



## A full life in a sparse landscape

The life story of a sheep herder, cattle hand and writer in the American West.

By **JULIE FOSTER**, Special to the Star Tribune

Last update: April 24, 2010 - 12:37 PM

For 22-year-old Laura Bell, the summer of 1977 fulfilled a childhood dream. Living in a remote Wyoming cabin, she spent days perched atop a 16-hand red roan gelding, exploring the harsh beauty of the Big Horn Basin.

At summer's end, she stayed on, accepting a job in the lambing sheds of the Whistle Creek Ranch -- a seasonal job that she assumed would be a side trip in her unmapped life. But those six weeks of 12-hour shifts caring for 5,000 ewes became the foundation of a new life for the young woman from Kentucky.

"Claiming Ground: A Memoir" recounts Bell's infatuation with this rugged landscape and her life within a sparsely populated and underappreciated region of the American West.

"I'd gone because I was drawn to this

nomadic life of horses and sheep and dogs. I'd gone because I was young and lost and had no idea where else to go. I arrived in the snows of February, twenty degrees below zero, and made my home in a sheep wagon parked under the bare-branched cottonwoods of the Whistle Creek Ranch."

In luminous prose, Bell pulls back the curtain on the prominent leading role the natural environment still plays in affecting some individuals' behavior, even within our ever more electronically connected world. Where else but the American West could a woman fill a life with work as a sheep herder, cattle hand, forest ranger, outfitter, masseuse and writer? Bell's life expands further when she marries a widower with two daughters and strong ties to Minnesota.

"Their Norwegian grandparents and their mother's older sister had brought them from Minnesota, all scrubbed and loved, to the ranch to see their dad, who was enduring the time of his mourning in tight-lipped stoicism."

Bell introduces the reader to this unique American place populated with a playbill of peculiar and undiluted personalities.

"They smelled of sheep tallow, woodsmoke,

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and kerosene, and sometimes whiskey seeping through their pores. Some of them brought a rare beauty and grace to their work. Others, psychotic or drunk, herded because they couldn't find a place among people. In the three years I herded, I came to understand they were often one and the same."

This book can be savored for the lyricism of its language, its insight into a distinct American region and a meditation on physical work and the role it played in one woman's life.

Julie Foster is a freelance book reviewer and writer in Sacramento and a member of the National Book Critics Circle.

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