

# Women Pioneers: Janet Thony

By Sherry Stewart



Our women pioneers come in all shapes and sizes and, of necessity, must possess a wide range of skills and abilities to meet the hardships of creating a home in the wilderness.

This month, as part of our series on Women Pioneers, we will see that the spirit of creativity, which includes growing most of one's own food and the willingness to build a home out of what is at hand, is not the exclusive property of the early settlers.

I drove out Sharpe Lake way the other day to visit Janet Thony. Janet is a Cattlebelle, a fellow member of the BC Farm Women's Network, and has just been elected as Director to the South Cariboo Cattlemen's Association by the Green Lake-North Bonaparte Stockmen's Association. She lives alone, and yet manages to run a 60 head cow-calf operation, which means 100 head or more through the winter as she backgrounds her own calves.

Yes, she drives a truck, has electricity, indoor plumbing, and a few other modern amenities. But beyond that she lives as our pioneer forbearers lived, finishing her home, other than the framework of the house, out of whatever old lumber was at hand. She spends no more than \$50 a month at the grocery store, as she grows and makes most of her food herself. That's at an elevation of 3,300 feet.

Fourteen years ago, Janet purchased Robbie Cleveland's old homestead, 310 deeded acres plus range permit on the Bonaparte River. She fell in love with it the minute she set foot on the land. It didn't seem to matter that most of the old log buildings were either caved in or falling down in disrepair. She told me that she stepped out of the realtor's car onto the land and KNEW it was home. Where others

would have seen an old ranch, well past it's prime, with huge work ahead just cleaning up the fallen down buildings, Janet saw the beauty of the land and... possibilities.

Fourteen years later Janet can still say, "I love living where I am. The river runs right by my door. I've kept this place as rustic and historical looking as I can. Everything is wood and rail and old log barns.

"For the first four years I renovated and lived in what was the original homestead log cabin. That's where Robbie Cleveland once lived. Approximately six years later I built the new house.

"Everything in my house is built from salvaged lumber: window and door liners and casings, shelving, cupboards and cabinets, dining room table, hutch, desks, headboard, and so on."

I asked Janet what led her to where she is now, not only her lifestyle as a lady rancher, but also the way she grows and prepares her food.

"My dad was a gypsy at heart," she says.



Janet's grandparents, Lorne and Dorothy Cutler were an inspiration



Janet Thony finished her house herself, using salvaged lumber from the ranch

"We moved twenty five times in the eighteen years that I lived with my parents. I came into adulthood with a mindset where I investigate everything. I believe that you should question absolutely everything. As a young woman, I had already investigated food, was reading Adel Davis, and was known as the 'granola cruncher' in my group of friends.

"My agricultural bent, I believe, comes from my genetics. My paternal ancestors were Empire Loyalists who settled in Ontario in the 1750s and lived on the same family farm until the 1950s.

"At one point," she told me, "we went to live with my grandparents on a 10-acre farm on Vancouver Island. My father was not interested in farming, but my grandfather, though he was a lawyer by profession, was a devoted gardener by heart. I idolized him, and so I followed him around like a little duck, and just sort of sopped up everything that he had to give. It must be at least partly genetic, because even at the age of two years old all I wanted to do was be with the cows.

"We did small husbandry there. I milked Jersey cows before I went to school, we raised chickens and sold eggs, we sold cream, and we raised every domestic animal known to man. And we put up a great big huge garden. But what was most

instrumental in my love for the land and growing things was my grandfather.

“My grandfather did the butchering and caring for the animals, as well as the gardening. It was my grandmother that I watched make pies and do the canning and pluck a chicken.

“My grandmother helped reinforce my love of nature. She gave me a treasured poem by Gurney, which ends, ‘I am nearer God’s heart in the garden, than anywhere else on earth.’ It has been framed for 30 years and hangs on my bedroom wall.

“There is something that never fails to absolutely astound me,” Janet says with a smile. “I can hold on the tip of my finger a seed so tiny that you can barely see it. And then I see the end result... I have never lost the awe that I feel when that happens. Right now, as I sit in my little office by my kitchen, there is not a flat surface that is not covered with a seed tray and a mix of flowers and vegetable bedding plants. Just think, you can stick that little flat pointy or round speck in the ground, and then you are eating it!”

I asked Janet to elaborate on the fact that she never spends more than \$50 a month at the grocery store. She lives alone, but often has grandchildren visiting her, and weekends bring family members and even seasonal ranch crews to her table. How does she do it?

“I’ve always had a frugal streak,” Janet told me, “and to be able to store or can or freeze vegetables and eat on them all winter thrills me. I read and read and taught myself how to garden. Every year I add more plant varieties to grow. Some of them are heritage ones. This year one of my additions is corn salad, and another is celery. I can’t wait to see how they turn out!

“So it’s a frugal nature

combined with a love for growing things that allows me to save money and sit down to a table where I have produced all the food on the table myself. I go to the store for staples like coffee, salt, black strap molasses, flour, baking powder, baking soda, nuts, spices and raisins.

I buy milk and butter because I haven’t the time to milk and churn, but I make my own yogurt.

“I buy organic rolled grains at health food stores and make my own crackers, granolas, porridge mixes, breads, and even dog biscuits. I buy most of my fruit from backyard growers in Kamloops. I’ve got six fruit trees growing here, and I ate my own apples last year.” But so did a local bear, which ruined her crabapple tree. Her trees are now in a homemade cage.

At 57, with three grown children and



Janet’s house today is beautifully finished, but she still has a pile of old lumber on the porch ready for future projects

seven grandchildren, Janet wouldn’t be anywhere else on earth.

“My kids all talk to me regularly about stopping, and they all have wonderful ideas about what I *should* be doing,” Janet says. “I have seriously tried to envision leaving here, or any combination of ideas, such as selling the herd and staying here or moving someplace else, and honest to God, I can’t come up with anything that I want to do except what I am doing!

“I have other passions in my life that I enjoy besides ranching, but I can do them here. I struggle with the arthritis and the diminishing energy levels, but, no, I can’t leave yet. I feel *so* lucky that I *love* what I do, because I know enough people who are not happy with what they have to spend their day doing.

“You make your own happiness,” she says, “regardless of what you are doing. It’s your perception of what you are doing that determines whether or not you’re happy.

“And,” she adds, “if I can do this, anyone can do this.”



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