



It's All About the Color

Antelope 'ranch woman' collects and paints old treasures

By Bing Bingham

Some marriages seem to make a person bloom. That was the case for Melinda Dickson.

"I never painted until I married my husband," says Melinda.

She has been helping her husband, Dave, run their ranch just outside of Antelope for 35 years. For 32 of those years, she has been painting.

"I started painting when our

youngest son was a baby," Melinda says. "It was a way to go to town and get off the ranch for a while."

The young mother enjoyed the look of beautiful old tin pieces and trunks she saw in antique stores.

Something about old wood with heavy antiquing and bright colors intrigued her.

For Melinda, it's about color.

While her marriage may have triggered her desire to paint, she has made pretty things for years.

"I've always been a very creative person," she says. "I've always sewed. It was a creative outlet for me."

Melinda made clothes—dresses, blouses, that sort of thing—especially

when her kids were little. She still makes—and sells—purses.

"I love fabric and colors," she says, "especially bright colors."

Melinda is a visual person. If she sees something in a store she likes—a mirror with a design, an antiqued trunk or an interesting cabinet—she can, for the most part, come home and create the effect on her own.

She haunts garage and estate sales for "treasures"—old doors, cookie tins and bread boxes—pays a quarter for them and hauls them home to her shed behind the house.

The treasure sits there until her imagination is triggered. She hauls it out, cleans it up and paints until she



Above and below, Melinda Dickson's paintings decorate her house and Ranch Woman shop. Opposite page, Melinda does most of her painting at home on her kitchen table. She has painted on almost all of the walls of her house.

likes the way it looks.

Three years ago, her house filled up with art objects.

"I always wanted to have a little store," she says, "I thought it'd be fun. I've never had the opportunity because I live so far out."

Melinda called Ed Martin in Shaniko and asked him if he wanted to rent a small building across from the hotel to her. He didn't.

"I kept bugging him and praying about it," she says. "Finally, he said, 'Oh, sure.'"

Melinda named it Ranch Woman after what she has been for 35 years.

Art is an important part of her life, but it's not the only part.

"My first job is to help Dave (on the ranch)," Melinda says. "My second job is (to fill-in at) the post office and my third job is my shop."

Variety is the key to her life. When she feels the need to talk with neighbors, she has the post office. When it is time to be alone, she can be found sanding, varnishing or painting one of her treasures. If it is time for her to be outside and moving around, there's always a cow that has wandered somewhere or fence that needs to be checked.

"I'm blessed," Melinda says. "I have a wonderful life and I love what



I do. I get to do things that a lot of people would never even dream about. I do it on a daily basis."

About a year ago, Melinda took on another job: first-time grandmother. She is jumping into it with both feet.

Grandson Thayne makes the sixth generation born to the Century Farm family. The Dickson family's newest ranch hand will turn a year old at the end of this month.

Surprises In Shaniko

When Melinda Dickson opened her shop in downtown Shaniko, she was surprised at the number of people who travel through the tiny community.

On a good day in the summer, as many as 25 customers enter her shop. They come from across the country and around the world: Germany, England, Australia and Austria.

What didn't surprise her is their intense interest in the town.

Most are fascinated with the history of the community: wool shipping and stage stops.

Others want to know how folks live out in the middle of the high desert. They wonder about grocery shopping, Internet access and what folks do with minimal amenities.

She was surprised to find out a few tourists are genuinely interested in the "ghost" part of Central Oregon's only reported ghost town.

How does she handle a traveler with an inquiring mind who pesters her with questions about "ghosts" in Shaniko?

"I say there are no ghosts allowed on my side of the street," she says, "but there might be some over at the hotel."

At that point, the surprised customer smiles and wanders down the street. ■

Melinda already is making plans. "We're going to make cookies together when he gets old enough," she says with a gleam in her eye. "He'll be up on the chair and everybody will be covered in flour, everybody will be creative with the food."

Of course, grandmother and grandson will be getting creative in the kitchen.

What would you expect from an artist and her newest helper? ■