

A collection of short stories from the ranch in western South Dakota.

Miracles in the Mundane

By Laura Hicks

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MIRACLES IN THE MUNDANE



A collection of short stories
from the ranch in western South Dakota

LAURA HICKS

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The Truth About the Unique Life of a Rancher

Ranching is a tough lifestyle to explain without walking a mile in our boots. So slip on my extra set of Bogs and take a walk with me, please. Make sure you pull your hat down tight.

It's 2 a.m. and the wind is howling as the snow swirls around the edge of the barn. You have on various layers of clothes, but the cold still seems to camp out in your bones! A shower or clean hair seems like a distant memory at this point.

There is a thick layer of dried lamb slime on your coat and your gloves are crunchy from it. Trust me, you're oblivious to it. There is work that needs to be done and no time to think about it anyway.

It feels like a lifetime since you've had a full night's sleep; yet it's only been three weeks, but who's counting?

You move as quietly as possible through the barn, speaking softly as you go. You try to reassure the girls it's just you again as you make the hourly check for new babies. One has dropped twins in the back corner and is talking to them as she gently licks them off. You've seen it countless times and even in this tired stupor you pause for a minute to thank the good Lord above for strong, healthy babies and a good mama.

As you step closer to open the nearest empty pen the ewe picks her head up and is hyper-aware of your every movement. She's worked hard for these babies and is on high alert even with those she knows and trusts.

You reach in and grab the back leg of each baby. Then slide the lambs along the ground so Mama will follow as calmly as possible into the pen.

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This time it worked. The next time might take more convincing for her. Either way, she will spend time alone with her babies. If the weather was better she'd be free to do this out in the pasture without interference. For their safety in this weather, we're all camped out in the barn together.

You straw down a few more pens while you have a few minutes. As you finish up you hear the wind pick up outside and step out to find it is darned near a blizzard by now.

So trudging through the snow and wind you climb the hill behind the barn to check on the older pairs. You're praying they're all still safely tucked behind the windbreak. The girls startle a bit at your flashlight so they quickly call to their babies.

One lamb's not been growing as well as his brother so you've been giving him a little extra help with some milk replacer. Somehow he got through the fence and is out in the wind and brutal cold. It's not good!

You scoop him up quickly and stuff him down in your coat hoping to give him what little warmth you have left. As you hustle back to the barn with him you say another little prayer. There is no chance you're thinking about the "bottom line" right now. Your time, heart, and energy are invested in this baby.

You've been entrusted to steward these animals and you'll go down swinging for each one of them! Not because of any kind of payout, you can't get paid enough for this life!

Your teeth are chattering as you get him into the house and your homemade warming box. In other words, a cardboard box and your

hairdryer. Grabbing what you assume is an old towel you set to work trying to rub life back into this baby.

Tonight, this one doesn't make it. You sit slumped on the bathroom floor as that sick feeling fills your stomach. The one where you wonder what you could have done differently.

You feel because you don't have a choice, but you also pick yourself up and move forward because of the same reason! Others need your attention. You grab a hot cup of tea to try to warm up as much as possible. You seize these moments when you can, as the wind is still howling, the snow is blowing, and work is still calling. So, out the door, we go again! Are you coming?

This is simply an hour in the life of a rancher during lambing season. There are almost too many countless hours, days, and seasons of stewarding animals to the best of our ability to count. But each one does count. Each hour, day, and season is one more living a life you know you've been called to do. It's a part of who you are and what you were made to do.

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The Jones Place

Think back. Do you remember what it felt like to see the world through the eyes of a child? The miracles in the mundane? The wonder of the world around you?

I'm so grateful I had the privilege to grow up in an era free of so much technology. A time when mom kicked us out the door to play and experience our world. Free to learn and grow and take in God's creation daily. Also, growing up as a veterinarian and rancher's daughter didn't hurt! I came by my love of animals naturally you could say.

When I was a young kid, my dad leased a 35,000-acre ranch way off the beaten path in southeast Montana. It still holds some of the fondest memories for me ALL these years later.

In a veterinarian practice, summers are often the slower season. So, Dad would pack us up and head to the ranch to spend the summers.

I was young so my memories may differ from my older siblings and parents but again seeing the world with childlike faith is still fun.

Our summer house was something I'm sure every mother dreamed of "vacationing" in with her 5 children. We lived 60 miles from the nearest small town and a good portion of that was down a two-track dirt road.

At the end of that dusty trail was a beautiful, two-room, old log house that had been covered with chicken wire and stucco. Oh, it also had no electricity or running water to make it even more dreamy for my mother! As you first walked into the kitchen/living room (hey we were open concept before it was cool) it was dark and a bit smelly from the skunks

that took up residence under the house over the winter. The floor was old wood planks that accumulated so much dust from the last time we'd been there that you could draw all sorts of artwork on the floor in it.

The old handmade drapes my mom had hung years previously would be pulled open to let in the natural light as we got to work cleaning out the winter wear on our palace.

Cobwebs filled the nooks and crannies and needed to be swept away. The wood stove was cleaned out before we left the previous fall but still needed a good washdown before food was going to be cooked on it again.

The mattresses of the two beds in the one bedroom were taken outside to beat the dust out and air out before making them up before night. It was always a bit like a puzzle going to bed trying to get 4 girls to fit in one double bed somewhat comfortably. My mom, dad, and little brother shared the bed next to us.

Kerosene lamps dotted the countertops and tiny table. The smell still lingers in my nose a bit. We carried water in for Mom from the windmill just 30 or so yards from the house every time the wind blew, which was daily in MT.

There was an outhouse conveniently located less than 50 yards from the door of the house. It was precariously perched at the top of a cut bank with about a 20-foot drop if you missed your mark in the middle of the night and overshot the door of the outhouse. Someone, in years past, had put an old box spring and mattress at the bottom of the bank. You know, just in case you needed a soft spot to land! :-)

The whole house was about 24' x 16'. To say seven of us were all close to each other in there would be an understatement! But, we spent so little time in the house over the summer anyway.

Horseback. That is where we spent our summer days. Saddling up at daylight to ride fences, check water, put salt and mineral out, and check herd health. I'm almost 50 years old as I type this and my mind goes back to those days with more joy than I can explain.

I'm sure it wasn't the same for my mom dealing with a house like that, but for us kids, it was the ultimate way to spend the summer.

You're going to hear me say this over and over again in this book. Ranch kids are raised differently.

One example that I can still vividly remember as a six or seven-year-old girl was my dad teaching my older sisters what to do if they got struck by a rattlesnake. We were so far removed from anywhere especially when out on horseback that there was no time to waste when dealing with any form of injury.

Now we know different ways to do that, but back in the day, you carried a razor blade in your boot. We were instructed that if struck, to quickly cut it open and suck the venom out and then get back to the house as fast as possible. That is something that sticks in a six-year-old's mind, not to mention not being trusted with a razor blade when your older siblings are, chaps your hide just a little!!

My older, teenage sisters were also trusted to go a little further out by themselves while we younger ones had to stick closer to the place or with my dad.

Somehow or another my slightly older sister and I decided the rattlesnakes only lived in the bottom of draws (canyons). Looking back we may have just used that as an excuse but it gave us every opportunity to run through the bottom of draws because we were trying to outrun rattlesnakes.

I was reminiscing with my dad recently about the Jones place. Telling him my memories about my grand steed, Butch. He was a magnificent horse! Bay with a white star and snip on his face. Sixteen hands tall and fast as the wind.

My dad gently corrected me as my 6-year-old brain had seen things from a different perspective. To my shock, and a little bit of horror, Butch was more like 14 hands tall. I was in disbelief. I remember trying to shimmy up that tall bay only to have to find a fence or my dad to help me on because he was SO tall! Hmm, maybe that had something to do with my height more than his!

But he was as fast as the wind, right? Well, maybe not. But he was honest and safe and the best friend a little girl could ever ask for. You cannot beat that in a horse!

Butch and I and my sisters spent a lot of miles together covering that wide-open sagebrush country. Stories from the past and dreams for days ahead laced the dusty air.

The stories we'd heard were handed down through the cowboy culture. Ones about summers gone by and horses they'd all been blessed to ride. Stories my teenage sisters tried to share quietly about boys they'd met at Rodeo Bible Camps through the years that happened to "find" their way to little sister ears too!

One of my least favorite stories got told for the first time in the cool, evening air sitting outside the small cabin. My older sisters decided that the best thing to tell little kids living in a dusty old house was a ghost story about said house! It was about a sheep herder that used to live there way back in the day.

There are a couple of versions of the story but the one I remember most is his wife went crazy, killed him, and placed his body under the house through the trap door in the floor in the kitchen.

Then my sisters would rattle the ring handle on the trap door in the evenings when the glow of the kerosene lamp was fading and scare the heck out of us littles! You know, that sibling love thing right?

Another memory that's lingered with me is when the family of skunks set up camp under our house. They must have decided the chicken wire and stucco provided the perfect combination of cool and dark. It took us forever to evict those rotten buggers and the smell even longer. Maybe that's where my strong dislike of skunks started! Either way, it continues to this day.

From the outside looking in I'm sure it looked like our summers were lacking in many ways. No swimming pools, baseball games, backyard barbeques, or amusement parks in our world.

But we did have stock tanks and creeks to jump in regularly. There were countless games of hide and seek and tag played throughout the corrals. My mama's biscuits from a wood stove eaten with my family in that dark house were better than any BBQ! And 35,000 acres of horseback makes any amusement park pale in comparison.

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Our lives were different. But different in a good way!

By far, the best part of our time at the Jones Place was working together as a family! Hot, dusty, and challenging days shaped each of us in different ways. But it helped shape us into a tight-knit family who can work through just about anything together!

About the Author



Laura married her husband Mike right out of high school and they have enjoyed thirty-one years of marriage. Together they raise cattle and sheep on their western South Dakota ranch. Laura is blessed to be the mother of two wonderful, adult sons and the amazing daughters they've brought into their lives as well. One of her favorite new roles is being Nama to two perfect, young grandchildren!!

Laura is actively involved in her church and youth ministry. She thoroughly enjoys working with preteens and teens. Laura also trains Border Collies to work cattle and sheep. She's had the good fortune of traveling all over the country to compete in stockdog trials.

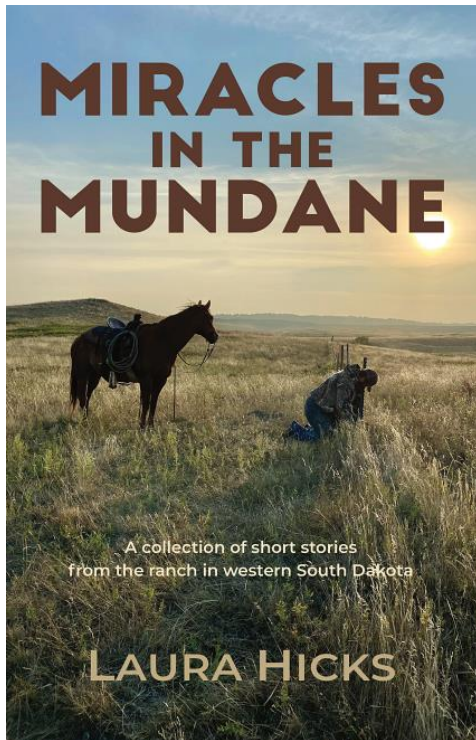
She loves to write about ranch life and lessons she's learned from God through it.

Stay in touch!

Laura Hicks

www.laurahicks.org

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