

Sixth in a series of reminiscences by Venosta's Tom McLaughlin on his days in a logging camp back in the 1930s

(In our last episode Tom learned the true intentions of his affectionate pet pig. This week we learn how sister Loretta ruled the roost indoors)

The porcine honeymoon was over and the wolf tracks in the snow gave ample evidence that they were patiently waiting for the sow's return to the outside world.

I returned the hog to the farm and endeavoured to carry on my work in as casual a manner as I could, and to try to live down my recent embarrassing experiences. It wasn't to be. My good brothers never let me forget the sow's amorous designs on me.

The experience seemed to mature the sow, and I learned something from the experience too. Most of all, I learned to stay well clear of a sow with that certain look. For the sow's part, she went about the camp as if nothing had happened. She seemed completely oblivious to the awkward position she had placed me in. All well and good, I was ready to forget the whole incident. But I kept a wary eye on the sow for the remainder of our stay in the bush that winter.

All in all, the camp was becoming a more interesting place for me. Among the entertaining aspects was Loretta's and Clifford's vying for the position of head cheese. And our second brother never fully accepted Clifford's position as head logger. He was bigger and he never missed an opportunity to push his weight around. But Clifford's expertise proved more than adequate for his task and to outwit his antagonist. Even father was hard pressed to find fault. It was obvious that he held a grudging trust in his eldest. He knew that he could depend on Clifford more than



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he cared to admit.

Loretta could be a good friend or an implacable foe. Depending on her mood. But she did everything up front. Her size and her courage carried the day for her. If you got in trouble with Loretta, you pretty well knew that you had it coming. And when the blow landed you knew that you had been hit. We learned that she was never satisfied with one whack. If you didn't move fast, and grab your coat, as you flew out the door, you found yourself out in the cold minus your wrap and usually without boots. The only sensible haven, then, was the stable until things cooled down. Then you reintegrated yourself back into the cabin with as little attention as possible.

Loretta wisely refrained from interfering outside of the camp area itself. She never liked being backed into a corner. Her preference for familiar ground kept her nose out of the logging operations.

To make up for these frustrations, Loretta held full sway over the compound, and never loosened her grip for an instant. There was no more walking in the cabin, or lying on one's bunk with his boots on. There was no more slurping or smacking at the table. Wiping your hands on your shirt was a deadly sin. Life could be difficult at times. There were some rules that I liked. My brothers were more careful about taking a kick at the pig, or trying to foist all the chores onto me.

There was a lot of grumbling about the rules. But only when we were well out of earshot of the cabin. When Loretta started to swing her broom, she didn't go for the butt. She always went for the head. And the broom seemed always to be dirty wet from sweeping the slush from the cabin. If you grumbled something that you thought was under your breath, then whammo you got a soggy broom on the back of the head. If you turned around to check if she was gaining on you, you got it again in the face. Her disciplinary measures were hard to take sometimes. But I guess somebody had to do it.

I felt safe under Loretta's umbrella most of the time. For some reason she had developed a misguided protective attitude towards me, except when I pulled by mischief on her. Sorting out the potential consequences of my teasing, or back talk, wasn't one of my strong points.

Squealing on a member of the clan was an absolute no-no. But defending oneself was mostly tolerated. I discovered that if I protested loud enough, when my brothers tried to push their weight around, it brought a thunderous roar from Loretta. This bellow, in turn, brought instant calm to the camp. The manoeuvre was classed as defending oneself. You will notice the subtle difference.

About the worse thing that Loretta could catch us at was scratching. This innocent gesture would surely mean an undignified inspection. And, even if she didn't find anything, it was back to the nightly baths, and the hated creoline and sapho.

I was slowly gaining some respect as a useful member of the team. It was understood, in logging operations of our size that it took a "damn good" skidder to take the last log away from the fallers, at the end of the day. I was now accomplishing this feat on occasion.