



Evelyn H. Cameron
Pioneer Photographer

by Donna M. Lucey



Looking across the Yellowstone River toward Terry

and Diarist



Evelyn Cameron in England

The rugged badlands and plains of eastern Montana at the turn of the century seem scarcely the place for a gently-bred Englishwoman to spend her honeymoon. Yet this is the place where Evelyn Jephson Cameron, a twenty-one-year-old bride raised in elegant style in a London town house, chose to go on her wedding trip with her husband, Ewen Somerled Cameron, a Scottish naturalist fifteen years her senior.

The newlyweds arrived in 1889 and hired a man who said he was one of Custer's old scouts to lead them through the eccentric badlands wilderness (with an English cook along to provide some of the familiar comforts.)¹ The bride and groom were both avid hunters, though hunting fox in the gentle woods and meadows of the English countryside was a far cry from stalking bear, mountain sheep, mule deer, and antelope in Montana. The Camerons were thrilled by the adventure of big game hunting, enchanted by the unearthly beauty of the badlands, and intrigued by the prospect of making their fortune on the rich grasslands of eastern Montana.

The vicinity of Miles City was already home to a small number of upper-crust Britons who were raising ponies on the open range. The Camerons decided to do likewise. A century later, that decision still reverberates—not because of the fine horses and cattle that the Cameron ranches produced, but because of the glorious frontier legacy that Evelyn Jephson Cameron left behind.

While ranching in one of the most remote and desolate stretches of the West, Evelyn taught herself photography. Her work, which represents an extraordinary, intimate view of pioneer life in eastern Montana, has only recently resurfaced. Evelyn died in 1928 and, having no children of her own, bequeathed her ranch and all of her possessions to a wheat farmer named Janet Williams, a dear friend who had been something of a surrogate daughter to her. For some fifty years, Janet safeguarded Evelyn's work in her cool, dry basement and deflected all efforts to make the collection public.

In 1978 while working on a volume about women pioneers for Time-Life Books, I was canvassing historical societies and museums throughout the West in search of frontier women photographers. The Montana Historical Society then had a small collection of Evelyn Cameron's turn-of-the-century vintage prints, and I was intrigued by her on-the-scene documentary style. I asked Delores Morrow, photograph archivist at the Montana Historical Society, if she knew the whereabouts of the original glass-plate Cameron negatives, and she said that a woman in the eastern part of the state was rumored to have them in her basement. For years, the historical society had been rebuffed in its attempts to view the collection, so I harbored little hope when I approached Janet Williams about printing some of Cameron's photographs from the original glass. After some gentle arm-twisting, however, I convinced Janet to send me a handful of Cameron images; when they arrived, I was amazed at the quality of the work. Over the course of the next year, Janet and I corresponded and she graciously invited me to visit her at her home in Terry, Montana.

When finally permitted to descend into Janet's basement and see the entire collection, I was astonished by what I found. There were some 1,800 dry-plate glass and nitrate negatives and approximately 2,700 vintage prints stored in the original cardboard plate boxes, each designed to hold a dozen 5" x 7" plates, that had been sent to Evelyn by mail from eastern suppliers of photography material. On the side of

each box were hand-written descriptions of the images inside—such as "Eagle's Eyrie," "Cattle Swimming," "Baker's Shearing Pens," "Dry Farmer's Thrashing," and "Rosie Roesler's Homestead"—that hint at the wide range of Evelyn's photography.

Evelyn's photographic equipment—including her Graflex camera with a German-made Goerz lens, her tripod, plate holders, developing tray, and safety lantern for the darkroom—were all spread about the basement. Janet also had Evelyn's personal photo albums that were filled with her own 5" x 7" prints of Montana scenes; beneath many of the images Evelyn had written detailed caption notes, including technical photographic information on the aperture and shutter speed she used. A large red leather album contained professional portraits of Evelyn and her family in England that gave evidence of the privileged life she had left behind.

Other artifacts from Evelyn's British past turned up in the basement: a large camelback trunk with the initials "E. J. F." (for Evelyn Jephson Flower, her maiden name) painted on the top. Inside the trunk were monogrammed petticoats, embroidered pillow cases, and other handwork. There was also a wardrobe of elegant clothing that included Evelyn's red satin bodice and skirt with a black lace overlay, as well as Ewen's red wool cutaway with a black velvet collar for tallyhoing the hounds. There were rifle cases made in London and fragments of old English sporting magazines.

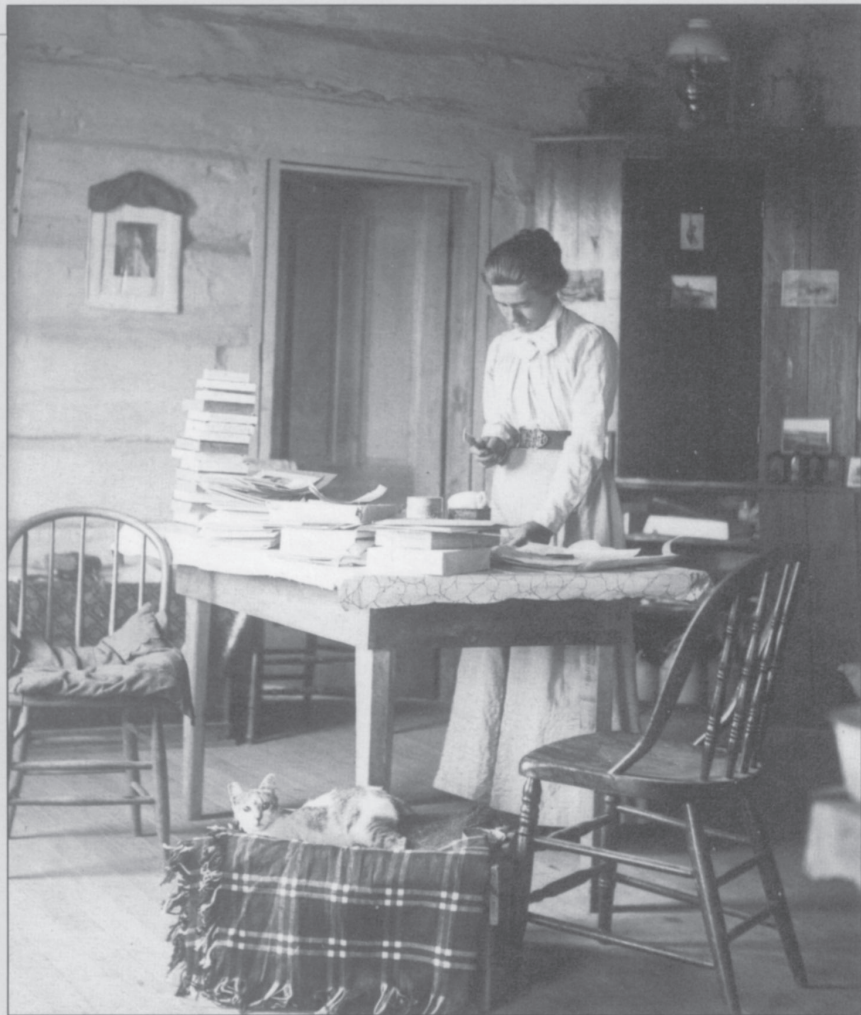
The Camerons' leather-bound library of books was there, which included a number of books on animals and bird life, as well as nine volumes of *The Auk*, an ornithological journal for which Ewen contributed articles. There were Ewen's hand-written manuscripts on Montana wildlife, as well as his extensive notes for a book he planned on the state's birds.

Amidst these treasures were thirty-five volumes of diaries that Evelyn had faithfully kept while ranching in Montana. They span every year but one from 1893 until her death in 1928. These volumes turned out to be the greatest prize of all, for it is the combination of photographs and diaries that makes this an unparalleled record of one woman's life on a Montana ranch. The diaries illuminate the photographs and vice versa. (The entire collection has just recently been donated to the Montana Historical Society by Janet Williams's heirs.)

1. "A Woman's Big Game Hunting," *New York Sun*, November 4, 1906, p. 6.

2. Letter from Evelyn J. Cameron to Jessie Cameron, December 27, 1897, Manuscript Collection 226, Cameron Collection, Archives, Montana Historical Society, Helena.

3. Census Return of 1871 for Furze Down Park, Streatham, Surrey, England; Prairie County Historical Society, *Wheels Across Montana's Prairie* (Terry, Montana: Prairie County Historical Society, 1974), 74; Constance Battersea, *Reminiscences* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1922), 170-71, 173, 192, 378; Richard Davis, *The English Rothschilds* (London: Collins, 1983), 164.



Evelyn, in her kitchen, mounting prints on cardboard

Cameron was a meticulous diarist who recorded all of the minutiae of frontier life and an enthusiastic correspondent who listed all of the letters she wrote and received in a given year on the front and back pages of her diary (in some cases she inscribed the entire letter into her diary). Evelyn wrote fascinating letters to her genteel relatives in Britain, undoubtedly shocking them with tales of her new life in this wild landscape and ever-so-strange cowboy culture. "Terry has been rather lively of late, cowboys shooting here, there & everywhere," Evelyn wrote to her sister-in-law in 1897.

One saloon is riddled with bullet holes & one cowpuncher held up the Justice of the 'Piec' (this is his spelling not mine). In fact, they painted the town red & not one was arrested!

The letter went on, however, to extend an invitation to her in-laws to come to Montana and get a first-hand look at the wonders therein:

Give Allan [Ewen's brother] my very best love & tell him he must manage to bring you & the nephews out here next summer. We can put you up in a rough & ready style & it would do you both any amount of good. The climate is bracing & exhilarating. Allan could then study the "New World type" in its native haunts. . . .²

It is clear that Evelyn loved the "exhilarating" Montana air and was fascinated by the rough cowboys and ranchers who surrounded her in the 1890s. Yet there was a great social and educational gap that separated her from her neighbors. Evelyn had grown up in a household tended by servants and, as was typical for a young woman of her social class, had been educated at home by a French governess. She spoke French, German, and Italian. Her mother had been a composer, and music filled the drawing rooms of her youth. Her half-brother, Cyril Flower, traveled in the highest social circles, married a Rothschild, served as a

member of Parliament, hobnobbed with the royal family, and in 1892 was elevated to a life peerage with the title Lord Battersea.³

The culture into which Evelyn Cameron settled on the barren plains of eastern Montana could not have been more different from the mannered society of late Victorian England in which she had been reared. She was now surrounded by rough frontiersmen—and occasional women—with little or no education and almost none of the refined social skills to which she had been accustomed. Encounters with fellow ranchers did not involve much in the way of ceremony, as Evelyn noted in her diary on April 25, 1893:

Breakfast had just commenced (8:30) when a knocking & scraping of boots proclaimed someone without. Ewen went to reconnoitre, Tusler proved to be the scraper. He came in, lit his pipe, sat down, spat once on the floor, said a few words and departed.

Evelyn decided early on to avoid Terry's organized social events, such as dances, which she described as "balls of a most riotous description, (where the men outnumber the women by about a dozen to one). . . ."⁴

Evelyn loved the outdoor life that Montana offered, yet she felt an unsatisfied yearning to improve herself intellectually in an area where books were scarce and highbrow conversation limited. On an unseasonably warm January day in 1894 Evelyn, then twenty-five years old, wrote plaintively in her diary: "I wish I could lead a life worthy to look back upon. I am far out of the path now."⁵

Within a matter of months Evelyn discovered the work that would transform her life and give her a firm connection to the world around her. On February 9 she and Ewen talked of ordering a camera (she never mentioned the exact model in her diary). Shortly thereafter, she launched her photographic career. She took up photography for a variety of reasons: to assuage her loneliness; to assist her husband Ewen in his wildlife studies (she illustrated articles he wrote for ornithological journals and, in the process, made some of the earliest photographs ever done of western birds in their natural habitat); and to earn extra money to help keep their precarious ranching venture afloat.

4. Evelyn J. Cameron, April 25, 1893 Diary; Evelyn J. Cameron to Mrs. Mary Cameron (her mother-in-law), March 7, 1896, Cameron Collection.

5. Evelyn J. Cameron, January 12, 1894 Diary, *ibid.*

In 1893 when the extant diaries begin, the Camerons had just moved to a ranch six miles south of Terry where they planned to raise polo ponies for export to Great Britain. In partnership with an old-time local rancher they imported exotic—and expensive—Arabian stallions onto the plains of eastern Montana. The cost of this ranching operation far exceeded their means, which essentially was an annuity of three hundred pounds (equal to \$1,460 at the time) that Evelyn received from her family trust fund.

To help supplement their income Evelyn sold vegetables to local ranchers and cowboys. She also put up with her dim-witted brother Alec in exchange for quarterly rent payments. Dressed in "bocker breeches & gaiters!" he must have cut a humorous figure among the cowboys in town, but he was a constant trial to his sister. "I believe the Lord was called away when casting Alec's cranium and the brains were left out," Evelyn complained in her diary. To make matters worse, Ewen and Alec did not get along well. Matters came to a head on July 24, 1893, and Evelyn had to intervene:

Very hot encounter . . . Ewen wanted to stand up and fight. Alec grappled. Alec tumbled over. I pulled him and slapped his bo-hind. He had torn Ewen's shirt to shreds and he was partially nude!⁶

The three-room ranch house was crowded enough with Alec's presence, but because of their financial difficulties the Camerons decided to take in a second boarder, a wealthy Irishman named Adams (Evelyn never mentioned his first name). The Camerons were after more than just rent payments—they hoped that after Adams had stayed with them for a time and had seen the surrounding countryside, he would be sufficiently impressed with the ranch's prospects to invest in it as a partner and give the operation a desperately needed infusion of cash.

Adams's initial enthusiasm for Montana waned, however, owing to the monotony of ranch life and to the horror of having to bunk with Alec. Adams left Montana without investing in the ranch, but he had a lasting influence on Evelyn's life. Adams was an amateur photographer familiar with glass-plate procedures, and he encouraged Evelyn's interest in photography. (It was Adams who set off for the Terry railroad depot on August 13, 1894, and picked up Evelyn's first camera.) He also helped Evelyn with basic photographic techniques, including developing and printing glass-plate negatives.

Evelyn worked tirelessly to learn the rudiments of photography, often developing her negatives in

6. Evelyn J. Cameron, January 23, September 11, July 24, 1893 Diary, *ibid.*

7. Evelyn J. Cameron to Kathleen Lindsay, September 21, 1897, *ibid.*

the middle of the night and then printing them by sunlight in the midst of her daily ranch chores. With her camera she recorded every aspect of life around her. She traveled great distances to seek out wild birds and geological oddities. And like an anthropologist in some exotic locale, she used her camera as a way of studying and understanding the local inhabitants.

The income from Evelyn's photography became more important to the Camerons when their polo-pony venture came to a disastrous end. In 1897 many of their ponies, being sent to England for sale, died of "pneumonia accelerated by starvation" after the ship's horse foreman refused to provide sufficient food for the animals. (He claimed that "if the horses were well fed & bad weather came on, they would die.")⁷

The surviving ponies were judged to be too wild by English buyers, so further time and money had to be spent on training them for polo. The Camerons lost years of time and virtually all the money they had invested. In the wake of this financial catastrophe, Ewen seemed to lose interest in the day-to-day business of ranching. He devoted himself mainly to his studies of Montana birdlife—studies that later were regarded as highly valuable by authorities at the Smithsonian Institution, where he sent some of his research.

With great courage and determination Evelyn began managing the ranch and enthusiastically threw herself into its hard regimen. She adored Montana and was adamant that she would not give up her independent, self-reliant way of life for a return to genteel England. In part, because her own background had been so different, she found the day-to-day business of ranch life fascinating. She eagerly photographed the men of the range at work: cowboys swimming cattle across the strong-

currented Yellowstone River; sheepshearers about to fleece squirming sheep; a solitary wolfer with his stack of traps used to capture wolves and coyotes for bounties; the lowly sheepherder tending his band of sheep.

Unlike most photographers of the day, Evelyn was fascinated by the spirit and energy of pioneer women and focused her camera on them. She made a series of action photographs of the Buckley sisters—Myrtle, May, and Mabel—at work roping cattle and horses. Some of these photographs were published in an article titled, "The 'Cowgirl' in Montana," which Evelyn wrote for *Country Life* in London. As Evelyn reported in her article, which appeared in 1914, there was by that time a new breed of heroine on the plains of Montana:

Dry-farming . . . is developing a new phase of the woman on the ranch. The female members of the Russo-Germans who have swarmed over the prairie like ants take outdoor work even more seriously than the cowgirls whom they replace. Russo-German girls in their teens successfully perform every kind of farm labour, and may be seen ploughing from daylight to dark, sacking and hauling grain, haymaking, or driving up the cows on their great draught colts, ridden bareback.⁸

Evelyn captured the ranching and cowboy culture that she first encountered when she arrived in Montana, but she also recorded the revolution that took place during the first decade of the twentieth century, as vast stretches of the Montana plains were plowed up by land-hungry homesteaders. In a letter to her brother Percy in 1908, she described eastern Montana's transformation:

This part of Montana has now taken on a regular boom and it is being rapidly settled up by "dry farmers." The growth in the size of the towns has to be seen to be believed. . . . Terry, which when

Evelyn frequently rode long distances carrying her heavy equipment with her to photograph people, wildlife, and eastern Montana scenery.





Ewen had planned to train the two wolf pups the Camerons had bought from a wolfer, but eventually sent them to a zoo at Coney Island, instead, because Evelyn was “too daring” with them.

I first went there only included a saloon, an engine tank and a store, has now a church, a bank, 2 hotels, 2 livery barns, 4 saloons, 2 schoolhouses, what they call an opera house, a newspaper & numerous stores, with two railroads running thro' it.⁹

Evelyn went on to write that it was the second railroad line in the area, the newly arrived Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul & Pacific Railroad, that has given the town “fresh impetus.”¹⁰ As the new line proceeded across eastern Montana, the railroad launched an aggressive advertising campaign that helped entice a wave of wheat-farming immigrants to the area. Evelyn photographed the proud new homesteaders in front of the tiny shacks they built on the barren landscape. She also captured the dry farmers—both men and women—at work in the fields with their steam and gasoline-powered engines. The area attracted a large group of German-Russians, descendants of Germans who, generations earlier, had been invited to farm on the steppes of Russia. It was the hard-working

German-Russian farm women whom Evelyn celebrated in her article about western women.

Evelyn was probably one of the few people who could move freely from one immigrant group to another. With her camera in tow she was a welcome addition to any ethnic gathering. The German-Russians tended to stay to themselves, yet they were eager for Evelyn to photograph them on their farms or at picnics and weddings; Italian railroad workers sought Evelyn out to photograph them on their day off; and, naturally, her British compatriots were pleased to be captured branding horses or enjoying teatime on a rugged Montana ranch.

Evelyn also chronicled her own life on a ranch in eastern Montana. She made a series of self-portraits—some of which she sent to her nieces in England to give them an idea of the life she led in the West—including a photograph of herself kneading a panful of dough and another in which she is mounting photographic prints onto cardboard. Both photographs were made inside her kitchen. Evelyn's photographs bring the viewer into her world—even inside her very cabin—and

8. Evelyn J. Cameron, “The ‘Cowgirl’ in Montana,” *Country Life*, (June 6, 1914), 831.

9. Evelyn J. Cameron to Percy Flower (her brother), January 17, 1908, Cameron Collection.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Evelyn J. Cameron, February 3, 1893 Diary, *ibid.*

12. Evelyn J. Cameron, February 5, 1893 Diary, *ibid.*

13. Evelyn J. Cameron, 1894 Diary, 1893 Diary, 1906 Diary, *ibid.*

her hand-written diaries and letters create a vivid picture of what life was like therein.

"Coldest day [we] have had," Evelyn wrote in her diary during one spell of frigid winter weather.

The kitchen is like a cage, wind blows in everywhere. It is impossible to keep warm, the stove's small heat is quite insufficient to make the temperature bearable. . . . Anything left in the kitchen for 15 minutes will be frozen hard, the room is the worst in the house.¹¹

During the same winter cold snap she took her batch of starter dough (a mixture of yeast, flour, and water that she referred to as her "sponge" and used in baking bread) into bed with her at night to prevent it from freezing.¹²

Evelyn was a compulsive record keeper, and her diary volumes are chock-full of her life's mundane details: lists of the books she read; the amount of butter she churned and the time it took to do it (one troublesome batch took about four hours, according to her list of butter churned in 1894); the number of eggs she gathered per month; a complete inventory of the food she packed to feed three people on a nineteen-day hunting trip into the wilderness and precisely what she returned home with (she took the trouble to carry back half a cup of grated cheese and one tablespoon of coffee). Her diaries also list her favorite aphorisms and poems and even the amount of coal needed to heat their house in 1906 ("We use about 100 lbs. Coal a day. This is 3,000 lbs. a month of 30 days. This is 9 ton in Six months . . .").¹³

The passage of time and invention of labor-saving devices did little to alter Evelyn's way of living. What she did in a given day—and how she did it—remained fairly constant throughout her life in Montana. In the late 1920s she was still leading the life of a pioneer of the early 1890s. The coming of electricity, the telephone, airplanes, and automobiles all had little impact on her life. Her two concessions to modern technology were her camera and her Victrola. She had always been a lover of music, and the latter device brought her great pleasure.

Montana ranch life, and the hard physical work it entailed, suited Evelyn perfectly. She wrote proudly to a niece in England:

14. Evelyn J. Cameron to Nancy Edwards (her niece), February 10, 1911, *ibid.*

15. Evelyn J. Cameron to Jessie Cameron (her sister-in-law), January 8, 1917, *ibid.*

16. Obituary, Terry *Tribune*, January 4, 1929, p. 1.

17. Marguerite Remington Charter, "Evelyn Cameron, The Lady of the Springs," unpublished manuscript, pp. 1-2.

Manual labour . . . is about all I care about, and, after all, is what will really make a strong woman. I like to break colts, brand calves, cut down trees, ride & work in a garden.¹⁴

As the years passed and Evelyn thrived on her regimen of hard work in the open air, Ewen's health deteriorated. He suffered painfully from an ailment that could not be diagnosed. In 1915 Evelyn took her desperately ill husband to California in a futile search for a cure. Ewen died there of what turned out to be cancer. Evelyn buried him in Pasadena. Turning aside the pleas of her family to come back to England, she returned to her beloved Montana ranch and ran the place single-handedly. She wrote to her worried sister-in-law in January 1917:

I am living quite alone on the ranch but I have plenty of occupation—cattle, photography, reading etc., that I do not feel lonely.¹⁵

Evelyn ranched alone for the rest of her life. She saw the homesteading boom go bust after World War I, and she endured the drought and the locusts that descended in the 1920s; but she did not survive a routine appendectomy at the end of 1928. On December 26 she died of heart failure following the operation. She was laid to rest in Terry. For her funeral, the church was "filled to overflowing, all of the old pioneers of this section being present."¹⁶

Among the ranchers and farmers of eastern Montana, Evelyn was a respected, well-known character. Though she was modest to an extreme about her own accomplishments, it was left to a traveling Englishwoman to describe the high regard in which Evelyn was held in 1919:

From the moment we got into Billings, Montana, we were never one whit surprised when whoever we might happen to be talking with would say: "Oh, be sure to go to the Eve Ranch and see Mrs. Cameron, she is one of the wonders of Montana." . . . Never was she described as English or American by her admirers. They just called her a Montanan, and no better description could be found for her, for she is the very embodiment of the spirit of that great state.¹⁷

DONNA M. LUCEY, who spent seven years uncovering the life and works of Evelyn Cameron, is the author of *Photographing Montana, 1894-1928: The Life and Work of Evelyn Cameron* published by Alfred A. Knopf (1990). Lucey has been an editor at Time-Life Books and *Look* magazine and received two grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities for her work on *Photographing Montana*. She lives with her husband and their son in Brooklyn.



"I wish I could lead a life worthy to look back upon. I am far out of the path now." Writing this in her diary on a January day in 1894, the twenty-five-year-old Evelyn could not have envisioned the impression her life would make nearly a century later. The stunning photographs in this essay are from the work done by this remarkable woman from 1894 to 1928. They appear in her biography by Donna Lucey as well as in an exhibit at the Montana Historical Society. Acquisition by the Society of Evelyn Cameron's photographs, diaries, and personal effects was made possible through the generous donation of Claire J. Caylor, Janet McCulloch, and William R. Deppe, heirs to the collection, which originally had passed from Cameron to her best friend, Janet Williams.

Evelyn took the photo (above) of herself kneading bread to show her nieces in England something of her lifestyle. She staged the picture (right) of herself and Mabel and Janet Williams on horseback to advertise her photography business.



Evelyn feeds a grasshopper to an American kestrel.



Evelyn perched “as far as I dared” on a petrified tree over a chasm in the badlands while holding a copy of *The Bystander*, an English magazine conducting a contest for photographs of readers in the most unusual settings.



The postmistress in the Terry post office sold Evelyn’s photos for a 10 percent commission.





Before 1910 when a bridge was built, cable-drawn ferries like the one above provided the only means for people near Terry to cross the Yellowstone River.



Evelyn imprinted on film the essence of life in eastern Montana represented here by a July 4 picnic (right) and a group of men at the ranch run by Lance Irvine (seated center) and Wesson Adams (seated far left).





An impromptu boxing match at a gathering of sheep shearers and herders

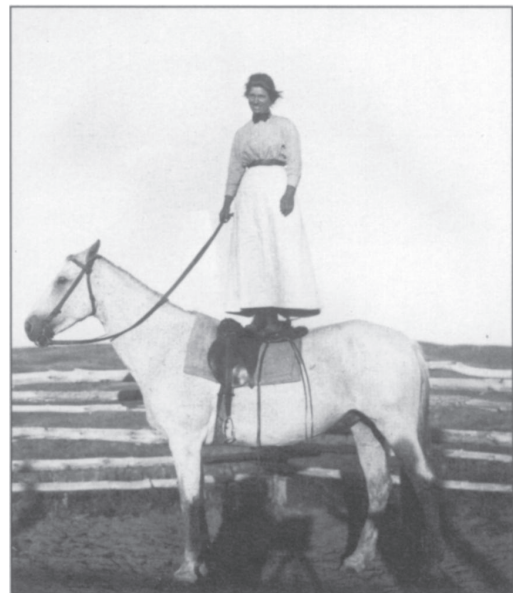


Proud Italian railroad workers pose for their portrait



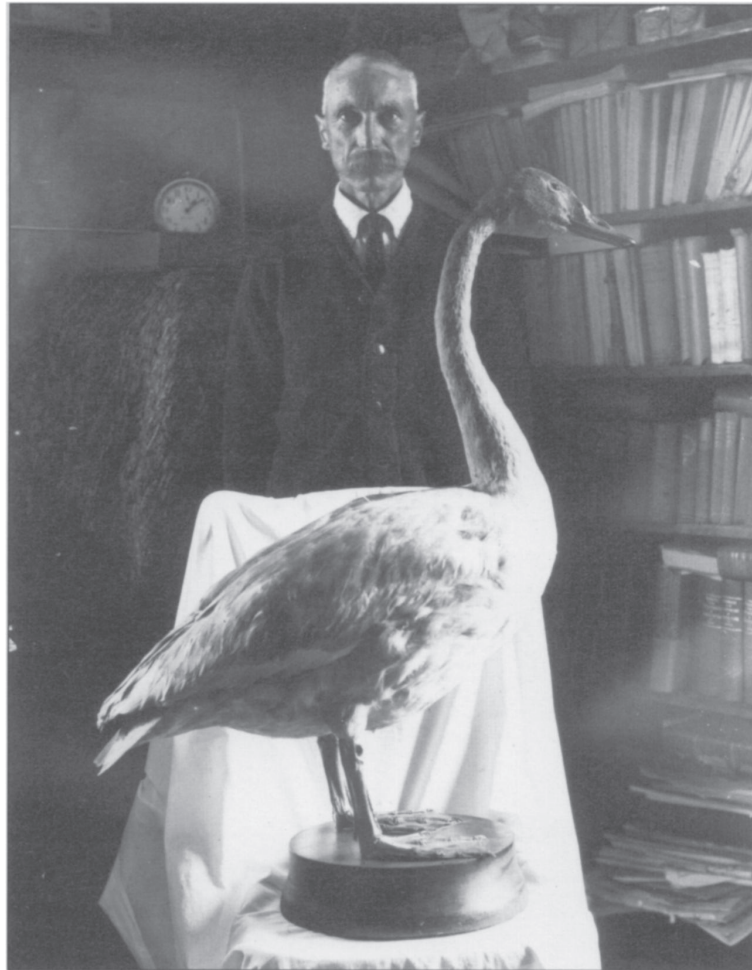
The homestead of Rosie Roesler,
a German-Russian woman

Evelyn standing on Jim

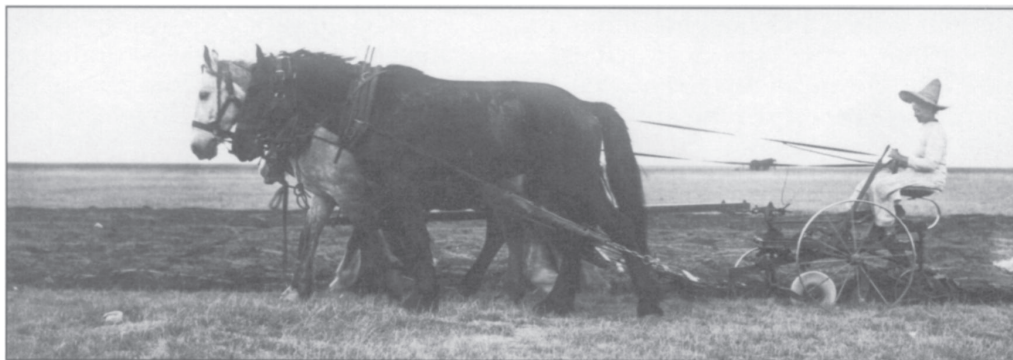




Evelyn, who turned to photography to earn money, to help Ewen with his studies of western birds, and to cushion her loneliness, left a portfolio of images—some art, some science, some snapshots—that tell her story as well as the story of the land and the people around her. From 1907 until her death in 1928, Evelyn lived on the third Eve Ranch, about ten miles from Fallon (left above). Her neighbor and friend, Janet Williams, shown here with a coyote pup, was a frequent subject of Evelyn's camera. A July 4 roping contest (left bottom) suggests spontaneity, while Jack Rice, an acquaintance, was carefully posed in an armchair that Evelyn carried outside to create an image of place and granite-like determination.



Ewen died eleven months after Evelyn took this picture of him in his study, on June 15, 1914, with a mounted trumpeter swan.



A German-Russian homesteader plowing her field