

SANDHILLS SURVIVOR

Call him a Renaissance man of the Sandhills. Albert Hebbert is skilled in many of the arts and sciences of survival in a land where cattle ranching has long reigned.

Albert Hebbert has spent most of his 89 years with a little sand in his boots. Since coming of age, he has toiled as ranch hand, trapper, hay contractor, blacksmith, well-driller and rancher. He cowboied for some of western Nebraska's bigger outfits and he even served a stint as a deputy sheriff.

But in this part of the world, there may be no greater compliment than to be called a true Sandhiller. Albert Hebbert is one.

The son of a homesteader, Albert was born in a log cabin in the Pine Ridge area of northwest Nebraska. There was no doctor in attendance because, as Albert put it, "they didn't know they needed one."

Albert's father, Harry Hebbert, ranched in the panhandle country, renting first one place then another until he was sick of it. Longing for a place of his own, he loaded his grub box and some grain for his horse and headed south into the Sandhills. He filed a homestead claim in April of 1909 when Albert was four years old.

"He took my mother and us kids out there and pitched a tent," tells Albert. "Then he took the wagon back to town for lumber and more supplies. He was gone at least six days. That claim was 40 miles to either of the nearest towns, Gordon or Ashby. I think about that when I hear about somebody who is living in a good house and feels afraid to be alone. Well, back then, if my mother was scared nobody knew it."

When Harry Hebbert returned, he built the family's first ranch house. It was just a claim shack covered with "building" paper, but it withstood that first tough winter of 1909-10.

"It was tough and it killed lots of cattle but it wasn't as bad as the blizzard of 1913," adds Albert. "That one buried many cattle and left the rest coated with ice. I don't remember that Dad lost too many but he couldn't stand to either."

The Nebraska Sandhills encompass more than 19,000 square miles. The grass-covered dunes represent one of North America's great



Albert Hebbert spins Sandhill yarns with great-grandson, Matt.

STORY & PHOTO BY TROY SMITH

grazing areas. But the cattle industry really got a foothold here when cattlemen realized their herds would benefit from the harvest of some of that grass as hay for winter feed.

During the early years of this century, when the Hebbert Family settled in the Sandhills, the days of open range were just giving way to a more modern style of ranching where holdings were delineated by ribbons of barbed wire. The modern rancher of the day hired crews of men to mow, rake and stack hay on the meadows. Working on a hay crew often was a youngster's first paying job, as was the case for Albert.

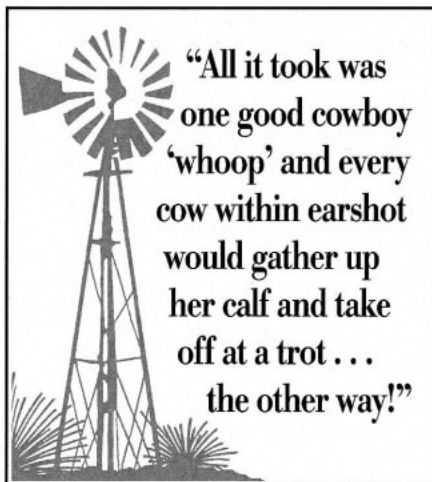
His first paying job came at age 14, haying for the nearby Toadstool Ranch. The outfit also hired Albert's brother who was one year older but just as green.

"Young and green as we were, you would think they would have put us on something other than mowers," muses Albert. "Or at least they should have put an older hand with us, but they didn't. They put us on those 'Big Four' McCormick mowers and sent us way on ahead of the rake crew. We survived it."

Today, a four or five-man crew using modern equipment can harvest thousands of tons of hay each season. But when Albert joined the work force in 1919, it took 12 to 14 men and 32 head of horses or mules to make hay. An average crew had four mowers, each drawn by three horses. A pair of horses was hitched to each of two rakes. Three or four sweeps bunched the windrows and pushed them to the stacker. Each sweep required a four-horse hitch; another four head operated the slide stacker to lift the bunched hay and dump it on the stack. Two men with pitchforks worked on top of the stack, evening out each load placed layer upon layer.

Some of the work horses were honest and good, but none were totally immune to mishap. Encounters with bee nests and other unexpected things could lead to run-aways dangerous to equipment and men. Sometimes counterfeit horses ended up in harness when some rancher was trying to save a dollar by cutting corners.

Albert remembers one episode as scary, funny and fast. He and other members of the mower crew had been working well ahead of the rakes and stacker. Quitting time came, all were anxious to get back to ranch headquarters. The horses were unhitched and turned loose to graze, except for Albert's team. They remained in har-



ness, hitched to a cart for the ride back to the ranch.

"We decided we better hurry because the loose horses wanted to go back too, and we had left a gate open," Albert recalls. "We needed to get over the hill and head them off before they reached that gate. The loose horses started to run and just as we topped the hill, my mares stuck out their noses and opened up. We had a ride started, gathering speed going down that hill, and I couldn't pull them up. Two of the fellows bailed out right away, but another one rode it out with me. At the bottom, we ripped through a stack yard and the cart broke up. When we finally stopped rolling, we picked ourselves up, gathered up the team and headed in. The boss didn't say too much about losing the cart, but I wish he'd been with us when we came down off of that hill."

Horses were important for powering haying equipment and for cattle work too. Albert says the cattle of those days were nothing like the well-bred stock of today.

"When I first hit the Sandhills most were wild old range cows and they were every color of the rainbow," he says. "All it took was one good cowboy 'whoop' and every cow within earshot would gather up her calf and take off at a trot . . . the other way!"

Ranchers with large numbers of cattle required sizable strings of horses and Albert remembers his initiation to the job of horse wrangler for the Spade Ranch. The Spade once was one of the largest ranches in Nebraska and, over the years, was operated by several different individuals. One was a South Dakota rancher named Tom Arnold.

"In the fall of 1923, we'd finished haying for the little outfit I'd been working for.

They weren't going to need me through the winter. I rode over to the Spade to see about a job. Tom Arnold was just taking over and hadn't moved all his stock down from Dakota. He hired me the morning I showed up, cut me out a couple of saddle horses and told me to go with two other fellows. They were supposed to show me what to do. We headed north and kept going until we got to Arnold's ranch up by Scenic, S.D. Those two fellows showed me a bunch of horses, 33 head as I remember, and told me to take them all back to the Spade.

"If I'd had more experience, or been a little smarter, I would have told those two right where to go. They had just brought me through a lot of country I'd never seen before, then handed over those horses, all kinds of horses. Some were young and unbroke, some good, some rode down and wore out. They told me to drive them to the Spade, alone. I don't think they really expected me to make it. I did.

"The toughest part was from Arnold's ranch to Porcupine, S.D. It was still pretty much open range in those badlands and there were some little bands of half-wild horses. I'd try to keep my horses headed south, but they'd see those others and take off. And when I got to Porcupine, the Indians were celebrating something, all decked out in their brightest colors. They took off again."

Albert was lucky. His horse fell with him just once while trying to turn those horses. He wasn't hurt and made it back to the Spade with every horse. Making about 40 miles a day, it took three days.

Another episode that challenged Albert's cowboy skills involved a bunch of hogs that he and some other ranch hands were assigned to deliver. Back then, almost every ranch kept a few hogs for home consumption, but this true tale involves more than 100 head of "stock" hogs that had to be driven some 70 miles across the hills.

"We took two wagonloads of ear corn to tease the hogs along and get them started," says Albert. "They were pretty hungry and they'd follow those wagons squealing all the way. But they would stop at every water hole and we'd have to pitch out a little more corn to get them moving. Then, on the morning of the second day, my count was 18 head short. I rode back and found those in a sunflower patch and managed to get caught up again. The trip took three and a half days. We made it."

As a young, single man, Albert worked

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here and there for ranches large and small. He made hay in the summer and pitched it to cattle in the winter. He cowboied for wages and made extra money breaking horses and trapping muskrats on the Sandhill lakes.

Albert married Ima in 1929, just ahead of hard times and the dry '30s. Ima had come to western Nebraska to teach at the local school. The young couple made their home on a little ranch located 30 miles out of Ashby and lived there during the Depression years.

"Times got pretty tough. Ranch wages dropped from \$100 a month, to \$40, and then really went down," says Albert.

The Hebberts put together some cattle and started a small cow-calf operation, but Albert also went into the hay contracting business. Rather than maintaining enough equipment and crews to put up all of their hay, some ranchers would contract the jobs to Albert. Then, during the winter Albert worked as blacksmith for the U Cross Ranch, one of the area's prominent spreads.

In 1944 Albert and Ima bought a place near the edge of Ashby. They stayed in the

cow business and sometimes ran a few yearlings. Albert also got into the well-drilling business covering a big territory. He "welled" all over the Sandhills and up into South Dakota, drilling close to 100 wells in an average year.

Times Change, and We With Time

During his lifetime, Albert has witnessed many changes but none so significant as those brought by mechanization. It changed and continues to change the methods of making hay and generally altered the way Sandhillers handle distance between town and remote ranches.

"Distance doesn't mean much anymore," Albert says. "Back when a horse or wagon was your transportation, you didn't make many trips to town. So you looked forward to special occasions when folks got together. We really looked forward to dances. If there was one anywhere around we went. Some folks don't believe me when I tell them that most cowboys wouldn't dance in their boots. They'd tie their dancing shoes to the saddle and put them on at the dance. That's different from now when the only time some of these cowboys wear boots is to a dance."

Country dances were important social events in sparsely populated country. They

offered opportunities for fellowship, romance and pranks too.

"There was an ol' school marm that used to show up at the dances," says Albert. She was tall, real tall, but self-conscious about it so she stood around all hunched up. And her feet were big!

"Well, one of the fellows was a good sport and felt a little sorry for her. He volunteered to ask her to dance first, if the other boys would cut in one after the other. That way, she would get to dance but none of the boys would have to dance with her very long. They agreed. But instead of tagging in, the boys whispered something to the music makers and just hung back to watch while the music played on and on."

Albert and Ima Hebbert have been dancing together for 65 years. They raised four sons and a daughter, and now have 19 grandchildren and 31 great-grandchildren. They've seen many changes, including changes in the Sandhills.

Ima says the country looks much different from the barren, treeless land she came to as a young school teacher. She thinks a few trees make a big difference and finally, she's starting to like the looks of this place.

Don't be fooled. Ima is a Sandhiller too.

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