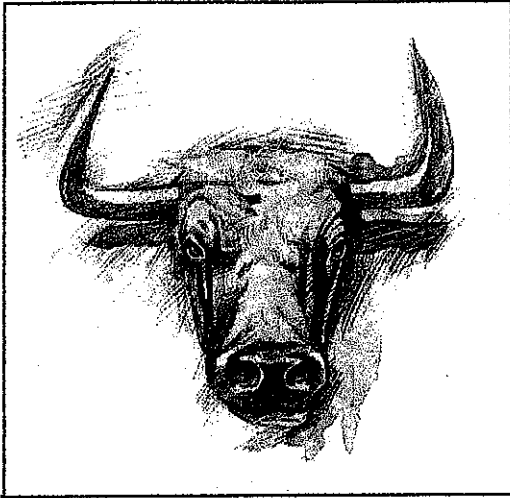


LYDIA'S CHALLENGE

THE JUMP-OFF CREEK, a novel by native Oregonian Molly Gloss, portrays a pioneer woman enduring hardships in Oregon's Blue Mountains. The following passage presents one such hardship, which may have been faced by one of Gloss's own pioneer ancestors.



THERE WAS A SPRING that made a reddish bog in a low corner of the Owl Meadow but no clear water in it. She had to bring water half a mile from another spring, hauling it in pails. By the time there were fifteen steers on the meadow, she was going down and back for the water six times a day, or seven. It was the worst of the work. There was a saucer formed among the stones of the old chimney where the cabin had fallen down, and she let the pails of water into it. But it leaked out slowly onto the ground

and often when she came onto the meadow in the afternoon the steers would be standing muddy-legged around the empty basin of the chimney, or snuffling the mud of the spring.

On one of the last days, a steer was stuck up to its belly in the quickmud in that bog. From half a mile off, coming in tiredly after a second gainless day, she heard it lowing dully and steadily with an unpitiful sound of complaint. She rode to the edge of the drying-up pond and looked at the steer unhappily. She was loath to get out in the mud herself. But the stupid steer kept up its crying, and made no effort to get clear of the bog on its own. Its eyes were glazed, blank.

She stood down beside the mule and dispiritedly bunched her skirt, pulling it up under the belt so her long shins in black stockings were bared above the boot tops. She stepped her boots unwillingly into the sucking mud and pitched a noose of rope around the steer's big horns. He kept up his steady complaining. She backed out of the mud and tied off the rope to the saddle horn of the mule, backed him up slowly until it was taut. The mule squatted back hard until the saddle tried to stand up on its pommel, but the big steer stood sullenly in the wallow, eyes