to Cody, where she lived in relative obscurity until her death in 1962.

he was about to die of stomach cancer. Her choreboy, Ed Pickering, was equally old and feeble. Gradually, they reduced the ranch operations, cutting down on their cattle and horses, letting range conditions deteriorate. Lockhart started to think seriously about selling.

“I could be comfortable, well-dressed, and look far younger than my years if I could care for myself properly,”

she told her diary in 1942. But where would she go? She had spent her life moving to new adventures, never retreating from them. In Boston, Philadelphia, and Cody, she had been discontented—and each time she moved on to a place that promised more contentment. She had pursued a western ideal, a cowboy ideal. Perhaps it was unattainable, shaped more by dime novels than actual experiences, but it was the driving force of her existence. In her work, her life, and her passions, she always strove to be a cowboy girl. Now, settled on the Dryhead—a spot as close to the mythos of the Old West as anyone in the 1940s would ever find—she wondered in the same diary entry: “Would I ever be contented as here with nothing to do and my eyesight so poor?”<sup>19</sup>

Lockhart had arrived at a question so many people face: once you are ready to retire, how do you live happily ever after? All those years on the

ranch had been a struggle—indeed, in her more ambitious moments, she wanted to write another novel based on her life there, portraying herself as valiantly overcoming obstacles.<sup>20</sup> Yet the ranch was also the landscape she loved. It nurtured the relationship she had with Dave Good. It was home to the cattle and horses that represented the stuff of those powerful myths.

She stayed on the ranch another eight years.<sup>21</sup> *M*

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Kurt Clayton, photographer, courtesy the author

In the 1940s, the war brought peace to the Dryhead as job opportunities lured many Dryheaders away. Lockhart and Good stayed on, enjoying a measure of success that left Lockhart wondering, “Would I ever be as contented as here . . .?” The L Slash Heart brand appears on the chimney of the main ranch building in this photograph taken in May 2005.