

Boots That Can't Be Filled

Alice Moore was the boss and there was never a question from anyone about her right to the title.

By Julie Carter

In a dresser drawer filled with personal clothing items was a small ring box that held a secret, a single reminder of sacrifice, loss and long buried pain. An engagement ring and a note. One represented opportunity for love and family, the other explained Alice Moore's solitary life. In so many words, the tiny scrap of paper demanded a choice. The ring or the ranch.

The engagement ring decision was the second harsh crossroad in Alice's young life. The first was the day in 1954 when she was on her senior trip and had called home to check in. Her mother advised that her dad had died. "You need to come home right now and run this ranch." In that moment, as an only child, her immediate plans for college and dreams of a veterinary career fell at her feet.

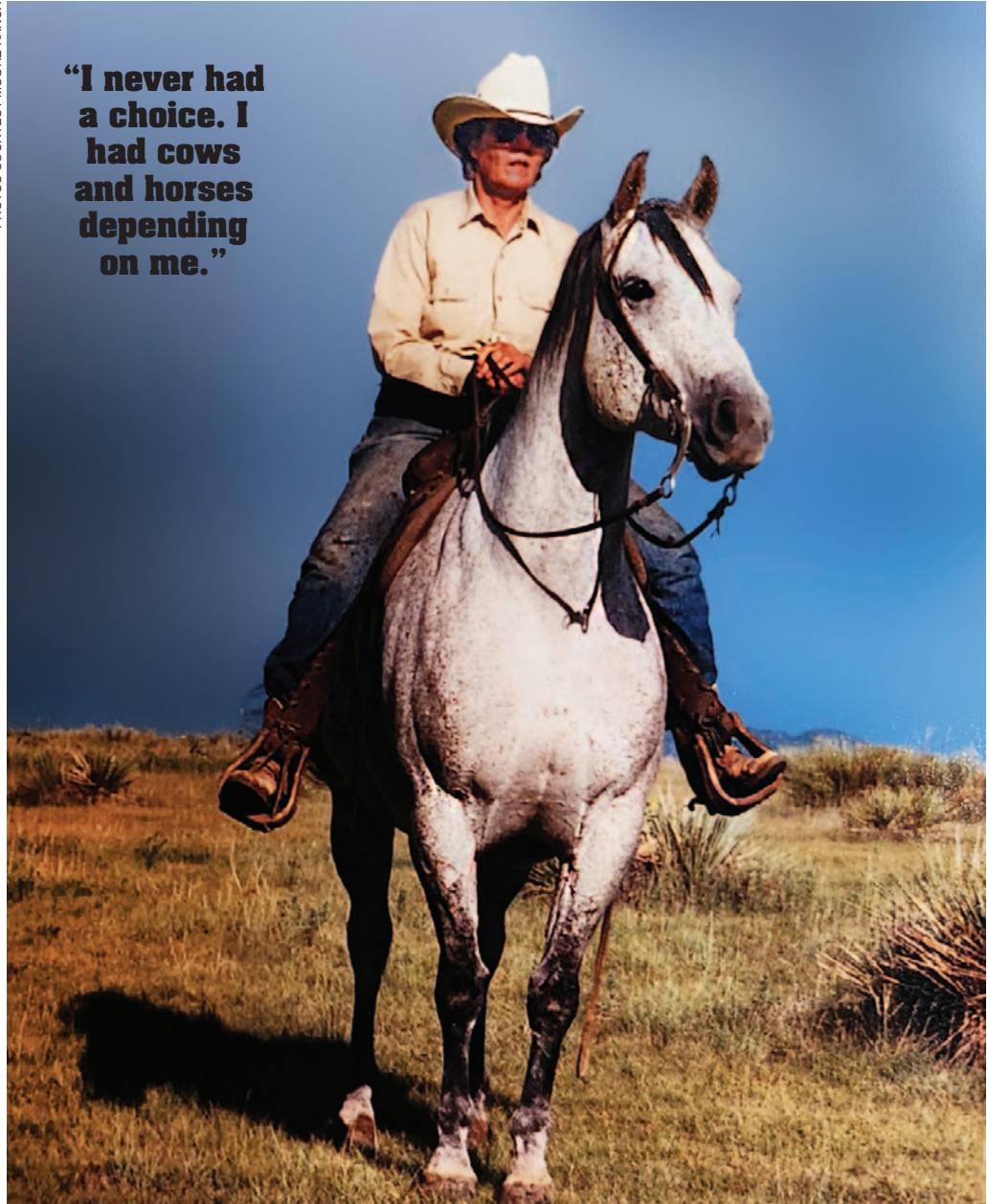
Alice and her mother Mary picked up the reins of ranching a herd of cattle and a band of well-bred Quarter horses on 40,000 acres of ranchland. For the next 45 years, the mother-daughter duo did whatever it took in all adversities to continue with the heritage of Moore Ranch. Alice was quoted as once saying: "I never had a choice. I had cows and horses depending on me."

It wasn't a new gig for either of them. Mary worked off the ranch as a registered nurse but was also "on call" for any assistance needed at the ranch. She branded her last calf at the age of 90, sitting on a chair to do so. She passed away in 1999 at 91.

Alice had been her father's shadow and best hand since she was big enough to sit a horse. She willingly upheld a ranching legacy set in place by the generations before her. The very fabric of her being was that of a tough pioneering family that came west 150 years ago with all their belongings in an oxcart when they homesteaded what today is known as Moore Ranch. The decades of Alice's hard work were seen in the good fences, healthy stock, ranchlands that were never overgrazed, and the continued improvements put in place to make that possible.

Northern New Mexico legend keeps the Alice Moore stories alive, as do her substantial saved collections of articles written about the Moore Ranch of Colfax County. The stories focus on her ranching prowess as a single

PHOTOS COURTESY MOORE RANCH



"I never had a choice. I had cows and horses depending on me."

woman in an era when society had rigid ideas about gender roles. She was the boss and there was never a question from anyone about her right to the title.

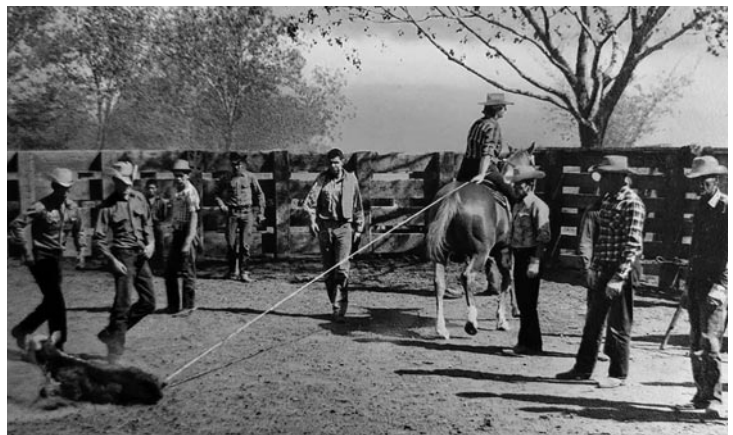
For almost 90 years, Moore Ranch has been breeding registered Quarter horses with bloodlines that trace back to the same that Alice's father raised for the U.S. Army Remount Program. She continued to breed good strong ranch horses with the mind, conformation and athleticism to be exceptional at

whatever they did but also be talented in other disciplines. By the time she had won the many prestigious awards for her horse program, including those from the New Mexico and American Quarter Horse Associations, she was shipping her horses all over the United States, many to repeat buyers.

Alice was beyond shrewd in her managing of the ranch. She was said to "pinch a penny until it squealed," and that was demonstrated over the years by her practices. On bad weath-



ABOVE: Northeastern New Mexico is home to many historically significant ranches including the cow-calf operation of Moore Ranch, southeast of Raton. The rolling hills and mesa lands provide idyllic country for cattle, sheep and horses. CENTER: Alice drags a calf to the fire while the cowboy crews stand ready to handle the flanking, branding, castrating and vaccinating. BELOW: Alice loved her dogs as much as she loved her cattle and horses. They were not just her companions, but the family she never had. OPPOSITE: For most of her 85 years—Jan. 23, 1937–Sept. 29, 2022—Alice Moore was a powerful influence in the Quarter Horse world matched only by her strength and determination for continuing her heritage in ranching.



er days when the ranch hands couldn't work outside, she had them on tasks such as straightening buckets full of bent nails for future use. When the horseshoes were pulled off the horses at the end of the fall works, she'd tie them together and put a name tag on them to be used on that same horse in the spring. Nothing was thrown away but always kept for "just in case you might need it."

Stories of her ruthlessness and/or her generosity still circulate today, as does her renown

5'10" housed on a large-boned frame with scarred hands with swollen joints that spoke of decades of hard physical work. She dressed as any man would doing the work she did, including the tell-tale Copenhagen circle on her right rear jean pocket. She thrived doing all it took to survive on the ranch in a man's world. She operated all the haying equipment, took classes on doctoring her own livestock so she could, handled the ranch work, grew a small garden every summer and at night she

for her tenderness toward all her animals, not just the large stock, but chickens, cats and dogs. The mischievous twinkle in her eyes never changed as her face weathered. She wasn't a delicate or small woman, and even into her 60s she stood about

did the paperwork. She was an avid reader and subscribed to every livestock and horse publication she could find.

She never married, but her deep-seated love of the land cast a long-lasting shadow over every acre fenceline to fenceline. It was handed to her by blood, but she earned her place through sacrifice and sweat equity. In her later years, when she was not agile or easily mobile, if she drove down the road to her ranch and there was any litter along the way, she had trained her dog to jump out, pick it up and bring it back to the pickup. She never stopped caring for any of it at any level.

She was a powerful figure who decided how she wanted you to perceive her and when or if she wanted to let you into her carefully guarded personal space. In her 85 years, she'd spent no more than three nights off and away from the ranch willingly, except for the hospital stays when necessary as she aged. She didn't travel, she didn't take a vacation, ever.



ABOVE: Alice in the branding pen at the Moore Ranch, always as good a cowboy as any around.

BELOW: Wes and Melissa Mack became owners of the ranch upon Alice's death in September 2022.



In the fall of 2022, just a couple weeks before she had scheduled with a buyer to ship her calves, she rode on through the gate to heavenly pastures. An era had ended with her last breath. But, even then, she'd prepared for the future of her "love." A simple will very directly passed the land and all on the Moore Ranch to a young family that she believed would carry on with her deep-rooted desires.

The land that carries the Moore Ranch brand echoes her presence in both tangible and intangible ways, as Wes and Melissa Mack and their young sons Rody and Riggs and daughter Quincy settle in to carry on where Alice left off. The overwhelming, even daunting task of picking up Alice's life was far beyond just the practical of counting cows and sorting through decades of papers. It was coming to grasp with the magnanimity of what they had been given.

Melissa says she feels like their kids are

gaining invaluable life lessons and experiences while they all navigate adding ranching to their already full lives. Wes wears the responsibility of it all in both practical and emotional ways. "I'd give it all back in a heartbeat just to have her back," he says. "I would. She had a love for the land that was greater, I guess, than anybody else's love. I mean, she never married, she never had kids, so this was her love. My goal is to keep her legacy alive."

As the spring colts are born in the same pastures where hundreds of others started life over the last century, bucking, playing around their mommas, there's an almost tangible feeling that Alice is perhaps looking down pleased with her most favorite part of ranching.

From a bluff high above the action, a crew of cowboys, many of them young and full of excitement for the season, are pushing a herd of momma cows and their fat healthy babies across the spring pastures. They are headed to the corrals for tagging, branding and vaccinations.

The sight is peaceful and perfect. Even Alice would have to agree her love is living on in those who loved her and that today, and always, will honor who she was and what she built. They will never take for granted what she sacrificed to keep it and pass it on.

Wes summed it up. "Somebody asked me the other day, 'How are you going to fill her boots?' And the answer is, you're not. You are going to have to wear your own boots." ■

Julie Carter is an award winning New Mexico writer/photographer with a passion for telling the stories of the people who remain steadfast in the ranching industry.