

The Elderly Country Woman

Facing the end of the trail. Excerpted from "Older Than Dirt: How to be elderly, a user's guide."

By Gwen Petersen

There was the time a woman got the dazzling idea to put on a pageant focused on ranch women. Her voice on the phone could have melted butter at 20 below.

"I am delighted to inform you," she purred, "that you have been selected to represent your state in the annual Ms. Senior Ranchwoman Pageant."

"Say what?" you ask.

"We feel the senior ranch woman has been overlooked for her contribution to agriculture."

"She has?"

"Certainly. We start with the Early Bird Happy Hour in the Over-the-Hill Lounge where there's ramps for the walker and wheelchair ladies. It begins right after the postlunch nap and finishes before contestants' feet begin to swell."

"You have contests?"

"Absolutely. Judges are chosen from among the nation's most reliable livestock auctioneers. They will

be asking you questions about your philosophy of life in your golden years on the ranch."

"Philosophy?"

The caller cleared her throat. "Am I not speaking loudly enough, dear? I understand. Many older ladies have hearing problems but I assure you the microphones will be turned up to maximum volume and all competition programs are printed in extra large letters and double spaced."

"Competitions?"

"Try to pay attention, dear. Ms. Senior Ranchwoman Pageant contestants participate in certain activities to show their skills to the judges."

"Skills?"

"To earn awards, dear," said the caller patiently, "starting with the Ms. Walker and Wheelchair Promenade. At a signal, the candidates swivel and pivot in a choreographed dance across the sawdust in the horse arena."

"Wow," you murmur, "what else?"

"There's the Ms. Congenial Denture Wearer title awarded to the woman who can best sing the Star Spangled Banner without her teeth. Ms. Night Calver title, of course, is awarded to the woman who still fits into her

chases a steer down the alley and hollers, 'IN!' or 'BY!' The ranch woman who is fastest at opening or closing a gate in the face of a charging steer wins the Ms. In-and-By title, a package of throat lozenges and a tasseled cow-sorting whip."

"Jeepers," you declare. "So, what does the overall winner get?"

"She's chosen after all the ladies parade across the stage wearing their homemade feedsack evening gowns. Ms. Second Runner

Up receives a new calf puller and a gift certificate to the feed store. Ms. First Runner Up is awarded a dead-calf skinning knife, a rubber hose for tubing bloat and a new pair of coveralls."

The caller paused for dramatic emphasis and then said proudly, "And Ms. National Senior Ranchwoman receives a crown of braided orange and black bale string adorned with bright ear tags and enhanced with stitched-on lambing rings. If Ms. Senior's knees aren't too bad,

she walks down the ramp carrying a spray of spurge and knapweed. For the next year, she gives uplifting talks at stockgrower, grain-grower and beet-farmer banquets."

The caller sighed. "Regretfully, we had to cancel TV appearances on the Letterman show. When asked to recite Top Ten Reasons for Ranching, last year's Ms. Senior Ranchwoman's short-term memory failed. Halfway through the list, she forgot what she was supposed to say and she couldn't see the prompter." ■

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ILLUSTRATION BY RONALD B. COLEMAN

wedding dress and can stuff it into a pair of coveralls the fastest. The Ms. Flapper award honors the woman whose upper-arm flesh hangs the lowest when she's pointing out which way the heifers ran when they broke through the fence."

"Awesome," you say.

"Isn't it," said the caller. "We pageant organizers are quite proud of our categories. For instance, Ms. Shovel-and-Pitch wins a marvelous set of new shovels, hay forks and rubber boots for corral work."

"Overwhelming," you mutter.

"Yes," agreed the caller, "but the In-and-By award is the most prestigious. An arena is set up with two dozen steers in pens. A helper