

SALMOND RANCH



The full moon rising over the northern Montana Ranch headquarters of the Salmond Ranch.

James and Francis Salmond at their home in Choteau Montana.



Night after night, sixteen-year-old Libby Smith listened to the cries and screams of fellow prisoners being beaten and killed by their Indian captors. Warriors dragged Libby to the gauntlet on several different occasions. This deadly sport required the prisoners to fight through two lines of men wielding clubs and tomahawks. Few made it through alive. The chief always intervened on Libby's behalf. He'd spared her from death now for five months since her capture and housed her in his own teepee. Would she be the only one not forced to run the gauntlet?

This brave girl learned one thing while witnessing the deadly sport. The strongest warriors stood at the beginning of the line and struck the first, most deadly blows.

Those prisoners who managed to avoid direct hits from the fiercest of the tribe stood a better chance of living through their ordeal. Was this knowledge enough to save her?

Inevitably, Libby's turn came.

That night, Libby hesitated at the front of the gauntlet and turned to the chief with a silent plea. Would he step in as before? This time, Libby sensed how alone she was.

In that split second, Libby noticed that the warriors' attention remained riveted on their chief. Now! And she sprinted. While the gauntlet waited to see whether or not the chief would save Libby, Libby saved herself. The first warriors, caught off-guard, barely had time to ready their weapons before she was gone.

At the end of the gauntlet, a tomahawk blow to the head knocked Libby unconscious. While hovering near death for several weeks, the chief's own daughter nursed Libby back to health, and shortly afterward, a company of soldiers arrived to exchange prisoners with the Indians.

Libby Smith was finally free.

Fifth generation rancher Jeff Salmond, Libby's great-great-great grandson, pauses in his story to point out the lay of the land from our vantage point overlooking the ranch. I'm listening for noises on the wind, waiting with my camera for the full moon to rise. The earth still feels warm under my legs after a dusty, hot July day, but the breeze has turned brisk. I tinker with the tripod, shaking off the chill. Colors of sunset linger on, threaded through the purple of the western evening sky above the ragged Rockies. Over one million-plus acres of the Bob Marshall Wilderness border the western boundary of the ranch—a rich, vast land attracting fishermen, backpackers, and horse riders from all over America. This is wild country.

"So how'd Libby end up here?" I ask.

"I was just getting to that," he says, and tells me that Elizabeth "Libby" Smith was born in Rockford, Illinois in 1845. Ten years after her birth, the family followed throngs of fellow countrymen looking for a brighter future and headed west to Denver. This Colorado boom town, however, proved not to be the land of dreams the Smiths had hoped for. Overflowing with saloons, shabby businesses, gunfights, and desperate goldminers, Denver provided a rough-and-tumble environment where Libby Smith honed survival skills that would come into play in the future.

At the age of sixteen, Libby and her brother joined



a wagon train heading back east. They planned to visit relatives. It was on this trip that a tribe of raiding Indians ambushed the wagons and took captives, including Jeff Salmond's great-great-great grandmother Libby.

I'm thinking of my daughter when she was sixteen. I take a deep breath, tuning in to Jeff's tale again.

"After her release, Libby reunited with her brother, and the Overland Freight Company employed both of them to accompany wagons from the Missouri River to the Rockies," Jeff explains. The company bosses promoted Libby to a scout, a rare job for a girl. She and her brother built a simple cabin and settled near Virginia City, Montana, where Libby quickly discovered an aptitude for healing when the winter winds of 1863 brought sickness to area miners.

In 1874, at the age of thirty, Libby fell in love with Nathaniel Collins, a silver mine owner and former member of the Montana Vigilantes. Remnants of Nat Collins' colorful past live on at the ranch today where the "77" brand identifies Salmond ownership. "3-7-77" is a figure associated with the vigilantes who cleaned up the lawlessness rampant in 1860's Montana gold camps.





In addition to the main ranch, the Salmonds have this ranch in Eastern Montana where, Brent, Lori, Elliot and Emmet Salmond live.

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The old ranch homestead at the main ranch headquarters near Choteau.

