

# Growing Up Poor, Living Rich

A cozy home in northern California. By Jolyn Laubacher

**M**y friends Jeff Glascock and Destry Campbell, both good cowboys, notified me when I was 20 that I grew up in poverty. Until I heard these two swapping stories about their childhoods, I didn't know it wasn't normal to have more siblings than seat belts in the family vehicle. I didn't realize my sister and I received free hot lunches from our public school because my family lived below the federal poverty line. I just knew the lunch lady made me finish my broccoli before she gave me seconds of fruit cocktail.

I called my older sister, Lacy, and asked, "Did you know we were poor when we were little?"

"Well, I slept in a drawer, so I kinda figured." Dad insists the drawer was a temporary travel solution one night in a motel room. They left the motel and went home to a cozy mobile home/log cabin/shack tribrid.

Camping at the county fair was our annual family vacation. Nothing promotes family fun like a 113-degree tent by the demolition-derby racetrack and showering with your shoes on. I showed my bummer lamb at the fair, and Mom made him a blanket from a pillowcase. Dad helped win the team-roping event and we ate cotton candy, so a good time was had by all.

At home, Mom picked pears from the tree in the yard and made fruit leather in the dehydrator. We recycled soda cans. Mom taught us to make graham crackers from scratch and refrigerator magnets from Popsicle sticks. I never felt poor, probably because we always had plenty of food. Hamburger Helper nourishes a growing body as well as filet mignon. What's culinary appeal to a six-year-old? Just add more ketchup.

When I was nine, we moved from the family ranch, located in a remote canyon, to two-and-a-half acres in a rural subdivision. I



PHOTOS COURTESY LAUBACHER FAMILY



FROM TOP: Jolyn milking Rosie at her grandparents' ranch. > Jolyn at age 19, with quarterhorse Drifter at Almond Tree Farm in Chico where he was boarded while she was in college. > Jolyn and cousin Joey ride, while cousin Patrick and sister Lacy hold on to Karl.

was excited because now my horse, Karl, was in a pen by the yard instead of a mile away in a flood-irrigated hay field. Dad got a job as a carpenter and helped build the new hospital in town. My sister and I were happy because

Mom deemed the family budget secure enough to splurge on Pop Tarts.

We had neighbors! And TV! Back in the canyon, we tried to watch channel 10, but all we could see were clumps of fuzzy gray dots moving around a lighter-gray, but equally fuzzy, background. Friends from town recorded the National Finals Rodeo and we watched each round on videocassette, peering around the Christmas-tree limbs to watch Ty Murray spur another bronc. Dad leaned forward in his recliner and pushed the fast-forward button during commercials using a large stick that a beaver had peeled and whittled smooth. DVR technology has nothing on a beaver-trapping hill-billy.

Because I was unknowingly raised up poor in the cattle business, I learned to seek happiness in nonmonetary ways. I don't need money to smell the rain on sagebrush, laugh when a colt touches noses with a barn cat, or listen to a wild cow-chasin' story. I need very little money to eat a shredded beef sandwich from the cattlemen's booth at the county fair and get barbecue sauce all over my face.

I'm glad I didn't know my family was poor while I was growing up. The social stigma attached to poverty might have ruined the fun of running through the sprinkler, building a tree fort and sharing a blanket on the couch to watch the rodeo finals. We didn't even have to watch commercials—how can it get any better than that? ■

Jolyn Laubacher grew up on her family's commercial Hereford ranch on the Klamath River near Yreka, Calif. She graduated from California State University, Chico, in 2008 with a bachelor's degree in agricultural business. After a big circle that included cutting horses and hog hunting in Texas, working at a ranch for troubled kids in Arizona, and five weeks in Fort Collins, Colo., she is happily back in California, where she currently rides horses for the public and substitute teaches.