

Montana's Red-Headed Legend

Susan Haughian's Irish empire. By Bill Kiley.

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When Dan Haughian returned to Ireland to marry his fiancée, he discovered that she hadn't waited, so he married her younger sister, Susan, pictured here with Dan in Ireland, Oct. 5, 1905. "Good Lord! What have I done?" was her reaction to Montana.

July 4th celebrations in Miles City, Mont., can get noisy. None are louder and happier than the big party a family throws to salute an Irish lass who came to America more than 100 years ago and started a fight that's still going on. Each year dozens of her descendants gather to celebrate their second century in America and to swap amazing yarns about Susan, the blue-eyed redhead who started it all.

The story of one of Montana's largest and best-known ranch families started back in 1890 when a wild Irish boy named Dan Haughian (pronounced "Hawkin") gave the Brits so much trouble he had to bid a hurried goodbye to his fiancée and make a dash for freedom. He came to the United States, where he had heard about lots of cheap—even free—land in a place called Montana, and set out to become a sheep rancher.

By 1900 he was doing well, but was getting lonely for that lovely Quinn girl who had promised to marry him. So he went back to Ireland to get her. But 17-year-old Susan Quinn informed him that her older sister had grown tired of waiting and had married someone else. So Dan courted Susan—and her life was never the same again.

Today hundreds of her grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren and relatives, most of whom still live in and around Miles City, laugh as they pass on stories about the pampered teenage bride.

A century ago Susan Haughian stepped off a train on a hot October afternoon in the roaring, rustic cowtown of Miles City and saw nothing but brown, dusty landscape in all directions. As the youngest child of a success-

ful Irish businessman, Susan had been served by maids, and had watched as her older sisters did all the cooking and sewing. She was used to a large, comfortable house surrounded by a cool, damp, green world.

"Her first words in the new land were, 'Good Lord! What have I done?'" says granddaughter Patty Neiffer.

Although Susan was destined to become a businesswoman and the head of one of the state's most successful cattle ranches, she spent her first three days in Montana bouncing over a rocky trail, staring at the rear end of a team of horses taking her 40 miles back into the Big Sky country to a place Dan called Big Sheep Mountain. Her new home was a battered two-room log cabin, surrounded by a half-dozen shy and rumpled men who worked for her husband.

"Her early experiences in cooking were hilarious," reports Mrs. Neiffer. "She borrowed a cookbook, and was totally puzzled by instructions. When she saw the cake recipe calling for icing she almost panicked. 'Heaven help me. In this country you need ice to make a cake!'"

During those early days she served things that the men put in their pockets and later buried outdoors, but over the years she learned to cook and bake for a growing family and a large work crew.

Dan worked hard and bought every piece of land he could afford. Many homesteaders walked away from their claims—and Susan

bought them for next to nothing.

Dan gave Susan two very important things before he died suddenly in 1931 at the height of the Great Depression. He gave her 10 children (five boys and five girls) and he gave her orders to hold onto the land. "Never sell your land," he said. "Fight for it. Without land you're just a drifter."

Her children



A gathering of the women. Although the old caption is lost, the photo shows Susan and her five daughters: Susan, Kathleen, Dorothy, Helen and Tessie. The small girl is probably a granddaughter.



A gathering of the men. Susan's five sons meet at the family branding camp in 1973. Left to right: Daniel Jr., Alexander, Henry, Jerome and Leo.

report that for almost a year after Dan's death Susan stayed in her room and cried. She refused to talk to anyone. But when she finally came out she was ready to take on the world. She had decided to become the biggest and best rancher in Montana. She might not have been the West's best housewife, but she was ready to prove that she could outfox any businessman in the state. In addition to sheep, she began buying a few cattle and horses. She plotted, begged, bullied and demanded deals.

She called all five sons together and put them on the path to becoming expert ranchers. She kept her five daughters at home, teaching them to become wives and mothers, but with the understanding that they'd share in everything equally with the boys. "The key," she told them, "is to let them think they're the boss."

When others were folding and fleeing during tough times, Susan Haughian bought abandoned ranches far and wide, filling them with Haughian men and their workers.

"Some folks think that the Haughian legend sounds sort of dry and boring, with all that dedicated hard work," says Elba Billings, another of Susan's granddaughters. "But they still had that Irish blood in them, and every now and then they'd head for Miles City and look for a fight. It wasn't that they were angry about anything. It was just that they were a bunch of tough men who loved to fight just for the fun of it. But if Susan heard about any fights, or drinking, or crazy rodeo riding, she quickly put them back on the proper path."

Susan always remained a lady. During all

those years out on Sheep Mountain she refused to wear men's pants. "She always wore a dress and stockings," recalls Patty. "The only concession to ranch wear was the boots she wore with her dress. She hated snakes."

Asked why she had never remarried she laughed and demanded, "What man in his right mind would marry a woman with 10 kids?"

When the boys went into the service during World War II, she moved to a house in Miles City, formed the Haughian Livestock Corporation, and ran the entire cattle empire by herself.

"At the time of her death in 1972 she was

worth millions—but I'll bet she never held a hundred-dollar bill once in her life. Everything was just plowed back into the company," says grandson Dennis Haughian. "She grew that little two-room shack on Big Sheep Mountain into one of Montana's most successful ranches, with thousands of cattle and sheep roaming over their 240,000 acres. Once she got her hands on an acre she never let go."

In 1952 Susan allowed herself to be dressed in a working cowgirl's outfit, and climbed up on a horse so the *Saturday Evening Post* could photograph her and do a national story about "The Cattle Queen of Montana."

The Haughians followed old Dan's advice: "Never sell your land." It is still in family hands. Some of the clan are doctors, lawyers, teachers and civil servants. One great-grandson recently flew Air Force bombers over Iraq and Afghanistan—but the great majority of Haughians are still ranchers.

When asked if any Haughian had missed the annual family party because they were in jail, Dennis laughs and says, "No, but it's still early."

Dan was eventually joined by three brothers from Ireland, Dennis says. "But we've never been able to find any immigration papers. I guess they were all wetbacks." n

Bill Kiley spent his life writing for the Los Angeles Times and NBC-TV. He was four years old when his mother took him from North Dakota to Los Angeles, screaming, "I never want to see snow again as long as I live!" It took him 70 years to get back to nice, cold Livingston, Mont.

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Members of the Haughian family get together at an annual picnic to share good times, good food and stories about their feisty ancestor, Susan.