

Wyoming Library Roundup

Spring 2007

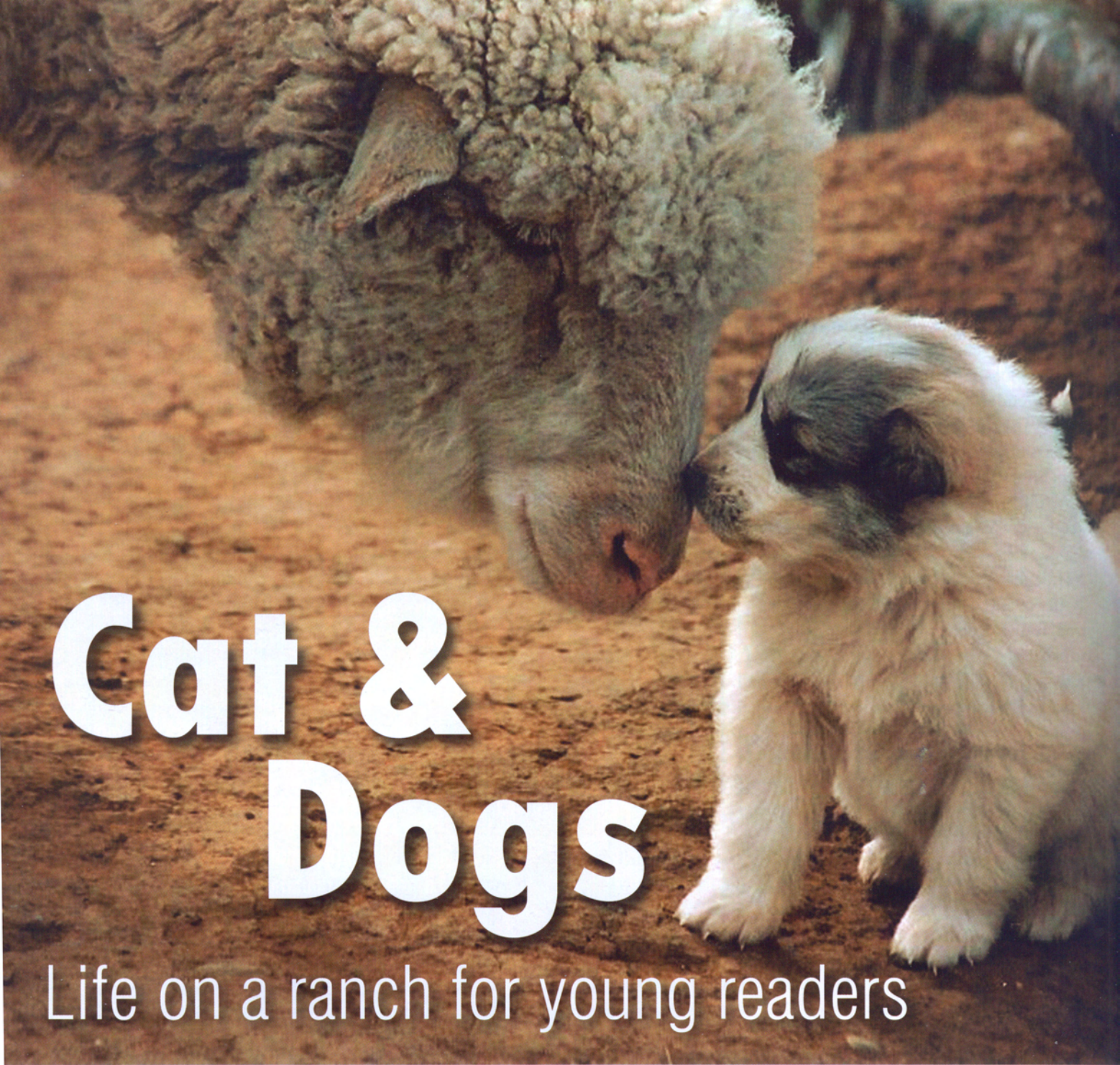
Ag & Ranching

A photograph of a brown and white cow standing in a field of tall, dry grass. A small black and white calf is lying on the ground in front of the cow, looking up at it. The background is a blurred landscape of rolling hills under a clear sky.

Gov. Dave Freudenthal's
Sheepwagon Restoration

Author Cat Urbigkit

Wyoming's Centennial Ranches



Cat & Dogs

Life on a ranch for young readers

According to her husband, children's author Cat Urbigkit does "whatever she wants, for how long she wants, when she wants."

Still it looks like a daunting daily schedule. A typical day starts with coffee at 5:30, and then ranch chores that vary with the season – driving the feed truck, chopping ice in the stock tanks, checking on livestock – before heading back home to write. She works in more writing where she can: it's not unusual for her to keep one eye on a ewe in labor while typing out a story in her pickup.

"I usually have a herding dog with me, and a shotgun, as well as the laptop and camera gear, jugs of water and granola bars – the sheep know the sound of the granola bar package opening, so I often have to share," she said.

"Sometimes, I'm shocked at how much I write in the middle of ranch events. When a pack of wolves came into our sheep herd one night a few years ago, I wrote about the events as they happened during the night and am using that as the starting point for my first fiction manuscript for young boys."

Urbigkit works their sheep and cattle ranch with her husband Jim and teenage son Cass. She's a self-taught photographer and writer who has published three children's books and is a freelance reporter for a handful of newspapers. She has two more children's books in the works, and her first book for adults, on Wyoming's native wolves, is coming out this summer.

Her first non-fiction children's book, *Brave Dogs, Gentle Dogs: How They Guard Sheep* was published in 2005 by Boyd's Mills Press. Several breeds are used as guardians – among them, Great Pyrenees, Kuvasz and Anatolian Shepherds.

"I started raising livestock guardian dogs to protect our sheep herd from predators and began taking photos of these animals interacting," she said. "It's really beautiful to see, and I'm often host to various children who come over to see our lambs and puppies. Jim looked at my shots and suggested I put together a book for kids since most people are totally unaware of the unique bond that forms between the animals."

Guardian dogs are for protection, not herding. They require little training. *Brave Dogs, Gentle Dogs* shows how the Urbigkits line the newborn puppies' bed with fleece, so they become accustomed to the smell. As they get a little bigger, the pups are introduced first to the lambs, then to the sheep. Mamas of both species chaperone until the young ones figure it out.

Writing for children "has been a natural progression for me," she said, "sharing my love of agriculture, laying out the facts for kids. I like non-fiction because you have to be honest with your readers – no glossing over the less-than-pleasant aspects. Kids are great truth detectives, so it's a good match for me."

Adults weren't her target audience, but "last year I received a phone call from a couple who said after they read *Brave Dogs, Gentle Dogs*, they were inspired to buy a small flock of sheep so they could get a guard dog and could experience the same things I had. What a compliment."

Her second book, *A Young Shepherd*, shows her son working with his sheep – a small commercial herd that will help finance his college. "Cass did not like the idea of me doing a book about him," she said. "But after hard negotiations – meaning I had to buy him a new dirt bike – he agreed to let me do it."

Cass, she said, "is a confident and smart young man, and I think he'll do whatever he wants to do. He has a natural affinity for animals, so that makes working in agriculture much more pleasant and easy."

She added, "I think that any child

with an affinity for animals who wants to be involved in agriculture can do so. Starting on a small scale, with only a few animals, kids can build confidence and knowledge, which can lead to bigger things."

Her third book, *Puppies, Puppies Everywhere!* is a rhyming book for preschoolers. She has two other children's books under contract with Boyd's Mills Press: *Cattle Kids: A Year on the Western Range*, which will be released in September 2007, and *Shepherd's Trail*, due out in 2008.

Urbigkit's first adult non-fiction book is due out this year: *Yellowstone Wolves: A Chronicle of the Animal, the People, the Politics*. It's a fully footnoted history of Wyoming's native wolves. "I begin with archaeological evidence of wolves in the region and proceed through the wolf reintroduction program and the various litigation," she said.

"I was very involved in the reintroduction issue, so the book gives an insider's view. I was opposed to the wolf reintroduction program because I believed wolf recovery should be based on the wolf subspecies native to Wyoming, but lost that battle in federal court.

Cat Urbigkit's dog, Snip, keeping an eye on the sheep.



She added, "After Canadian wolves were brought in, we went into the sheep business 200 miles south of the park, yet those animals eventually found our sheep herd."

Urbigkit grew up on tobacco farms in Indiana and Kentucky, but her family moved to Sublette County when she was in middle school. It was just after her seven-year-old sister died and they lost their farm in the national farm crisis. "I think the prospect of staying there was just too sad for my family," she said. "We fell in love with Wyoming while here on vacation."

She graduated from high school in Pinedale in 1983 and married Jim Urbigkit two years later. He grew up on a Wyoming ranch and his late father was a county extension agent, but he had left ranching and was working as a derrick hand on drilling rigs.

Cat didn't have a great interest in returning to agriculture, but she did want to live out of town with some space. They leased a house on 300 acres, and "Jim convinced me that I would love sheep," she said. "I doubted it."

That was until the Bill Thoman family from the Fontenelle area gave her some bum lambs. "I fell in love with these gentle creatures," she said. "I guess I was always a shepherd at heart, but didn't know it." They've been building their sheep outfit since then – about 11 years now – and have added a small Hereford cattle herd. They lease ranches and private property to expand their ag outfit.

She began writing for the local newspaper after she kept reading stories on controversial issues and realized that reporters weren't always aware of the technical issues involved. She drafted a few articles and offered them to the paper for free. "The editor, Janet Montgomery, soon offered me a job as a reporter, bleeding red all over my drafts, forcing me to become a better writer," she said. "I've been a full-time writer since then. I've had no formal



training, just a love of literature, issues and the English language."

She has been honored for her work by agricultural organizations. *Brave Dogs, Gentle Dogs* was the 2006 Wyoming Farm Bureau Federation Young Farmer & Rancher Ag Book for Kids; the Farm Bureau delivered more than 300 copies of the book to the state's elementary school libraries. *A Young Shepherd* was named 2006 Ohio Farm Bureau Federation Children's Literature Award Honor Book and was the 2007 Wisconsin Ag in the Classroom Book of the Year. For her general reporting, she has received awards from the American Sheep Industry, Wyoming Wool Growers Association and the Wyoming Association of Conservation Districts.

Urbigkit takes all the photos for her children's books on their ranch. At least once a week she has a photography morning, shooting pictures for the first few hours after dawn and getting back home to write usually before 9 a.m.

Writers don't typically illustrate their own books, as Urbigkit does. "I think I'm an exception because of the life I lead," she said. "While many ranchers see beautiful, unusual or striking images every day, they carry those pictures in their minds. I carry a camera all the time and work very hard to capture the

Author Cat Urbigkit with one of her lambs on her ranch in Wyoming.

image so that I can show others what it is that I see. For me, the story simply wouldn't come without the pictures."

Urbigkit is one of more than 50 roster authors who will appear at the Wyoming Book Festival in Cheyenne this fall, Sept. 14-15, 2007. "I'm hoping to bring a puppy," she said, "but it has to be the right dog for the event. I actually started training a guard dog pup as an ambassador dog, but she dearly loved the sheep so much, I let her go back to the herd."

The response to her books has been wonderful: "I get letters from across the nation and I respond to every one. The photos seem to draw even reluctant readers into the pages of the book."

She added, "My hope is that when a child puts my book down, he or she will walk away with a positive view of agriculture, especially primitive agriculture like open range livestock grazing. I hope that some will even be inspired to dream about what it would be like to be involved, and maybe make a move in that direction."

See Cat Urbigkit at the Wyoming Book Festival, Sept. 14-15, 2007 in Cheyenne, www.wyomingbookfestival.org.