

Ranch work: Hardest job a family ever loved

By Kristin Delaplane

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'We have bobcats. Foxes on and off. I've never had a problem with the coyotes. I don't know why, everyone else does. The raccoons eat walnuts and so do the squirrels, but Shad just didn't believe in poison. At one time, he bought a spray rig because the walnuts were getting husk fly. Then he saw a bird go into a tree and fall down. He never sprayed again. The spraying couldn't be safe.

"When Grandpa Samuels first came up, they had a watermelon patch and the bears liked the watermelon. The bears liked their blackberries, too. I guess they figured they'd lose some. Ten years ago there were a lot more bears. Bears do get into the walnuts the prunes, and they will climb a tree and the tree limbs break. My daughters and I went to the barn once and could see the claw marks. We looked at each other and said, 'I bet I can outrun you back to the house!'

"We had a small cherry orchard and the birds were eating a lot of cherries. Shad said, 'Let them have some of them.' That's the philosophy they grew up with.

"We have mountain lions and we lost 27 sheep one night. The lion just took a couple of bites of some of the lambs. I had a lot of abortions afterwards on the sheep that lived.

"This type of living is more difficult than a lot of women expect. Usually a family moves up here and the woman stays one winter. There's no telephone or electricity. Getting children to school is hard. The roads here are really bad. Not a lot of people are willing to put up with all that.

"In '86 it flooded and the roads were gone for quite some time. I walked back and forth to work. I was a teacher's aide in a one-room school in Wragg Canyon. It's two miles down the Napa side and a good mile and a half down the Solano side. To my house is another mile. The roads get really muddy and it's a different type of driving. You stay off your brakes and you use your gears and your head. The Napa road is narrow, slick when it gets wet and there are big drop-offs. Shad always said, 'If you can keep two wheels on, you're all right.'

"I said, 'Yeah, but I want the outside wheels on.'

"When Shad was killed in a farm accident, I heard a man say, 'What a shame. Now the ranch will be sold.'" When he was told I wasn't selling, he said, 'What's the matter

with that crazy woman? Does she think she can run that place?' I say, 'It will always be the family's ranch. It's the homestead.'

"After the walnut harvest in November, I try to get in the ditching and seed the barley before the snow or the frost. We made the ditches with the dozer, but it has broken down so the last few years I've been doing it by shovel. We put the barley seed in buckets and walk along and broadcast it. My daughters usually help me. If I'm cleaning out a sheep pen, I get manure on the orchard, too.

"The pruning I do in December and January. Most of the time, we try to catch any branches that are low and I have a pull so I can stand on the ground, pull the limb down and hope it doesn't fall on me when I cut it. Pruning is a hard job. I always figure if you got to do work, you might as well not be grouchy, but sometimes when a limb falls on me, I do get a little grouchy.

"Next is the hillside discing. They used the hand plow behind the tractor. Shad hung on to the plow and I would drive the tractor. I drove the tractor quite a bit. I don't like tractors anymore. When you go over a rock, one end of the tractor is up. You get a little used to it, but I was never quite comfortable with it.

"Then I get the dehydrator cleaned and the huller cleaned out and greased. I put the field boxes out. Haul the propane up to run the dehydrator.

"When it's time to harvest the walnuts, I hit the limbs with the pole to make them drop. Sometimes my son-in-law helps with the limb shaker. Usually Kathy is that one who climbs the tree and puts the strap of the limb shake on the limb.

"Harvesting the walnuts has always been a whole thing for the family. You just don't make enough money off of non-irrigated land to hire laborers, so you do it yourself. Shad's brothers have helped me. My mother, who was quite elderly, came and helped me. My girls. My granddaughters. After the walnuts have fallen, everybody picks them up and puts them in boxes.

"I'm not sure I want to replace any of the walnut trees. I like livestock. It's something I grew up with. I can grab a sheep, no matter what size, and handle it. When my girls became 4-H members, we started in sheep and the sheep became something that the women members of the family could handle. Shad liked selling them, because when he would take them in, they would always tell him how great his lambs looked. The sheep have more muscles from running up and down hills. Buyers like the muscles.

"My brother made the remark one day that my mother had never worked out in a job. My poor brother will never make that remark in front of me again! If you wash clothes,

they're dirty again. When you wash dishes, they're dirty again. All these kind of things a woman had to do were 10 times as hard as what women today have to do.

"When we first moved up here, we had some dirty clothes and my brother-in-law said, 'There's the washboard Mom used.' I'm willing to try anything. I tried the washboard and said to my husband, 'We're getting a wringer washer up here.' I can't imagine doing a big wash on a washboard, but they did it. Summertime cooking on the wood cook stove, they did it. They canned on it. I tried the old iron that you put on the wood stove. Obviously, I didn't know how to do it, because the only thing that got hot was the handle which I grabbed. My hat's off to those women. They had to work hard. And bearing 11 children, Shad's mother spent a lot of that time pregnant.

"The ranch was homesteaded by Shad's family. He loved it so much. His mother, when her husband died, kept the ranch. It belongs to all those who worked so hard, Shad's family. I'd like to keep it that way and my daughters would too.

"When I was working down at the school, a man whose family that had been in the Napa Valley for years said, 'Samuels? You know that's one family that's worked hard, minded their own business, but they'd help you if you needed it.'

"I can feel Shad's presence here on the land, especially if I do something stupid. My wood splitter broke down a year ago, so I split my wood by hand. I like to do it in the morning to get me warm. Shad would come up and say, 'What beaver come along and chewed on this?' My difficulty is hitting it in the same spot twice. I can feel him laughing at me. He's part of the land and that's why I hope it will go on for many years."

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