

Julia Bennett Dude Ranch Pioneer

By Lisa Hendrickson
Images courtesy of Sherry Merica Pepper

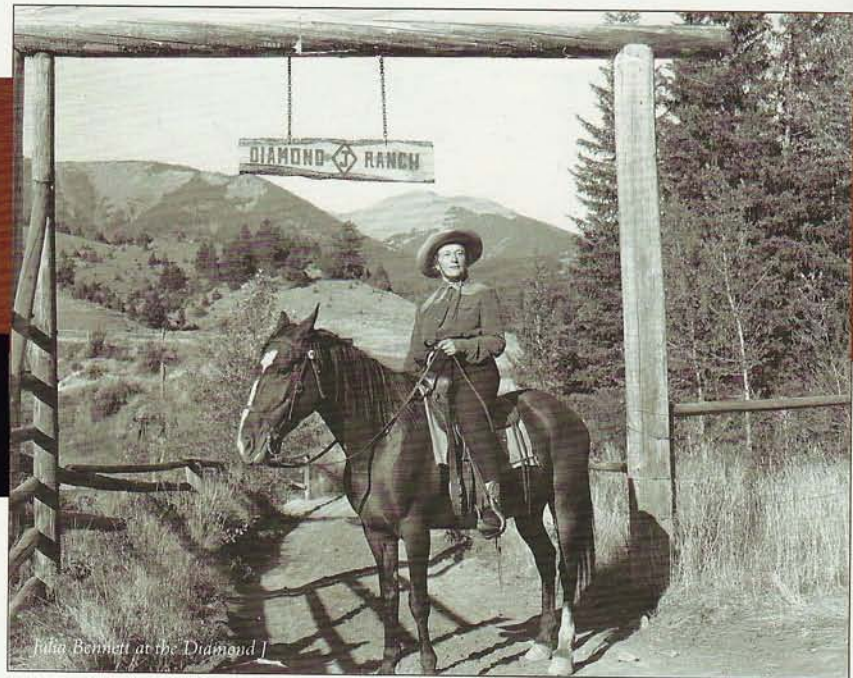
Julia Bennett was the first woman to singlehandedly build, own and operate a Montana dude ranch. Her story is one of grit, determination and the power of mind over matter.

Julia Bennett stood at the front door of the Northern Pacific Railway Office at Fifth Avenue and 46th Street in New York City on a chilly, late February morning in 1931. She wore a fringed buckskin jacket, a silk neckerchief, and a riding skirt—a costume she hardly ever wore on her Montana ranch. Since she was new to this bustling metropolis, she had added a pair of stylish dress pumps and red lipstick to complete her ensemble.

Although it was her first visit to New York, she was savvy enough to know that East Coasters would be enchanted by her cowgirl get-up. Back home, she wore canvas jodhpurs and a plaid flannel shirt when she hauled wood, pitched hay to her horses, or hunted elk, but here she knew that to be successful, she needed to deck herself out as if she were in a motion-picture Western.

After all, she was an attractive woman on a big-game hunt: an expedition to attract wealthy Eastern guests to her new dude ranch—the first in Montana to be built, owned, and operated by a woman. She knew that to find those guests, she had to personally convince them to choose her ranch, the Diamond J, over the many others who were chasing clients.

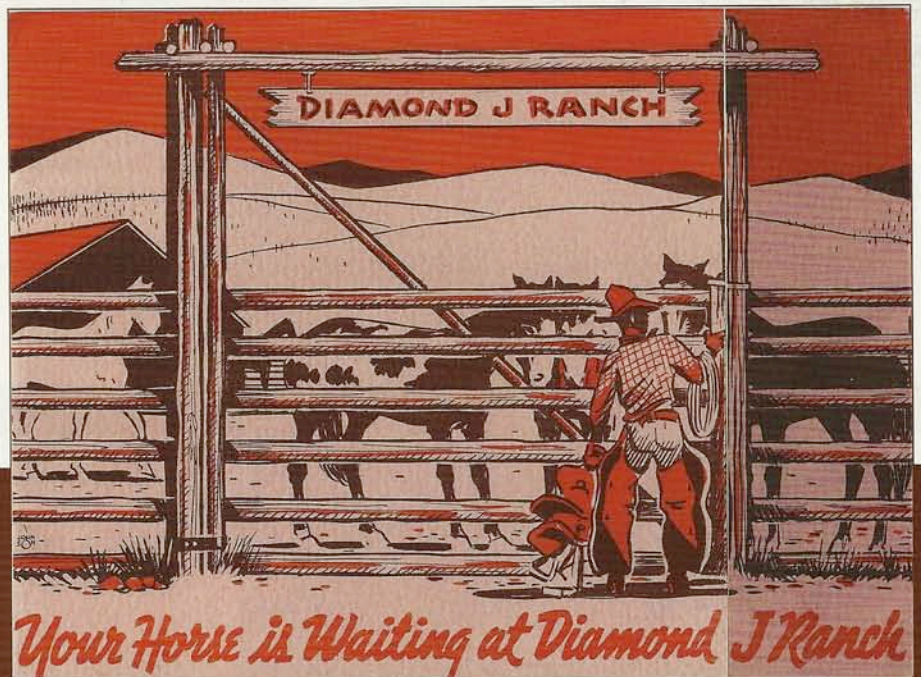
The West was big in the East. Placards on the sides of New York buildings promoted an upcoming rodeo at Madison Square Garden. "See real cowboys!" they proclaimed. The new motion picture "Fighting Caravans" starring Montana-native Gary Cooper was showing in New York City theaters that very month.



At the same time these romantic stories of the West were attracting adventure-seekers, novelists, and moviemakers, the railroads' Western expansion was making travel more accessible. Ranchers were seeking new sources of income after the collapse of cattle prices, and many—to help make ends meet—branched out to accommodate guests seeking summers filled with hunting, fishing, and riding. By 1926, a group of ranchers had formed the Dude Ranchers Association to begin marketing their ranches to Eastern "dudes."

Julia, however, was going it alone. She had only enough money to last in New York for a week—if she didn't eat much. She was willing and able to work—she had been doing it all her life. She had been raised on a thriving cattle ranch by her parents, Benjamin Franklin "Doc" and Lulu Martin Bembrick, who were among the first settlers to make their home in the Montana Territory. Gradually the couple built a large ranch, raising their four children in the Crow Creek Valley of Montana.

But by 1931, Julia's parents had died and she had divorced the straying husband her mother had arranged for her to marry. Now 51, with a grown son and a 17-year-old daughter, Julia had no job and no steady income. In desperation, she had borrowed money from her sister to buy a broken-down farmhouse and 190 acres of ranchland near the small town of Ennis (a place she had discovered during her annual hunting trip) for



Cover of a brochure promoting the Diamond J

\$1,800, and then secured a \$6,000 loan from Bozeman businessmen to transform her land into an upscale guest ranch.

She had designed and built the ranch herself, with the help of a few local out-of-work laborers. She put up a tent for a kitchen, and together the men felled trees and constructed a lodge, a barn, and six guest cabins. She knew her potential guests expected the finer things in life (albeit with a Western flair) so she ordered fine hickory furniture, china bearing the Diamond J brand, and authentic Navajo rugs. “No dime-store stuff,” she liked to say.

The businessmen who had loaned her funds, in a deal that involved no contract, had told her they would give her five years to pay them back. Her lodge and cabins stood empty in the snow, awaiting guests. She was desperate, since the summer season would start in just a few short months.

She decided the only way to find these guests was to head to New York. Borrowing more money from a fellow rancher to finance her trip, she boarded the Northern Pacific train in Bozeman, putting finishing touches on a brochure the night before she left. Arriving in New York, she headed to the Northern Pacific ticket office, which was filled with people arranging passage out west. There, she left some of her brochures, hot off the press:

“In the rugged peaks of the Madison-Gallatin range in the heart of the Rocky Mountains, the Diamond J Ranch offers its guests every comfort in modern, rustic, log cabins,” it read. “We accommodate twenty guests.”

Of course, there had never been any guests, but Julia planned to change that as quickly possible—despite the fact that she had only one tenuous lead, a woman in Princeton, New Jersey, who had written to request a brochure.

Julia had nothing to recommend her but grit, determination, and faith. A devout Christian Scientist, she believed wholeheartedly in the power of mind over matter.

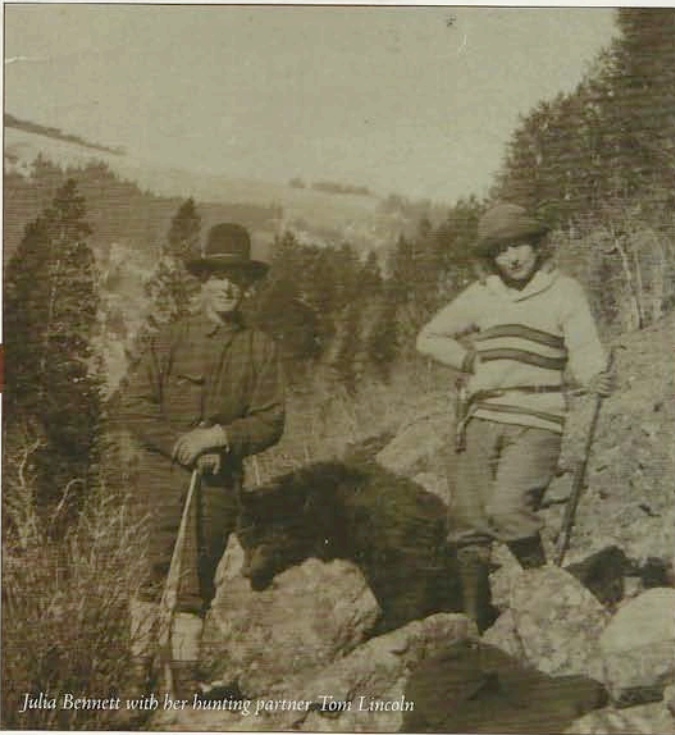
Within a few weeks, thanks to her single-mindedness—along with an ample amount of charm and innate marketing savvy—Julia had managed to convince the Princeton woman to put down a \$1,000 deposit on a \$5,000 booking for the summer. She also persuaded the young and not-yet-famous country singer Tex Ritter, who was performing in a small role on Broadway, to sing at a picture show she had dreamed up to promote her ranch that would be presented at the posh Roosevelt Hotel.

“Through the shows and [the] Northern Pacific office, I booked eight more people, which was wonderful considering how tight money was then,” she wrote in a memoir.

Little did she know that waiting for her back home were the businessmen, who had decided they didn’t want to wait five years to recoup their investment. Moments after she stepped off the train upon her return, she learned that they had filed a lawsuit and were trying to sell her ranch.

“I made up my mind they could not stop me, so I went to the ranch to open up,” she wrote. And open up she did, even though the creditors had hired a man to stay at the ranch all summer to keep an eye on her.

The ranch survived, and Julia managed to keep the creditors at bay. But her story was far from over. She continued to struggle to make ends meet, traveling to New York each winter to find guests. While there, she managed to attract the attention of major New York newspapers, the Associated Press, and *The New Yorker* magazine, which published articles that resulted in bookings from as far afield as China and Norway—and even a long-distance marriage proposal.



Julia Bennett with her hunting partner Tom Lincoln

Over the years, her guests included two teenaged heiresses—daughters of one of the richest men in the United States; the ventriloquist Edgar Bergen; the famed Western explorer, painter and photographer William Henry Jackson; and the family of George Westinghouse III—son of the engineer and business magnate.

Despite her ability to attract well-to-do guests, the expenses of maintaining the ranch mounted, and she struggled to earn enough money to support her family year-round.

In 1936, she convinced Westinghouse to lease her his unused 300-acre estate in Tucson, Arizona, to operate a winter dude ranch, which she named the Diamond W and later purchased. She continued to run both ranches, driving her saddles and equipment back and forth until 1950.

And every October, between ranch seasons, she continued to go on month-long hunting trips, riding up into the Spanish Peaks with her packhorse and tent. She shot her last elk at the age of 84. Julia Bennett died in 1971 at the age of 91. ■■■

Lisa Hendrickson is a writer living in Indianapolis, Indiana. She is currently working on a biography of Julia Bennett. She invites anyone with information about Bennett or the Diamond J or Diamond W ranches to contact her at lisahendrickson@me.com.

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