

Old-time cowboy still rides his beloved Sweetgrass Hills

Story and photos
by Mack McConnell

As he flew through the air, the young cowboy worried about where he would land. Would it be in the brass section where the instruments would be hard and bruising? Would it be in the woodwinds section where the clarinets and saxophone players might provide some cushion. Or would it be on the base drum where he would end his maiden flight and perhaps his rodeo career with a "boom!"

"What an odd place to put an orchestra, in the middle of a rodeo arena," he thought. The musicians had barely enough time to move out of the way and the cowboy crashed into the benches and boards they had been sitting on.

The landing was painful but not nearly as painful as the embarrassment of being launched into the air by a strawberry roan on his first bronc ride in a rodeo. Claude Demarest was 16 years old at the time. He was already an accomplished cowboy, but as green to rodeoing as the grassy Sweetgrass Hills he still calls home.

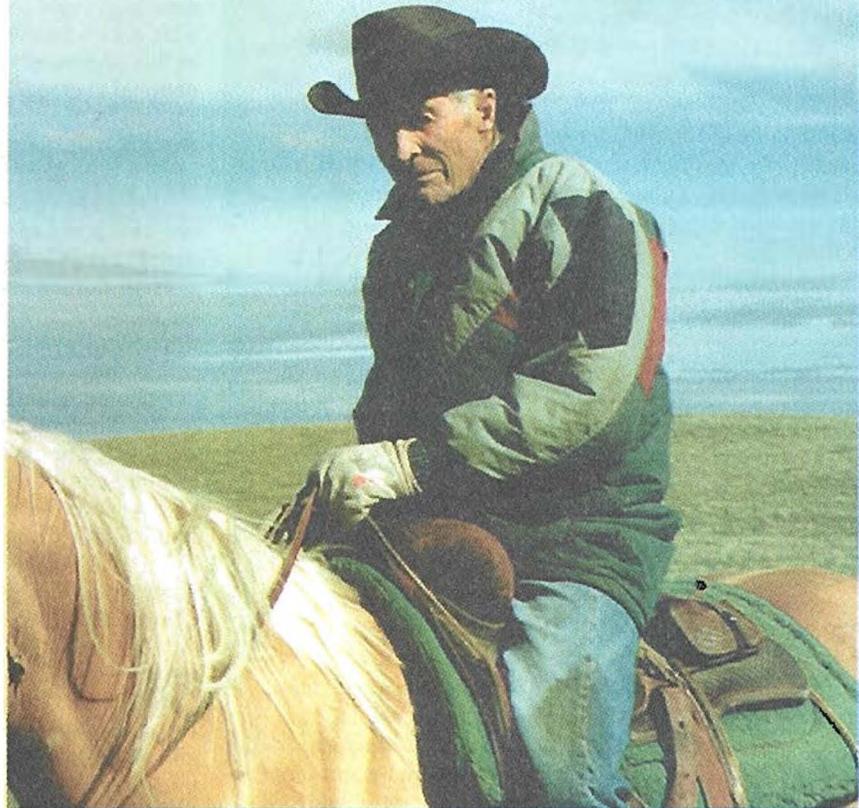
That rodeo was 69 years ago in the now extinct town of Goldstone north of Rudyard.

Claude remembered it as he watched riders on three strawberry roan horses "heeling" calves for branding last month.

"It's not often you see three strawberry roans in one place like that working cattle," he mused.

It was branding time at the Demarest ranch and a couple of hundred of calves in the enclosure milled around as their mothers, most of them outside of the fence, bawled incessantly for their offspring.

Just a couple of hours earlier,



Claude Demarest, at 85, still very much a cowboy.

Claude had mounted his palomino and rode out with several other people to round up the herd. Now he stood watching as horsemen looped lassos around the heels of calves in the herd and dragged them, frightened but unharmed, to two-man teams of "calf wrestlers" who held them down while the branding, vaccinations and other "doctoring" took place.

It was a large crew of friends, family and neighbors on hand to do the roping and muscle work, so once the cattle were rounded up, Claude's role in the corral was mostly supervisory, and he helped tend the gates.

"It kind of bothers me to be left out of the action," Claude said wistfully

watching his son Doug and the others work the cattle. "You know, I'm 85 years old and I've never missed a branding. I could still heel calves." And he could.

"Before I started showing people how to heel calves, they all just wrestled them down around here. That was a long time ago. An old cowboy showed me how to do it. He told me it didn't make sense to wrestle the calves when we could let horses do the work."

And Claude learned how to spay heifers and was teaching others how to do it even before area veterinarians were doing it.

Claude pulled his black hat down a little tighter as the chilly spring breeze

stirred the green bandana around his neck. A young cowboy, also wearing a black hat, came up to ask him a question. As they talked, the intense expression on the young man's face was one of respect and serious interest. The youth knew he was talking to a man who had seen and done it all.

Later that day, after the branding was over and everyone was fed buffet-style in the ranch's large workshop, Claude had time to reminisce. He sat on a cot in the ranch house, petting his unlikely companion, a miniature poodle.

"She's the best cow dog in the Sweetgrass Hills," he said with a grin. "She stays in the pickup and out of trouble." Claude ended up with the dog when it's owner, one of Claude's granddaughters, moved from Washington, D.C. to Florida and couldn't take it with her.

The conversation turned from poodles to one of Claude's favorite subjects, family history.

"It was a hundred years ago today that my Dad came to Montana," Claude said. "He came to Billings from Nebraska. Then, in 1901, his brother joined him and one day they left Billings on horseback and one pack horse and took off cross country headed for the Sweetgrass Hills. The packhorse fell as they were crossing the Mussellshell River. They were able to retrieve their bed rolls and a frying pan but they lost all of their grub. If there hadn't been a lot of rabbits and if Dad hadn't been such a good pistol shot, they would have gotten mighty hungry."

Claude's father worked in ranches in northcentral Montana and southern Alberta before he got married and bought a ranch just north of Whitlash. In 1912, he took Claude's mother over a hundred miles in a buggy to Great Falls where she gave birth to Claude. A buggy ride a short time later returned mother and child to the valley between the small mountains known as the Sweetgrass Hills. That valley has been



Doug Demarest puts the family's brand on a calf during this spring's branding at the Demarest ranch near Whitlash.

the cradle for four generations of Demarests. Claude's family, especially his daughter, Auverne Douglas, of Seattle, realizes that Claude is a treasury of family and community history. They have convinced him to write a book. He has begun that work.

Claude received his formal education, all eight years of it, at Whitlash School. In those days, money for

schools was scarce.

"We had school until the school ran out of money," Claude recalled. "Sometimes the school year was just six months long."

Although his formal education was brief, he worked long and hard in the saddle to achieve the equivalent of a doctor of cowboying degree. He started trailing cattle from local ranches to railheads at Chester or Galata while still in his early teens.

"There was always someone wanting me to do it and Dad was good enough to let me go," he said. "We always took it slow. It took three days to get there and we loaded on the fourth. I got two dollars to two fifty a day. Then it took a day to get back. I'd get \$10 for the trip. Of course nobody trails anymore. That stopped some time ago, trucking is much better. But I spent an awful lot of time in the saddle. I went everywhere on horseback. I'd ride 15 miles just to get to a branding. Now with the horse trailers, there's nothing to it."

Claude also "broke" (trained) horses to make money. Sometimes he would break them while working on a cattle drive.

"I'd take the horse with me and use it," he said. "By the time I got back, the horse would be broke."

Claude terms himself lucky when it comes to health and injuries. Although he rode in rodeos, broke brones for a living and spent his whole life doing hard and sometimes dangerous ranch

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Bill Harmon holds a calf while Claude Demarest's granddaughter, Crystal Hall, vaccinates it. The branding is a community, as well as a family event.

Cowboy

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work, he has only broken one bone, a finger. And he almost never gets sick. Other than work, he doesn't attribute his continued good health to anything particular. He's not been a teetotaler.

"I've had a few highballs along the way," he said.

Ranching has been a good way of life for Claude and he has no plans to stop.

"I may die tired, but not retired," he said. "I've seen a lot of guys quit. It's not good for them. You know, I don't really feel that well today but it's the first puny day I've had in 40 years."

But Claude admits with a smile that, "The hills are getting steeper, the horses are getting taller and the ground is getting harder." And he has lost most of his hearing in one ear.

But his eyes are bright, his walk is firm and his wit is sharp. And he has no trouble finding work to do on the ranch, which is where he prefers to be.

"I just came back from a trip to New York City to see my grandson graduate from college," said Claude. "That's a good place to be from. Too many people, and the buildings, they're so tall you have to lie on you back to see all the way up them."

One reason for Claude's good health and longevity is probably Elsie, his wife of 62 years, who passed away just a couple of years ago.

"She came to this country in 1930 to teach school," said Claude. "Girls were scarce back then. I was lucky."

To describe his and Elsie's happily married life, Claude said, "I dabbled a loop on her and she never took up the slack."

His outlook on families and child rearing are a bit old-fashioned, he said.

"I know it's not a popular thing to say now days, even sometimes among some of my own, but I can't help but think that we'd have a lot less troubles if women would stay at home while their kids are growing up. Kids need that care and attention. The husband does too," he adds with a grin.

"Of course I realize things have changed. There was less stress back then.

And there is more out there to choose from now and people don't want to settle for less than the best. And they can't get that unless both parents work. It's just a matter of choices. I wish they would choose to wait a few years and get their families started off right."



Claude Demarests holds his "trouble-free cow dog."

Besides ranching and his family, Marias River Electric Cooperative has been a major component in Claude's life. He has been on the board of directors of the Shelby-headquartered co-op for 45 years.

"People around here love the co-op," Claude said. "Unlike some areas, and some

members of the younger generation, most of the people here realize and appreciate what had to be done to get this service. As long as they realize that and are active in it, they will be a part of the co-op and the co-op will be a part of them. Of course I have seen a lot of change, especially in the growth of expenses and the payroll.

"As far as this deregulation of the electric industry goes, we have the cheapest rates in the state, almost the nation," Claude said. "I don't see any sense in us getting into it now."

Marias River Electric has chosen not to open its system to retail competition, at least for the present.

"We are lucky to have a co-op manager like Larry Nelson," said Claude. "He came into a tough situation and made it work."

Larry has similar praise for Claude. "In the 18 years I have been manager, Claude has missed only two board meetings. And he has to drive 60 miles in all kinds of weather to get here. He's one of a kind. And he's a very sharp guy."

Claude was re-elected to the board again at the co-ops annual meeting this past May.



Community brandings, there are several of them each spring in the Sweetgrass Hills area, are chances for area ranchers to visit as well has help each other with a necessary task.