

It's Better to Be  
Lucky Than Good

*an autobiography of a real cowboy*

*Merle Aus*

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and Bruce Bainbridge.

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*To My Wife, Rose Marie*

*Because June 9, 1960 was the very  
luckiest day of my life.*

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It's Better to Be Lucky Than Good



It is so full of minute detail of a period that is now past. I think it is valuable as a slice of local history. It is rare to find an amateur memoir which has such careful recollections and documentations.

*Valerie Hemingway*  
Author of *Running with the Bulls*  
*My Years with the Hemmingways*

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# Prologue

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Will Rogers, the famous humorist, once said, it's better to be lucky than good. I am probably not good at anything in particular but I've been lucky at times.

This book is mostly about me and it's all the truth. I have no writing experience nor do I have a broad vocabulary. So why am I writing a book? Well, it's something I've never done before and I like a challenge. This is not about a celebrity but about a common ordinary person who has lived a long time. Perhaps my generation has seen more changes, both good and bad, than any other generation in history. The computer is hard for some of us old timers to comprehend but it is one of the modern inventions that will do such amazing things it's unbelievable. That is one of the good changes and it certainly has been a handy tool in writing this book.

I wrote most of this in longhand and then had a retired language teacher do most of the typing. I told her to type it as it was written because I thought my grammar was pretty good. But I'm finding out that is not so. I had to get Kristin to transfer it all unto Rose Marie's computer. It underlines in red all my mistakes. So I'm learning to type again. I'm getting faster. I can now type with both hands, (one finger of each.)

I am fortunate to have had good hard-working Christian parents who raised 7 children, who got along well and had a lot of friends. My parents had both good and bad luck, and like most early day homesteaders, didn't accumulate a lot of wealth, but managed to make it through the great depression and lived a long life. A few days before he died Dad told me he had paid all his debts. Not every one could say that in those days.

The luckiest and happiest time of my life was the summer of 1959. While doing a bit of acting in a play called *Old Four Eyes*, I met the most wonderful girl I had ever met.

Rose Marie Goetz had come to work in the show too, and it didn't take us long to decide we wanted to spend the rest of our lives together. We were married the following spring. It's the smartest thing I have ever done in my life and it's been wonderful. We have been best friends ever since.

Kristin was born in 1965, making me a proud papa. She took to horses at a young age and she was very successful in horse shows. She also took to books at an early age. If she wasn't out with the horses she was probably in her room with a book. We were glad she liked to read. She graduated from Carroll College at the head of her class and became a C.P.A. and then went on to get a Master's Degree in agriculture at C.S.U.

Kristin met Bruce Bainbridge at C. S. U. They were married and moved to Montana where they are both teaching at Dawson College. They also have some Paint horses and they do the heavy work here at the ranch. With them nearby we will hopefully be able to stay here for a few more years. Bruce has a Ph.D. in Ag. Economics. People tell us both he and Kristin are great teachers. Bruce also has other talents. He can and does do anything that needs to be done on the ranch, from building fence, to putting in water lines, doing electrical work or welding. He does

all the things I wish I could still do and he moves faster than anyone I know. He has a way of getting horses gentle and I like the way he works with colts to get them to load in a horse trailer without getting them excited or nervous. When Rose Marie and I have company for dinner and need help in the kitchen, Bruce is good help there too. He and Kristin are both very considerate and they take good care of us in our old age.

Ranching has always been my primary occupation but I've done other things part time. I bought a truck (with borrowed money) when I was 19 years old and eventually ran 2 trucks. I sold out after 6 years.

I have also done other things like saddle making, sheep shearing, rodeoing, acting, real estate sales, bought and sold ranches, broke a few horses, and have done some wood work and carpentry. I also taught saddle making at Dawson Community College for 15 years. Everything I've



*Bruce Bainbridge  
and Kristin Aus*

done I've enjoyed so I'll say I have been lucky if not always so good.

I hope you enjoy reading my simple effort at writing a book. If you do, tell others. If you don't, don't bother to mention it.

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# Chapter 1

## Homesteading

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A four year old boy was missing. He had been playing outside on a nice sunny day in early spring and now in spite of frantic calls from his mother and two older sisters he was nowhere to be seen. The ranch was built beside a creek. It was running high from the recent snow melt and the mother was afraid the boy had fallen into the water and was swept away. The sisters were supposed to be watching after the boy but each thought the other was doing it. And he just slipped away.

But the boy was in no trouble – yet. He was just playing hide and seek with the ones who were looking for him. When he heard them call the first time he was behind a little A shaped coop that was used to set turkey hens or chicken hens when they were setting on eggs to hatch. He slipped inside the empty coop and thought they will never find him there.

He was right. They didn't think to look in the coop for him and he soon tired of the game. Like most kids his age his attention span was short. He finally came

out of his hiding place and began walking toward the house feeling pretty proud that he had found such a good hiding place. The mother was a very gentle loving person but when she saw the boy she lost her temper and became angry. That was as close as I ever came to getting a spanking.

That little boy was me and I got a lecture I never forgot. That was the first event of my life that I can remember. Even though it was nearly 77 years ago it is still as clear as if it had happened last week.

This took place in southwestern North Dakota. Scranton was our nearest town and that is where I was born. I am the youngest of nine children. Seven of us grew up to be adults. I had one brother and five sisters to wait on me so I became pretty spoiled but I liked it.

The folks were one of the very earliest homesteaders in that part of the country. It was 1905 when they built their homestead shack and 1906 when the family came out. The claim was 60 miles southwest of Dickinson. That was the closest town then and that was where they unloaded their immigrant car. Their homestead claim was the south east  $\frac{1}{4}$  of section 14 township 132 range 99 Bowman county North Dakota but later they moved to the north west  $\frac{1}{4}$  of section 24. I heard Dad say when they got off the train with Mother and a baby girl about one year old and their worldly possessions, all the money he had was a \$5 gold piece. He had four horses, a wagon and one cow. He started to haul freight then with his four horse team. The country was filling up with settlers and freighting was good for several years. Since it was 60 miles one way to the railroad it took several days to make the trip. Mother would worry in the winter when a blizzard came up and Dad was out hauling. Several

times he had to stop in the night, because he couldn't see the trail, and walk around the wagon all night to keep from freezing to death. Mother would keep a kerosene lamp burning in the windows all night in case Dad was close to making it home. On one trip he had a passenger who wanted to go to sleep. Dad knew that if he did go to sleep he would freeze to death, so he used his horse whip to keep him walking and they both survived.

Those must have been tough times especially for women. With no electricity or plumbing they had to carry water in and then carry it out again. They raised big families and big gardens if it rained. They seldom got to town and neighbors were few and far between, especially in the early years. Mother used to say how lonesome she had been before they finally got some neighbors. The area where they settled had very few trees, just choke cherries or June berries and a few willows along the creeks. Mother talked about how she missed being where there were trees. They came from Southeastern South Dakota where trees grew everywhere. On the other hand Dad was probably pretty satisfied. The country was still open even after some settlers moved in. Stock could be turned loose in the fall and there was free grazing until spring. I can remember as a kid each spring the neighbors would round up all the horses that had wintered out and each one would trail his stock to his own place. They usually corralled them at our place to sort them. That was pretty exciting for me to watch all those men working on horseback.

My brother Wilmer was almost ten years older than I and I idolized him so much that I wanted to follow him wherever he went. I'm sure I was a big nuisance but he was very patient with me. Some times

he let me ride with him and I'd feel pretty important but if he had to go very far or very fast I had to stay at home. I remember one day he said I could go with him. He was riding a young horse he was breaking and I was on old Peanuts. He was the only horse Dad had at the time that was gentle enough for me. I was five at the time. Old Peanuts was pretty lazy and I wasn't keeping up very good so Wilmer cut a willow branch for me to use for a quirt so he wouldn't have to wait for me. Well, Peanuts objected to that and when I woke up I was in the house on a bed. Old Peanuts had bucked me off. Wilmer said I went over the horses' head, turned a summersault and came down flat on my back. That was the first time that happened and the last was 60 years later and there were also several times in between.

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## Chapter 2

# My First Horse

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The summer I was seven, Dad gave me a two year old sorrel filly. She had never been touched, of course, and was running out with a bunch of other mostly wild horses.

I immediately started to bug Wilmer to catch her and break her for me. One day he and a neighbor friend, Bud Sipma, about the same age, had some horses in the corral and my filly was with them. I must have begged Wilmer to catch her until finally he said, "Well, go ahead and catch her then." I'm sure he didn't think I could rope her but on the second try I caught her. I think I surprised everyone including myself. In those days we didn't know any way to get a halter on a wild horse other than to rope it and dally to a snubbing post. With the filly caught, Wilmer didn't have any choice but to halter break it and not long afterwards he was riding her. Two year olds weren't usually ridden back then but this was an exception. Colts weren't fed as much as they are nowadays so they weren't developed until they were three or four

years old. When she was broke gentle enough for me to ride, I pretty much lived on her every summer until school started in the fall. Besides that she raised me a colt just about every year. If I was herding sheep or chasing cattle the colt would tag along. Dad suggested I call the filly Flossie so that was her name.

Billy Carter was a horse buyer from Scranton, North Dakota, and he came out to buy a load of horses from Dad. He sure wanted to buy my horse too but I wouldn't let her go. I was awfully proud to have my own horse. I kept her all of her useful life. We used horses so much back then. It wasn't just for pleasure but it was our transportation. We didn't have four wheel drive pickups then.

Dad had some good horses. One he called Socks was well respected in the community around Scranton. He was jet black with a bald face and four white stockings. He was so high lived and eager to go that I wasn't allowed to ride him until both of us were older. There were many stories told of the extra-ordinary endurance the horse had. It sounded as if Dad would do more than his share on a long trail behind a herd of cattle or horses and Socks would still seem to be eager to go and the other riders' horses would be played out.

One day after Socks and I were both a little older, Dad was gone and I saddled Socks. When dad got home I was riding his horse. He didn't say anything so from then on I rode him regularly. I did the same thing with a team I wasn't supposed to be able to handle. There was another team that was older and gentler which I was supposed to use. One day when Dad came home from town I had the young team hitched to a slip scraper and I was cleaning a corral. A slip scraper has two handles to use to fill it or to

dump the load so there are no hands free to handle the lines. So it is best to have a well broke team because the lines are tied together and put around the driver's neck and under one arm. When Dad got home he saw I was getting along ok. He didn't say anything to me and I didn't say anything to him. I used that team from then on if he wasn't using them.