

EWEN AND EVELYN CAMERON

# *Under the Big Sky*



Evelyn Cameron, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, PAC 90-87

EWEN AND EVELYN CAMERON, whose British background is discussed in the previous article, joined the exodus of Britons seeking their fortunes in the American West in the late nineteenth century. The couple had enjoyed an extended honeymoon in Montana in 1889–1890 and in 1891 returned to Montana to stay. They planned to support themselves raising polo ponies on the eastern Montana prairie, but their hopes were dampened when the Stock Growers National Bank in Miles City folded in the Panic of 1893, taking their small savings with it. Like many British expatriates, Evelyn received a yearly stipend from a family trust, but the three-hundred-

pound sum was not enough to cover the expenses of the ranch. When it was reduced to two hundred pounds in 1894, the Camerons scrambled to make ends meet. Over following decades, the couple became part of the social and economic life of a broadly scattered community of ranchers and homesteaders. They raised cattle, horses, chickens, and a garden; hunted and camped in the badlands; and took in boarders. Ewen, an avid ornithologist, continued to study and write about birds, and Evelyn took up photography to supplement their income and to document their lives. The image above shows Evelyn with her camera circa 1907.



ALTHOUGH both had grown up with servants, the Camerons had no hired help, and Evelyn did all the housekeeping and cleaning. Undaunted by what was considered men's work, she also chopped wood, broke horses, and branded cattle. In addition, she tended to the endless cycle of milking, cooking, washing, and mending. All of this she meticulously documented in her diary, as in this entry from May 29, 1905: "Arose 6:20. Milked, etc. Breakfast 8:05. Washed up. Mounted 25 [photo-

graphs]. Wrote at back titles. Dinner 1:30. Hard boiled egg & minced bacon sandwiches. Out. Cleaned fowl house, put clean nests in. Set 2 hens & 1 after supper. Fed little chicks at barn. Mended old boot of Major Dowson's. Got 2 pails. Chopped wood. Milked. E[wen] picketed Toad out. Supper. W[ashed] D[ishes]. Set another hen." She took several photographs, including this picture of herself kneading dough in her kitchen, to give her relatives in England a view of her domestic life.



THE CAMERONS started out renting the remote 4.4 Ranch in the pine-covered hills east of Miles City. When raising horses on the open range proved difficult, they moved thirty miles east in 1893 to the first of three Eve Ranches, each named for Evelyn. Made up of grassy rolling hills, the ranch could be fenced for their horses and was six miles south of the town of Terry and the railroad depot from which they would ship the polo ponies. Despite the move, the business venture failed, and they quit raising polo ponies in 1897. In 1902, they bought land from the Northern Pacific Railroad on the north side of the Yellowstone River opposite the mouth of Fallon

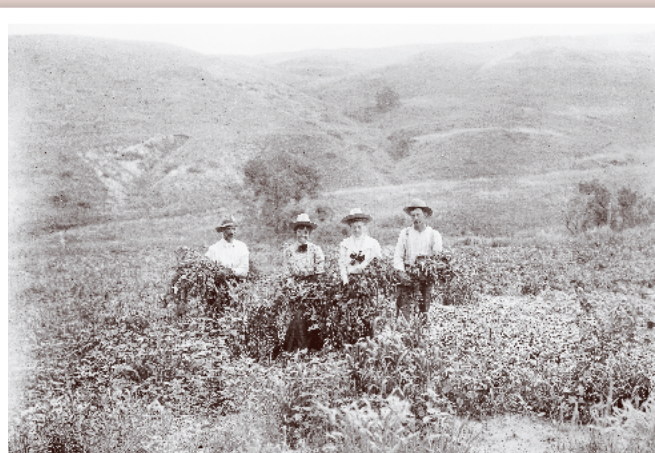
Creek and built the second Eve Ranch. Plagued by continuing financial problems, within a few years the Camerons thought they might have to return to Britain. They were saved from that unwelcome option, however, when the homestead boom brought new prosperity to the region. In 1907, they bought their third ranch, pictured above in 1910, on the south side of the river near Fallon Flat, where homesteaders were beginning to settle in large numbers. In this view, Ewen is chopping wood in front of the cabin, and an unidentified woman is sitting astride a horse on the left.



THE CAMERON homes were always modest, but Ewen found space for his library and scientific pursuits, and Evelyn managed to run the household, operate a darkroom, work on her photography business, and write in her diaries. Ewen sat for this portrait after breakfast on August 4, 1903.



THE CAMERONS and the nearby Williams family became close friends. Ewen is shown above with them after the Williams's hay had been stacked in 1911. Standing in front are Mrs. O. R. (Margaret) Williams, Ewen, and Janet and on top are Roy, Mabel, and Mr. O. R. Williams. The three Williams siblings staked adjoining homesteads, and their parents bought nearby land from the Northern Pacific Railroad. Janet became like a daughter to the Camerons and inherited the Cameron property and possessions after Evelyn died in 1928.



ALTHOUGH Ewen's health was often poor, he was Evelyn's partner in their ranching and hunting pursuits. Here, he is pictured with harvested vegetables from the Eve Ranch garden with neighbors Mabel, Janet, and Roy Williams. Evelyn raised a large garden and traveled for miles selling the vegetables to remote ranches, to cook wagons on the range, and even to cowboys in saloons.



THE CAMERONS' friendships with other British ranchers in the area helped them maintain ties to their old home and familiar traditions. Here, Evelyn and Ewen (on the right) pose with Mabel Williams (left) and fellow Brits Ida and Monte Archdale (center), who owned the Fiddleback Ranch and raised horses and cattle on Locate Creek, a Powder River tributary south of Terry.



BRANDING at the Fiddleback Ranch on July 16, 1904, required all hands. Above, Billy Longfellow, at right, keeps the rope taut as Monte Archdale brands the calf while his brother Lionel holds its hind legs. Ida Archdale is bending over behind the fence. The man at the calf's head is not identified.

RANCH LIFE was not all drudgery. The Camerons enjoyed hunting, sometimes chasing coyotes in the manner of an English fox hunt. Every fall until 1900, they packed into the badlands for a hunting trip, sometimes lasting up to three months. Ewen wrote

that the badlands “constituted a regular sportsman’s paradise, being full of mule deer, mountain sheep, and grizzly bears.” Below, he is pictured leading horses through a defile in badlands formations on a November 1899 hunting trip.

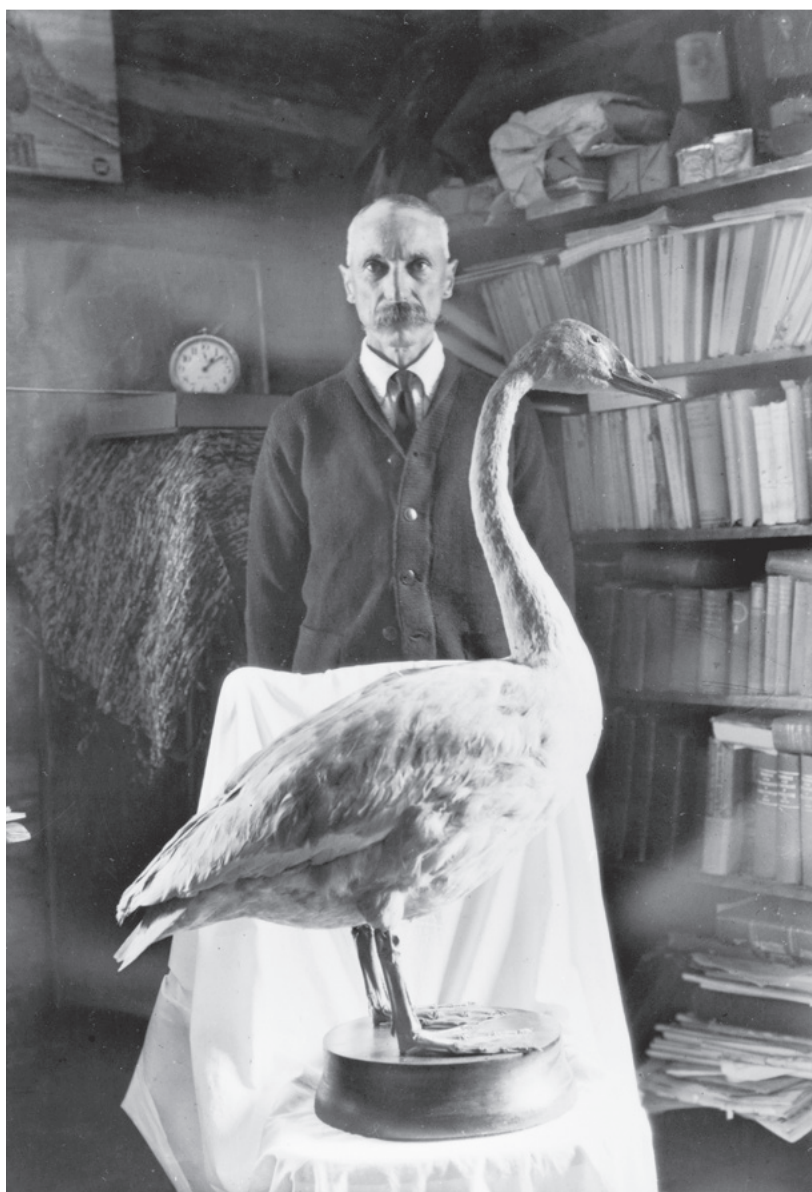


Evelyn Cameron, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, Pac 90-87 A.1.34a

BESIDES PROVIDING fresh meat, the Camerons’ hunting trips provided opportunities for Ewen to observe and record Montana’s birds and wildlife. Evelyn participated by taking photographs, and they sometimes killed birds for specimens and even captured animals alive for study as well as for pets. Ewen’s handwritten articles about Montana wildlife and notes for an encyclopedic book on Montana birds were in the estate left to Janet Williams, as well as many photographs of birds that Evelyn had taken. At right, Evelyn captured Ewen overlooking the Yellowstone River.



Evelyn Cameron, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, Pac 90-87 .037-006



WHEN BACK at the ranch, Ewen pored over his field notes and wrote for ornithological journals and sporting magazines. His work brought him recognition within the ornithological community; in 1910, he was elected as a member of the American Ornithologist's Union.<sup>1</sup> In an April 23, 1915, letter to Dr. Hart C. Merriam, chief of the Smithsonian Institution, Evelyn chronicled some of Ewen's scientific achievements. "He has done much work on the migration of Montana birds for the Department of Agriculture & you know his list of Montana Birds published in the *Auk*," she wrote. "Of late he has given Mr. A. C. Bent matter for publication for the Life Histories of North American Birds. . . . If I was home I could send many complimentary letters from

Dr. Witmer Stone, Editor of the *Auk* [and] Dr. W. L. Slater of the *Ibis*," she added. Ewen posed on June 15, 1914, with his mount of a trumpeter swan, a specimen that had become very rare by 1914. He had sent his trumpeter swan research to experts at the Smithsonian. For half his life, Ewen had been plagued with ill health brought on by injuries sustained in horseback-riding accidents. By the end of 1914, he could no longer walk and suffered severe pain. Evelyn took him to California, hoping that doctors there could discover the cause of his baffling illness and that the warmer oceanside climate might provide him with relief. Nothing helped; Ewen died on May 25, 1915. An autopsy revealed brain and liver cancer.<sup>2</sup>



IN TIME, Evelyn came to appreciate her solitude on Eve Ranch. "I think living alone is very agreeable, no dissension, no annoyances from others," she wrote. "I think all past miseries are being repaid by present contentment." She continued to spend time with friends and to take the commercial photographs that had helped sustain the Camerons over the years. Here, she is pictured with her Graflex camera, nicknamed Lexie, and some of her friends on September 4, 1921.

HERE, the Finch family celebrates their harvest on September 19, 1909, near Marsh, Montana. They are eating watermelon and proudly displaying other garden produce.





OFTEN TRAVELING for miles to get to her subjects, Evelyn photographed everything from homesteaders outside their tar-paper shacks and XIT cowboys fording cattle across the Yellowstone River to sheep shearers stripping a flock of its fleece. She never charged any kind of fee for her travel. Instead, she charged by the number of prints her subjects ordered, twenty-five cents apiece. She also left albums containing two dozen photographs each at the post offices in Fallon and Terry, which the postmasters sold for her for five dollars each. Sometimes, Evelyn bartered with her subjects, accepting a load of wood or some such service in exchange for a photo session.<sup>3</sup> Above, members of the Gardiner family pose with their homestead shack on January 19, 1914. They may have been eager to show family back home what they had accomplished on the Montana plains.



Evelyn Cameron, photographer, MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, Pac 90-87.G008-001

EVELYN caught Adam Gehnert playing the accordion in the Marsh area on December 10, 1913.

# Experiencing EVELYN CAMERON'S DIARIES

FRONTIER PHOTOGRAPHER and rancher Evelyn Cameron died on December 26, 1928, bequeathing her ranch and all of her possessions to Janet Williams, who had become like a daughter to her. Williams stored Evelyn's personal effects, diaries, and all of the photographs, albums, and glass plate negatives in her basement in Terry, Montana. In the 1970s, the collection came to the attention of Donna Lucey, a photograph researcher for Time-Life Books, who, with Janet Williams's blessing, began writing a book on Evelyn Cameron. *Photographing Montana, 1894–1928: The Life and Work of Evelyn*


Cameron was published to great acclaim in 1990. While Lucey was still working on the book, Williams died, and the Cameron photographs and diaries were eventually donated to the Montana Historical Society.<sup>4</sup>

Evelyn Cameron's diaries and photographs continue to be of tremendous historical significance. They describe a life of self-reliance and dependence upon the land, and they document the diverse and yet close-knit community near Terry. Spanning more than thirty years—through war, drought, Prohibition, and the Great Depression—the diaries reveal the physical culture: how homes were built, clothes washed, and meals prepared; how weather dominated lives; and how communities were built. For some lucky genealogists, the diaries provide a glance into the daily lives of kin. For photographers, the diaries outline the images Cameron took—the how and why, the equipment used, and the fees gathered. They document not only the business of



**There were new babies to brag about and photographs to share with grandparents. Unfortunately, many of the children in Cameron's images are not identified.**

being a photographer but, on occasion, the artistry of being a community photographer in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Today, images and transcriptions of the diaries Evelyn Cameron kept between 1893 and 1928 are available on the Montana Memory Project website ([mtmemory.org](http://mtmemory.org)), an online collection of digital documents and photographs. Wynonna Breen, founding member of the Prairie County Museum's board and a longtime admirer of Evelyn Cameron, headed the diary transcription project in Terry. Cameron's ornate writing style and her habit of writing in between the lines made the diaries very challenging to read, and it took Breen and a group of local volunteers more than three years to transcribe them all. Meanwhile, Montana Historical Society staff scanned and uploaded the diary pages. The entire project took five years. To view or search the diaries of Evelyn Cameron, visit [mtmemory.org](http://mtmemory.org) and select "Evelyn Cameron Diaries." 

Evelyn Cameron, photographer.  
MHS Photograph Archives, Helena, PAc 90-87.6076-013

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1. "One Hundred Years Ago in the American Ornithologists' Union," *The Auk*, 127 (Jan. 2010): 250–251. For examples of Ewen Cameron's ornithological research, see "Nesting of the Golden Eagle in Montana," *The Auk* 22 (Apr. 1905): 158–67; "Nesting of the Great Blue Heron in Montana," *The Auk* 23 (July 1906): 252–62; "The Birds of Custer and Dawson Counties, Montana," *The Auk* 25 (Jan. 1908), 39–56; "Changes of Plumage in *Buteo Swainsoni*," *The Auk* 25 (Oct. 1908): 468–71; "Notes on Swainson's Hawk (*Buteo swainsoni*) in Montana," *The Auk* 30 (Apr. 1913): 167–76; and "The Ferruginous Rough-Leg, *Archibuteo ferrugineus* in Montana," *The Auk* 31 (Apr. 1914): 159–67.

2. Donna Lucey, *Photographing Montana, 1894–1928: The Life and Work of Evelyn Cameron* (New York, 1990), 57, 223–29.

3. Evelyn J. Cameron to "My Dearest Hil," Jan. 21, 1904, Evelyn J. Cameron Diary, Nov. 5, 1906, Cameron Papers, MHS; Lucey, *Photographing Montana*, 157–60.

4. Lucey, *Photographing Montana*, ix.