

Riding Shotgun

Anola is always Clevon's best hand.
By Sophie Sheppard

Ruth Lake says her good friend Anola Dixon “is like a firecracker on the Fourth of July. Cute as a little girl’s dolly and just as fun.” It’s true that Anola and husband Clevon are both small people, but the cuteness hides internal steel that hasn’t dulled in 95 and 90 years, respectively. They are tough but with a sense of humor that is always bubbling over into laughter. And gentle, too.

Anola’s life with Clevon played out in that empty corner where Nevada, Oregon and California meet. It is one of few places in the continental United States where the population has dwindled in the last 60 years to almost zero inhabitants per square mile. It is the darkest part of the country when you fly over it at night, with hardly any lights at all for several hundred miles. It wasn’t all that populated when Clevon and Anola were there either.



Anola, 95, and young husband Clevon, 90, in 2010. Featured in and cover stars of RANGE’s new book, “The Red Meat Survivors.” See ad page 17.



ABOVE: Anola, left, age 5, and little sister Barbara with sagehens caught in front yard at Last Chance Ranch.

LEFT: Anola’s grandmother, Mary Jane Jones, with Anola sitting in her lap. Barbara is standing with their uncle, Mary Jane’s late-born son Raymond.



PHOTOS COURTESY ANOLA DIXON

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Anola, pre Clevon, at Denio, Nev., in 1938. She was 15, returning to the ranch after a dance the previous night. "I had friends in the three-piece orchestra."

Anola Hapgood was raised on the Last Chance Ranch, which was owned by her parents, Jesse and Olive Hapgood. The main house still stands—that old stone building in the Little Sheldon Antelope Refuge that U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has shored up and reroofed so it will stand for a long time. On the hill behind it are stacked rock walls—kids' forts that Anola and her sister and brother built. Remnants of old tin kitchenware they might have played with are scattered in the sagebrush. The Last Chance was the Hapgoods' ranch until the property was sold during the Depression to pay debts incurred by Anola's grandfather. When Anola was eight and her sister Barbara turned six, the Hapgoods moved into Cedarville every winter so the kids could go to school.

In spite of entering school two years late, Anola was smart and liked schoolwork so much that she skipped grades and entered high school at 12. She graduated at 16 as the salutatorian of her class. She says she wasn't very social in school, preferring to spend a lot of time alone after being raised so far away from people on the Last Chance Ranch. She worked as a telephone operator for a few years until, as Ruth says, "Along came Clevon Dixon, a good-looking buckaroo and Anola snapped him up."

Anola and Clevon married in 1942. "Clevon had an old Chrysler," Anola says. "The tires were so old the inner tubes were bulging out of them. You couldn't get tires during the war. We drove it to Lakeview and then we got on the bus to Reno. We walked in big loops all over that town trying to find the courthouse. On our final loop, Clevon said we had better find it or he was going to go get back on that bus and go home. Well, we found it alright and the judge married us. The next morning we got back on the bus to Lakeview and then into the Chrysler for the last leg of the trip. On the way home, he drove it across the creek and it just stalled...right in the middle of the creek. He got out and came around and opened the door and carried me on out of there."

Her first years of married life were spent in Guano Valley on the IXL Ranch working for Ross Dollarhide. "We never saw any women out there. It was all men. God, that was awful. When we left after four years, I said to myself I would be happy if I never saw that place again." They lived in the stone main house. In the summer, the hired men bunked in the long wooden addition to the main house, and in the winter, Clevon and Anola had the place to themselves while they managed the cattle that wintered there.

"There was a big fireplace in the stone house but it didn't work very well," Anola says. "I have never been as cold as I was in that house. All those rock walls would never heat up. One time I had some carrots cut up in the kitchen. I put them in a bowl of water so they wouldn't dry out 'til I was ready to use them. The next time I looked at them, the water had iced up."

For the young woman who was an accomplished piano player, life in the cow camps must have been hard. But she didn't complain. There was always a story, and her brown eyes crinkle up with her



Clevon Dixon at Coleman, Nev., in 1946. Clevon, a great horseman and buckaroo, was longtime cowboss of Oregon's legendary MC Ranch.



ABOVE: Anola, left, friend Wilma Ray, center, and sister Barbara at Anola's high school graduation in Cedarville, Calif., 1932.

RIGHT: In summer, the Jackson fork could move a big wad of loose hay via a derrick and boom and swing it up to the top of a loose haystack. It had trip wires to both pick up and release the hay. It took a team of strong horses to run that operation, another team to pull the hay wagon. In the winter, the operation was reversed, using the Jackson fork to lift hay off the stack and into the feed wagon. A wagon would hold more than a ton, but two little people managed this by themselves in rough conditions and rougher weather for months at a time. Anola says they were usually finished by noon every day. She drove while Clevon forked the hay to the livestock. Then they went back to the stack where Anola would drive the other team to load the hay while Clevon ran the fork. They were a perfect team! They fed nine tons of hay a day, which is a pretty phenomenal daily feat to us today, but was normal for ranching in the '40s.



laughter in the telling. In Guano Valley, their only neighbor was an old Irishman who lived 12 miles north. He had a car and made regular trips into Lakeview and would bring them eggs from his chickens and their mail from town.

That first winter of Anola's married life was the toughest. In February, they were snowed in and ran out of food. No flour. No sugar. No coffee. No potatoes. Only beef to eat. Anola told Clevon, "We've got to get to town and get supplies."

So Clevon saddled a young horse for himself and Anola's steady horse for her, and led a packhorse through the two feet of snow and deeper drifts 18 miles to Coleman Valley. They spent the night with the Coleman winter cow-camp buckaroos and Anola said the bed they slept in that night was so grimy she didn't want to sleep in it. She put one of her jumpers between her head and the pillow and lay on an extra shirt. She didn't sleep too well but was ready in the morning for the car trip into Adel where they got supplies. Another night spent in Coleman and then they loaded up the packhorse and headed home. The snow had been soft two days before, but going home the horses had an awful time of it, breaking and wallowing through hard-frozen crust.

Clevon got tired of leading the packhorse as the horses lurched through that deep snow. He unhitched the lead rope, saying, "It will follow us home." Clevon was wrong. "That horse turned right around in all that snow and headed back toward Coleman," Anola says. "There went all our food, bouncing away in the packs on that horse heading out across the valley." Clevon had a tough time getting his young horse to circle out in front of the runaway in deep snow, but he finally caught it and didn't let go of that lead rope again. At times Anola couldn't see Clevon's horse even though it was right in front of hers.

Clevon says that Anola was his best hand. Anola says she was scared of horses and called them beasts, but she rode whenever she was needed and drove the teams for the hay wagon and Jackson fork. Clevon looks at her with pride and says, "She sure was good with that team and that cart. She drove and I forked nine tons of

loose hay to the cattle per day that winter."

Anola may be afraid of horses and dogs, but not snakes. "It's a good thing because there were so many of them around those camps," she says. "One time I was going out with my paring knife and a bowl to get vegetables for dinner out of my little garden at the IXL.



LEFT: Anola got in trouble for wandering out in the brush to check the Last Chance well. BELOW: Even though she didn't like horses much, Anola is dressed in woolly chaps, ready to buckaroo at the Calcutta Ranch. It is still owned by the Hapgoods.

All I could grow was carrots and onions and potatoes because it was so cold. Stretched out across the garden path was a big, old rattlesnake. I stabbed it with my paring knife real quick. It was still there a couple of hours later. Couldn't go anywhere with my knife stuck through it clear into the ground."

Another time, Clevon tells that she caught a rattlesnake by the tail while they were walking through some big sage. She carried it for a few minutes until Clevon dangled a dead mouse in front of her that he had found on the same trail. "She screeched and threw that rattlesnake off into the brush," he chuckles. "She is more afraid of a danged mouse than she is of a snake."

About 10 years ago, I was on one of my daily walks up Lake City Canyon with my old dog Pete. On the way back, I met an agitated Clevon who had dropped a big, dead pine snag and it blocked the road. He was in a hurry to get home, fire up his tractor, hook up the wagon, buck all that wood up, and get it loaded and off the road.

We had friends staying with us that weekend, so I rousted them and told them we would get a little early morning exercise. We could already hear Clevon's Johnny-popper heading up the canyon. Lynn grabbed his chainsaw and in about 10 minutes we had helped Clevon and Anola cut the tree up and load it on the old haywagon. Clevon thanked us. Anola climbed onto the tractor and stood behind him, one foot on either side of the axle housing, her hands clasping his shoulders. I looked up at those two small people, the ancient tractor and rickety wagon loaded with firewood and was worried. "Anola," I said, because she was about 85 at the time, "do you think that is really safe?"

"Oh," she said, "he had better not dump me off and run over me. If he does, I'll never let him hear the end of it." And off they went. ■

Sophie Sheppard is a painter and writer who lives with her husband, Lynn Nardella, on their Lake City, Calif., ranch. They neighbor the Dixons. This story was written with the help of Anola's friend, Ruth Lake. Anola still washes clothes in a tub in a shed behind the Dixons' trailer, using water Clevon heats on the stove. She uses a wringer before hanging the clothes on a line. Sophie offered to wash the Dixons' clothes in a new-fangled washing machine but Anola declined. "Oh, no, thank you. It is good for me to get out of the house and I've always liked doing the wash." Sometimes Clevon has to shovel snow to get Anola to the wash house.

