

Rockwood Brown Memories

Magelssen Ranch (Big Timber Livestock Co.)- Summer of 1945

Sonny Magelssen was a different sort of a guy. He was my Dad's client and that's how I knew him and got the job at his ranch. Sonny operated as Big Timber Livestock and had once lived in Big Timber, hence the name. His headquarter ranch was about seven miles South-West of Forsyth, Montana on Smith Creek. It had a few hay fields, a house a barn, and was surrounded by grazing land. I was 17 at the time. Sonny drove me down there early in June. Leonard Jensen was Sonny's manager and lived at the Smith Creek ranch with his wife and several kids.

As was typical at any cattle ranch, there was a continuing process of breaking colts and training them for the work to be done. I rode several green horses that had been rough broke. One of my jobs was to fix fence. I would do this alone, with just my horse, and fencing equipment consisting of fencing pliers, brads, rope, and a jug of water. Barbed wire fences needed constant fixing, especially the old ones. The posts made of cut cedar tree trunks and had three barbed wires. I ran into more rattlesnakes at that ranch than I have seen since. When I would get down from my horse to fix a fence, invariably I would hear a warning rattle telling me to watch out. (its best if you hear the rattle before you get down). In addition to my regular lasso, I carried a shorter section of very stiff rope for killings rattlers. I tied a large knot on the end of the rope and when swung to the ground accurately the knot would crush the skull of the rattler, without my having to get near the bugger.

I drove a team of draft horses to put up hay. I weighed about 135 pounds at the time, and it was everything I could do to throw on the harness and get the two large horses hooked up to the rake. The rake was old, and had a lever that you stepped on to trip the rake tynes behind and lift up, so the load would dump. At the end of the day, my right leg would really ache, because, with my light weight, I had to jump on the lever to get it to trip. Another of my jobs was to kill the prairie dogs that were ruining the hay field. I had a can of powdered Cyanide and a shovel. I would hold my breathe, open the can, put a spoonful of cyanide in the hole, dig up some sod and put it in the hole, and then take a breath.

There was rarely any down-time at the ranch. We worked on Saturdays, and then when Sunday rolled around, instead of sitting around and resting, there were always things to do, such as working in the barn or breaking the draft horses

to be a team. There was a gadget called a “running W” with ropes that were threaded through rings attached to collars and down to hobbles with a ring on it which was strapped to the horse’s front legs. The rope sort of had the shape of a “W”. The reins were hooked up to the bridle and used to direct the team to turn, stop, back up, etc. If, as was a usual thing, the raw team decided they didn’t like their schooling, they often started to run, and if they didn’t respond to the reins, the driver would yank the ropes on the running W and pull up the front legs of the runaways. They seemed to remember the incidents after a couple of times, and learned to obey the rein commands.

On Saturday night the cowboys would ride our horses to Forsyth, put them in a corral, and then hit the town. Hitting the town for a 17 year old boy was somewhat different than for the older guys. They would go the bars, then to the whorehouse, and back to the bars until closing time at 2:00 AM. I would go the movies, and then sit around until my friends got out of the bar. We’d then saddle our horses and ride back to the ranch at about 2:30 AM on Sunday morning. I would invariably get a jug headed thick necked green horse to ride. Horses know when you are heading back to the barn, and that’s when they like to run and buck. There was a flat spot just out of Forsyth, and that’s where the horses would misbehave. I could count on my horse bucking at that spot most every Sunday morning. I had an old sheepherder saddle that my Dad gave me (I’ve still got it hanging up in the basement) that had swells that stuck out past your legs in the front, and a high cantle at your back. Sitting in that saddle on top of a bucking horse, you wanted to get bucked off. I would get bruises on my legs and back and ache for days. Finally someone felt sorry for me and loaned me a roping saddle for the weekend trips. A roping saddle has virtually no swells at the front and about a two inch cantle behind, so I was usually out of there at the first buck.

The Second World War was still going on in that summer of 1945, and so a lot of the foods we were used to weren’t available. One food that I missed a lot was regular syrup, like Log Cabin. What we had was corn syrup. It wouldn’t have been important except that every morning we had fried eggs, bacon and hot cakes with corn syrup. Breakfast was always at 6:00, even on Sunday mornings. Seems like such a little thing to complain about in retrospect.

Leonard Jensen. I was a “City Kid” and Leonard always liked to test me to see if I could take the ranch life. Over-all he was fair to me and always saw to it that I was fed.

Emmett Schull. Emmett was the bronc stomper of the outfit. He came from Missouri and skipped school when growing up. He was afraid of no horse. He had

been bucked off broncs and had them fall on him so many times that multiple bones in his legs and ankles were broken and not reset properly. His legs bowed so much, and his ankles were in such bad shape that he actually walked on the sides of his boots. Emmett had a laugh like a cross between a hyena and braying donkey. He chose to ride a horse to town that had a reputation for meanness in that it would buck off the rider and then coming back to stomp him. One way to tell that a horse may not be the nicest thing in the world is by the number of brands. Emmett's horse had at least ten or twelve brands, meaning that his successive owners didn't like him for some good reason. But Emmett was too much for this mean horse, and I even think that Emmett looked forward to the horse bucking.

There were the remnants of an old automobile at the ranch that always intrigued me. It was at the edge of the ranch yard, with grass and weeds growing up around it. It was painted powder blue, the engine was all chrome plated and had what appeared to be an electric carburetor. The story told to me is that was brought there by a wealthy Arabian Prince and that it gulped gas so much that it was not possible to drive from one filling station to another.

In addition to the Smith Creek Ranch, Sonny owned and leased a tremendous amount of grazing land North of Forsyth and the Yellowstone River, and Easterly of the towns of Ingomar and Vananda (now a ghost town). These properties were mostly in Rosebud County but the top part extended into Garfield County. I'm guessing that he controlled 30 to 50 sections of land (a section is one square mile). By coincidence Dad leased or controlled a lot of this same dry-land grazing in the 1930's when he ran a large sheep operation with Gunner Lindsey. The soil is gumbo, and when it rained (which was seldom) the mud would get gummy and stick to your horse's hooves and wind around wagon wheels. It's funny how you can get attached to land such as this--- I did, and still am. The vastness and uninterrupted openness of the country, along with the smells—the sage brush and smell of the earth, get into your soul. I think I prefer that country to the mountains. There was a shallow valley about 10 miles Easterly of Ingomar that had constant wind devils (small tornados) dancing around.

About mid-summer, Leonard gave me another testing job. He took me, my bed roll, a team of horses, harness for two, some hay for the horses and grub for me and dropped all of us off at a deserted homestead on Big Porcupine Creek, which is located South-East of Ingomar and North-East of Vananda. He had delivered the buckboard the day before. That first night was not fun. I had taken care of the horses, eaten some food and was sitting on the steps to what was left

of the homestead. The sun had just gone down, and I was real lonesome. I looked out at the bare yard and saw a rattler that looked like a boa constrictor slithering towards me. Apparently it had just eaten a gopher which he hadn't yet digested. When it saw me it turned away. My bedroll consisted of two blankets between a canvas tarp. I threw my bedroll in the back of the buckboard, and that was my home. I slept like a log. I had one broke horse and one green horse. There were two sets of hobbles that buckled up to their front legs, but all the hobbles did was to slow down their pace of travel. In the morning I would have to walk a long ways to get the two and bring them back to hitch to the buck board.

My job was to drive the team and buckboard and move three sheep wagons at different locations to new grass. Leonard Jensen gave me general directions on how to get to the first wagon, four or five miles away (like head to that nob you see on the horizon and go right for five miles). At that time there didn't seem to be any fences or gates to restrict you and so you could just head out across country to where you wanted to go.

The sheep wagons were the traditional type, with a hoop frame, covered with canvas, on top of a wooden-wheeled running gear. The wagon had a wooden tongue that I could hitch to the back of my buckboard. Each herder and wagon cared for a herd of several hundred sheep. The herder dispersed his herd and moved them around locally so they would find new grass, but after 4 or 5 days, they would have eaten the grass down to the point that the wagon needed to be hauled to another location a mile or so away---and that was my job.

The three herders were as different as night and day. One of the herders, Mike, was a tall Irishman and he had his wife with him. I always ate with the herders, as I didn't take any food with me other than for lunch, and so the herder's eating habits were important to me. Mike's wife always had an apple pie on hand and her meals were great. Another herder was a Basque. I can't remember his name, but as I recall, the food he cooked was OK. Basques are from a region in Northern Spain and were the best sheepmen. (the Basques in Spain have tried to set up their own country, and in process they have blown up a lot of people and things) In the old homesteading days of the West, Basques were brought in from Spain and they became the backbone of the sheep business. A large number of Basques immigrated to NE Montana in the 1800's and still reside in the Glasgow area. My old friend, Dr. Len Etchart, is Basque, and his family was big in sheep ranching The third herder was a social misfit. The story I heard was that Leonard Jensen couldn't find a herder (all of the able bodied men were in the military), so he took his pickup truck to Billings and on a Sunday morning, picked

this guy up, intoxicated, on the sidewalk of Montana Avenue, and the guy woke up at a sheep wagon 50 miles from anything. Even if this story wasn't true, it fits his demeanor. He was mad at the world, including me. For breakfast he would fire up the wood stove, put on a pan of water to heat, throw in a couple cups of lard and some bread. That's it. I couldn't eat it, so my breakfast consisted of canned tomatoes and bread. I never liked pulling that herder to new grass. I remember one of my overnight stays at a sheepwagon. The herd consisted of a bunch of young (two years old, probably) sheep. During the night a lightning storm frightened the sheep and they stampeded in several directions. It took over a day to gather them. This was one of many reasons I didn't care for sheep.

The sheepwagon work wasn't the only time that I was in the Ingomar/Vananda area. The ranch had a hayfield near Vananda which Emmett and I harvested and stacked. At that time Vananda had a population of probably ten people and most of them were named Mysse. One of the Mysee girls (a red head) apparently decided to dilute the gene pool and hit on Emmett which led to me having to put up most of the hay by myself.

Another time, Emmet and another hand and I went to the abandoned homestead mentioned above to cut (castrate) some of the two year old stud horses that were missed the previous year. We did it the old fashioned way. We would rope the horse by the neck, two other ropes on the hind legs and then push him to the ground with the front and back legs spread. One guy (me) would hold his head back while the other two did their operating job between the horses back legs with a jack knife. One of the studs was particularly big and while I was pulling his head back, he broke the back rope and reached up with a hind hoof and hit me on my nose. I bled like a stuck hog, but there wasn't much else anybody could do for me, except they did pour some KRS (creosote) on the wound to keep the flies away. We didn't get back to town for another four or five days and because everything appeared to be healing up OK, I didn't see a doctor about it. My nose was sort of knocked out of alignment from the kick, and obstructed my breathing somewhat. About four years later I had the nose worked on by Dr. Morledge, Sr. at his office in the old Hart-Albin building in Billings. The procedure was the worst experience I have ever had. Doc Morledge gave me some local anesthetic, like novacaine and then went to work on me. The first thing he did was to take a pair of long-nosed pliers and re-break my nose so that he could re-align it. Then he had a tool that looked like a wood chisel, and with a hammer, took out some gristle, etc that had obstructed the nasal passages. He put two condoms in my nose and sent me home to recuperate. It so happened

that I had started dating my future wife, Marilyn, that summer--must have been 1950. I can remember laying in bed feeling miserable, when then Marilyn Alguire, and my good friend Jim Tingle, visited me. It turned out that they were out on a date together at the time. I couldn't do anything about it laying there with two condoms in my nose and hovering near death. In retrospect I realized they were there together to cheer me up.

Whether it was at the time of the nose kicking or while pulling sheep wagon, V-J Day occurred, and the Japanese surrendered. I didn't hear about it for several days after, and I missed all of the reported orgies and mob scenes where, in celebration of the event, women tore off of their clothes and acted with abandon. It was one of those points in history where I was around, but missed it altogether.

Sonny Magelssen drove me home at the end of the summer, and we went back by way of Ingomar. Ingomar's reason for existence at that time was that it was on the old, now abandoned Milwaukie Railroad station which served as a place where the steam engines refueled --with wood in the earlier days, and later with coal, and also took on water to make the steam. The railroad quit in about the 1950's. About the only thing there of interest in Ingomar was, and is, the Jersey Lily Bar and Café. In later years Bill Seward ran the Jersey Lily. Bill was a former Navy man and boxer. He wore a white navy cap and had a string wrapped around the top of his head that came down the center of his nose and tied onto his glasses to hold them in place (because the things that go over the ears were long ago broken) My son Scott and I have been there several times while hunting in the area, and we partook of the "Shepherders Hors d'oeuvres" which consisted of sliced onions, oranges and cheese on saltine crackers. The plates and silverware were all different, and the food was good—especially after you have been hunting all day. Back to 1945—Sonny and I stopped at the Jersey lily when he took me back to Billings, and while there Sonny talked with another sheepman or buyer at the Bar. When we were riding home, Sonny told me that in that conversation he had sold 30,000 sheep, with a hand-shake.

I later got to know Sonny better and on a different level when I started practicing law. I graduated from law school in March of 1952, practiced at Brown and Davis during April, and was called into the Air Force at the first of May. When I was discharged in May or 1954, I did a lot of stuff-- probates, divorce, criminal law, civil litigation, and within a couple of years directed most of my energies to insurance defense litigation. Sonny was a client of the firm, and toward the end of the 1950's he incurred a debt to a shop in Roundup which repaired his water

pump. As I recall, Sonny objected to the bill, and didn't pay for it after delivery to him. The Roundup outfit sued Sonny, with Jim Sandall of Sandall and Moses as counsel. Ben Forbes and I defended Sonny. The case was the very last jury trial in the old Yellowstone County Courthouse, which was shortly thereafter torn down and replaced by the new Courthouse. (a flawed structure) Judge Guy Derry presided. Judge Derry lived on 31st street, a block from where I grew up. He was famous in legal circles for calling his former son in law a "piss ant". Criminal Procedure provided that when cross examining a witness who had been convicted of a felony, you couldn't ask about what bad stuff he did, but for the purpose of discrediting him you could ask if he had ever been convicted of a felony. In his earlier days in Big Timber, Sonny was convicted of cattle rustling and so Ben and I had that to face in this trial. Jim Sandall, of course, asked Sonny the question and when he affirmed that he was a convicted felon you could see the jury slump in their seats, and our client going down the tube. Sonny didn't have a very good reason not to pay the debt (In a defense firm, you take your cases as you get them) and the Plaintiff was a nice guy who performed the work and wanted to be paid. The Jury didn't take long to reach a verdict for the Plaintiff, and on the Verdict form, signed by the Foreman, it not only awarded damages in the amount of the bill, but also it instructed Sonny to hand his pump over to the plaintiff. Ben and I knew that we had been beaten.