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Cowboys Used to Only Tend to Cattle, but Today's Deal With the Oil and Gas Industry

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Editor's note: This is the final story in a three-day series on New Mexico's working cowboys, some of whom are women.

LOVING— Lisa Ogden stands in a corral south of Carlsbad and shakes her head. The morning sun is frying the mesquite-covered ranchland around her. On the ground in front of her lies an aborted calf.

The mother cow was supposed to be calving in October, so the fetus, tiny and hairless, is about three months premature.

"I'm sad and I'm angry," Ogden says.

Ogden is sure the mother aborted because she had been ingesting contaminated water that had worked its way to the surface of Ogden's ranch from a breach in an oil pipeline.

"This didn't need to happen," Ogden says, unable to keep her voice from cracking. "It's horrible."

Gaining composure, she says, "You grieve, but this is a business."

Once upon a time, a New Mexico rancher's business was only about running cattle and watching the weather. Today, a rancher faces myriad challenges. There are still predators such as coyotes, mountain lions and bobcats to deal with. And all sorts of endangered species such as Mexican spotted owls and ridge-nosed rattlesnakes must be respected.

Deep in Eddy County, cattle growers need to pay attention to oil and gas wells.

It isn't unusual, says Ogden, for ranchers in the southeast (or northwest) corner of the state to see a surveyor in their pasture driving a stake into the ground without permission.

It doesn't matter if the land is state, federal or private, there are mineral rights below the surface that the rancher might not own, and no permission is needed to go after those minerals.

Ogden has had pump jacks on her property since the 1960s. She deals with them as best she can, but it isn't easy: She says she has lost four cows this summer to contamination.

Though she has been compensated, Ogden says other ranchers have trouble working with oil and gas people, feeling they aren't remunerated enough when ranchland is torn up or livestock dies.

That's why Ogden is helping put her shoulder to a proposed Surface Owners' Protection Act. It's a bill that was introduced last year to the Legislature, but didn't get out of a final committee.

If it makes it this year, Ogden reckons, the bill will help level the playing field, particularly in terms of giving proper notification and minimizing the disturbance.

"It'll give us surface owners a few more rights," she says.

"I expect some lively discussions," says Bob Gallagher, president of the New Mexico Oil and Gas Association.

In fact, Gallagher says his association is presenting its own bill.

"I don't know what Ms. Ogden says about us, but we don't believe we're the bad guys. We're supporting a bill that gives up many things."

The Forehand Ranch, which Ogden oversees, is a 17-mile-long, mostly flat slice of jackrabbits, snakewood and creosote bushes. It's a quiet, nearly treeless place, beautiful in its shimmering starkness.

But like a lot of ranches, looks are deceiving.

Says Ogden: "You can no longer be on your little piece of heaven and keep your head in the sand."

In other words, cowboying has changed.

"The job isn't anymore about just being a good horseman or having cow sense or knowing how to care for the land," says Caren Cowan, who directs the New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association. "You've got to know what's going on at a variety of levels. You've got to be involved in all regulations and legislative pressures."

In other words, you've got to be a lot tougher.

Time to 'cowboy up'

Toughness is a way of life in the low-desert country of New Mexico. Well-worn as it may be, the phrase "cowboy up" means something to Ogden. You have to be strong to ranch here. At 51, Ogden is a hard twist, as Westerners like to say. Tanned and wiry, she hoists a bale of hay for her cows as if it were a hatbox.

"A good hand," allows her father, Jim Ogden, still tenacious at 85.

"She won't tell me to do anything that she wouldn't do," says Andrew Forehand, 18, a cousin who does day work for Lisa Ogden. That work includes grubbing mesquite and shoveling out ditches.

Finding happiness

Women ranchers are nothing new in New Mexico. Some well-known ones, like Gretchen Sammis and Linda Davis and the late Fern Sawyer, occupy niches in the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame in Fort Worth.

Ogden may be headed there someday. As president-elect of the New Mexico Cattle Growers' Association, she is the first woman to lead that organization.

Ogden is less about being a ground-breaking female than she is about being a tireless worker who just happens to be female.

There never was a you-can't-be-a-cowboy-because-you're-a-girl voice echoing in Ogden's head.

Like all ranch kids, she rode, branded and did chores. "She's been a'whippin' and a'spurrin' all her life," her father says.

As a girl, she applied oil to the brands on calves, once used to heal the marks. "I graduated from that to vaccinating, then to castrating, then to earmarking."

Along the way, she had good role models, besides her father.

"A lot of independent women in my family," she says.

Her grandmother, Masie Forehand, taught Ogden that the only limitations she had were ones she put on her herself. Widowed in her 50s, Forehand took over the family ranch and battled a severe mid-'50s drought. The drought won. Desperate, she sold her cows and went into town to look for a job.

"What woman is going to go out and get hired when she's 55?" asks Ogden. "My grandmother did. She was hired as a bank teller and did that job 10 years."

Holding that memory, Lisa Ogden went off to college and in a few years became one of the first female athletic trainers on the college level. She served Colorado State University as head women's trainer, also assisting male athletes, for three years.

Finally, one day in 1981, Ogden decided she'd had enough. "I got tired of people talking back to me." Animals, she remembered, didn't talk back.

She telephoned her father.

"Can I come home and work on the ranch?"

"Sure," Jim Ogden said, "but we can't pay you anywhere near what Colorado State pays you."

That's OK, she said. "I just want to be happy."

Breaking barriers

Returning to Eddy County, she watched and listened and realized how much she missed this way of life. Soon she became manager of the ranch, also assisting her brother Craig on her family's farm. Both properties have been in the same family for several generations.

In time she fell in love with Jim Stell, from a nearby ranch. The two married and her husband worked alongside her, sharing her dream. Stell, who had flown jets in the service, had his own dream: He wanted to be a commercial pilot. He followed that course and after a while the marriage ended.

The couple produced a son, Cody, now 12, and he works alongside his mother. Like his mom, Cody looks people in the eye and has a handshake as firm as a fortress.

When Cody's Little League team needed a coach, Ogden jumped in, unbothered by what others might think.

Trouble is, she can bother others. When a rancher said he'd like to "neighbor" with the Ogdens, or share some of the branding or roundup labor, Jim Ogden said fine, he'd come by with his daughter. Uh, the man said, I'd prefer you come alone.

Twenty-five years running the ranch has told Lisa Ogden that she tends to work better with men than women. "Men are more blunt, more to the point."

This fact was underscored when she deftly led a public discussion at the New Mexico State University in Carlsbad campus this summer on the newer version of the Surface Owners' Protection Act. Most of the 80 or so people in attendance were males, some from the oil and gas industry.

"There are bad ranchers and there are bad oil and gas companies," Rand French of Marbob Energy in Artesia told the group.

Ogden nodded. Though she didn't have to say it, she knew: She's a good rancher who wants to be better.

It's a business, after all. And a way of life.