

An excerpt from:

WHERE THE RIVERS RUN NORTH

By Sam Morton

Rusty Wells topped a high ridge over looking the Powder River and drew rein on the black gelding. The horse pawed at the dry ground beneath his hoofs, causing small waves of grasshoppers to rise off the drought stricken land. The year was 1932 and the great depression that swept the land had little effect on either horse or rider. The fifteen-year-old had never felt more alive than he did at this moment. In sitting on this magnificent animal all his dreams of the past five years had come true. He was on the open Montana range, working for the biggest horse outfit in the world, riding a pure thoroughbred that was as attractive as he was athletic. He wasn't playing cowboy, he was living it. The young cowboy paused and admired the majesty of the scene below, giving silent thanks to God for putting him there. Reaching forward, he stroked the gelding on the neck, letting his hand run through the coarse black mane basking in the smell of horse and leather. He felt at the scab over his left eye, a reminder of the beating he had taken back at camp a week before at the hands of a crew cowboy. Neither the cut nor the thought of the cruelty mattered at all now. The biggest country he had ever seen laid before him in all its glory. His ride with the old cowboy was interrupted by only flashes of white from retreating antelope or the silhouettes of the gray mule deer trotting over the horizon in front or on either side of them. He was in wild uncivilized country and he loved it.

The sun reflected bright on the famous muddy river that wound through the dry hilly country where scattered herds totaling over a thousand horses were watering and grazing next to. The current moved over some shallow gravel giving it the appearance of sparkling lights. The air was the clearest he had ever seen, and carried the smell of sage, cedar and sweet grass. He watched a flock of pintail rise off a far bend of the river in unison and disappear over a high butte to the south leaving the Powder River, the horse herd, and the two riders behind. The horse herds were not just range mustangs; half of these were at least part thoroughbred. The herd had a life of its own; drifting along grazing, changing shape and yet remaining in a loosely tied confederation upon itself. The late afternoon sun reflected off the tails of the horses as they swatted flies. A dozen horses stood in the water on a shallow gravel bar. Rusty smiled as a mouse colored mare pawed the water splashing a fifteen-foot area around her waking others who were dozing, soaking sore feet. Rusty recognized the 77 brand on a gelding belonging to Al Irions; a horseman he did not know personally, but he knew the brand. The boy was pleased with himself, feeling like he was becoming acclimated with his job.

With ears pricked forward and an impatience to travel, the black gelding let Rusty know of the herd a good mile before the boy had seen them. After eight hours of riding, this horse showed little signs of fatigue. He was powerful and at the same time sensitive to the bit, where you needed only to move the reins for the horse to stop, slow, or turn. He put his feet down exactly right every time, never stepping on a rock or stumbling. What impressed Rusty more was the way the horse seemed to float when he moved. Sitting in the saddle on this horse felt so smooth that it “made your ass laugh” as wagon boss Sid Vollen said about athletic horses.

The gelding was put in his string three days prior and Rusty shod him and topped him off after supper while the other cowboys played cards and relaxed around the chuck wagon. He rode him for only about twenty minutes to see if he'd buck, and then spent twice that time brushing the dust out of his black coat until it resembled velvet. Tom McAllister, the old cowboy Rusty was riding with, seemed to know about every horse they saw. Rusty had heard Tom say to Vollen that this horses' bloodline was brought over from England by Lord Wallop, when Wallop built his massive herd of horses on Otter Creek south of Miles City in the 1880's.

Today, Rusty was riding with McAllister to check on the location of some range horses for Sid Vollen who managed the Chapple Brothers Company out of Miles City, Montana. The CBC as it was known was a rebirth of the old western days of the 1880's. Crews slept out on the range and ate out of a chuck wagon, working as the trail herds did 50 years before. The big difference was, the crew wasn't walking behind steers; they were chasing wild horses over rough country where a horse might step in a hole or stumble at speed, resulting in sometimes bone breaking wrecks. There were hidden cut banks and even cliffs a cowboy might stampede over chasing wild horses. Wild horses that had hardly seen a human were roped and wrestled by cowboys to be branded, doctored or castrated. There were few Cowboys that had not been severely kicked at least once during this procedure. Broken arms and legs were set by cowboys themselves, and often times they worked in spite of injuries, rather than being a cooks assistant and bump along in the cook wagon.⁴ Some men had taken to wearing baseball chest protectors to protect themselves. Men had a string of ten to thirteen horses, spent all day in the saddle and rode “broke” horses or “rim rockers” only when it was absolutely necessary. The cowboys were all expected to break wild horses and then use them on certain parts of the roundup. Crews adapted to the work and soon became hardened professionals at their jobs. They were predominantly young, with tough seasoned cowboys sprinkled among them. Because of the danger factor, younger cowboys were asked to sign releases and there was a large turnover rate among some crews.

After the stock market crash of '29, a lot of ranches went bust and drought hit the country hard. People moved out, left empty wind blown cabins and fences to fall as they would. The price of horses had fallen to nothing so horses were

turned loose on thousands of miles of vacant land to fend for themselves to be gathered again when and if the market came back. As a result, tens of thousands of horses were running loose on thousands of acres of state and abandoned ranch land. Thoroughbreds, Draft horses, and range mustangs all ran together in the wild and multiplied, reverting back to the wild state of their ancestors. At one point there was rumored to be over sixty thousand horses running loose in the state of Montana alone.³ These herds contained rouges that were hard to catch even by the most well mounted, wily cowboy. Stud fights for those who witnessed them were horrid, bloody affairs. These horses poisoned the mentality of the herds and made them all but impossible to gather. During the early 1930's, these animals were starving from the lack of the rich grass caused by drought. Grasshoppers and crickets that had infested the country would eat what little grass was left.

The CBC saw a way to profit off the range horses. The company bought up or leased huge tracts of land in central Montana from Miles City to the Canadian Border where the wild horses roamed for 17 dollars an acre.⁴ This gave the CBC possession of all unbranded stock that grazed the area. Labor in the form of Cowboys was cheap, as the west was full of competent cowboys looking for work during the depression. By culling the best and worst of the horses every year, the best horses being broke and sold as saddle or military horses, and the worst being shipped east, it saved many horses from starving and turned a profit for the company.

For Rusty Wells, the CBC was an opportunity to get out of the stockyards in Kansas City and into the country he had dreamed about since he could remember. The boy and his sister Mattie were raised in an orphanage since they were toddlers. His mother died in the influenza outbreak of 1918 and his father was killed in France during the World War. Rusty had developed a passion for horses at age ten when he got work as a chore boy in the afternoons at the Fred T. Platt horse barns next to the orphanage on Genesee Street.⁵

He cleaned stalls and fed the livestock there and at the stock exchange nearby. He had followed horse shoers and veterinarians around the yards like a shadow, watching with fascination and absorbing everything he saw. Rusty had eventually graduated to riding rough stock thru the sale ring. He learned to listen to a horse, watching their movements, eyes and disposition. It was at a horse sale in Kansas City that Rusty caught the attention of Tom McAllister, who was there buying stallions.

Fred Platt was fond of the boy and knew his desire to go west. The hard truth was that Mr. Platt wasn't sure he could afford to keep the fifteen-year-old on. The depression had hit his boarding business and the sale yard hard, and the job in Montana would pay Rusty thirty five to forty dollars a month.

“He’s got good hands and he won’t talk your ear off” Platt told McAllister. That suited Tom fine. He could not tolerate these young insolent cowboys wanting to ask about the “old” days, when all they really wanted was to run on about how they heard it was. So the fifteen-year-old freckle faced boy from Kansas City would now live the life of a cowboy.

Tom McAllister was a legend among horsemen of the west; he had raised thousands of horses in northern and eastern Montana at the turn of the century. Sid Vollen who ran the CBC out of Miles City had asked Tom to keep an eye out for riders. Tom noticed the boy worked hard, had a lot of horse sense, and was quiet with horses. McAllister’s only reservation about the boy was his age and disposition. The cowboys that worked for the CBC were a rough breed. He knew Rusty would work, but Tom worried the might be taken advantage of. If that were the case, McAllister would take the boy with him to check stock. McAllister had no children of his own but had raised several ranch kids buying their cloths and paying for their school. One of which was Sid Vollen himself who years before as an adolescent boy showed up at Toms ranch wanting to become a cowboy. Tom was now approaching seventy years old and doctoring a cut horse on the range was more of a job than it used to be, he could also use a second rider to hold a bunch of horses.

After two months of working with the CBC crew, Rusty became skilled enough with a rope to catch a horse in a rope corral. He had learned the technique of holding a horse’s head back while it was on the ground being castrated and branded. As a hand on a horse, he was as good as any on the crew. Unfortunately for Rusty, his thirst for knowledge, shy manner and assignments with Tom McAllister won him no points with the younger cowboys. Rusty Wells had taken a beating from Mitchell Kaycell, a cowboy out of Texas after he had taken a four-day trip with Tom McAllister to Glendive. When he got back, the Cowboy, jealous of what he considered preferential treatment bestowed on Rusty, began to badger the boy incessantly until he caught Rusty alone brushing his horse in the remuda corral. Rusty never had a chance; Mitchell Kaycell was almost two hundred pounds and Rusty was barely one hundred thirty. The nineteen-year-old knocked the boy down, cut his lip and bloodied his nose. It didn’t bother Rusty as it might, because now, the following week, Rusty Wells was riding over the prettiest country he had ever seen, riding the best horse he had ever sat on and working for the greatest horsemen he had ever known.

They were south of Miles City riding up the Powder River and McAllister, as he was apt to do, rode off from Rusty and trotted over and down a side drainage. Nothing was said and barely a look was given, but Rusty had learned to continue on his course, while Tom looked at some other country. He also learned when to follow or when to stay put. In a big open country you could easily get lost. If he stayed on his course, McAllister would find him. Rusty had followed a piece of advice that Fred Platt had given him upon leaving Kansas City which had helped him more than any lesson he had learned in his life; PAY ATTENTION

AND KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT. It was the code of the west. After riding along for a few miles alone, Rusty began to recognize land marks. He had ridden to this area on Powder River once before, which was around eighty miles southeast of Miles City. A mile away, Rusty saw the form of Tom McAllister topping out on a ridge. Like a ghost he would appear and disappear down draws, out of sight, only to appear again on a far away ridge like a silhouette. He never seemed to get out of a walk or slow trot. That a man could appear in two as far away places in as short of time without running his horse flat out, seemed impossible to Rusty but he knew that was not the case. From the ridge the young man looked down from under his broad brimmed hat on the herd and searched for blooded, better built horses. Though he was only 15, Rusty had developed a keen sense of judging horseflesh. From a distance of a quarter mile, he immediately picked out the stallions of the separate herds and noted the horses that were obviously physically superior to the rest of the range horses that the CBC ran. He gave the Black gelding his head and let him pick his way down the bluff to the river. On uneven rocky ground the horse descended the quarter mile effortlessly all the while with his ears pricked towards the massive herd grazing on the green flats next to the Powder River. High brown and gray bluffs punctuated the miles of sun parched land that rolled on for miles. Rusty gave the herd a respectable distance and unhooked his rope from his saddle and hung it over his saddle horn just to be safe. The knot end of a rope can sometimes turn a stallion on the fight. He had seen on two occasions cowboys carelessly wander into horse herds and be taken by aggressive stallions.

Rusty rode over next to Tom McAllister who was reading brands and examining the animals. The boy did not speak but sat on his horse patiently. He stroked the black geldings' neck with his hand and smiled sheepishly at the old cowboy whose old wrinkled face lifted slightly into a small brief smile. The two paused, dwarfed by the immense country, the herd of horses, and the famous Powder River whose name symbolized a history of the American west.

One of the few rivers in the world that flows directly north, the Powder was said to be an *“inch deep and a mile wide; too thick to drink, too thin to plow.”*

In sign language, the Arapaho, Sioux, Cheyenne and Crow rubbed dirt between their fingers and let it fall to denote the Powder. In the 1880's, a cowboy trailing 1,600 head of cattle from Riverton to Casper Wyoming, fearful of crossing the mighty Powder River, was so relieved when he discovered it to be dry in spots with only occasional waterholes, he celebrated with the toast “Powder River Let ‘er Buck.” when reaching Casper.

The phrase stuck and “Powder River! Let ‘er Buck!” was often used by cowboys to start the action on a rank horse; to open the gates of the arena or to pull the blindfold from a snubbed horse. During the First World War, “Powder River, Let ‘er Buck” had been the war cry of thousands of soldiers from the

American West who were plucked from a brief training in the states and thrown into some of the bloodiest fighting in France. Montanans had suffered horribly as they charged “over the top” into German Machine gun fire. The war had taken Rusty’s father who had been killed fourteen years before in Argonne.

Rusty had heard the phrase “Powder River Let ‘er Buck” used way back in Kansas City. It started with the famed 91st Division but soon spread thru the entire allied forces. Even the Frenchmen picked up on it yelling “Poudre Riviere!”

Tom McAllister rolled a Bull Durham and looked to the boy. He was a good hand with the horses, had no bravado, never ran his horse unnecessarily, and paid attention. He figured things out and did what he was told. He was good company on trips, never asked stupid questions or constantly talked as most cowboys did. In fact, the boy rarely spoke at all unless spoken to. Tom gave him the black gelding to ride because he liked the way he rode. A rough cowboy on a hot thoroughbred did not mix. He could see by the boy’s expression when he rode up that he appreciated the horse.

“How’d you get the name Rusty?” The old cowboy asked.

The question almost knocked the boy off his horse. He had never, in over five hundred miles of riding on different trips, been asked anything by Tom McAllister, much less a personal question. Instructions had been given or directions were given out, but never a direct question. The boy had been sitting at peace with the world watching the beauty of a wild horse herd and now he sat shaken and tongue tied. The boy reached in his tattered vest pocket and produced an old leather billfold and handed it to McAllister who looked at the word “Rusty” embroidered in fancy lettering on the front.

“My dad sent it from France ...when I was a baby” Rusty stammered. His eyes were as large as hens eggs at the prospect of having to hold his own in a conversation with a man he considered a legend. His face was so flushed, that even his ears turned red. McAllister looked at the billfold and the picture displayed inside.

“That’s a fancy wallet, is that a picture of your girl?” he asked handing the wallet back to Rusty.

“No sir, that’s my sister. She’s the one that writes me all the time” Rusty paused, feeling he’d talked too much. He panicked in his thoughts; Mr. McAllister had not asked him about his sister nor about letters. Now he would probably think him rude, or worse, a blabbermouth. He heard men complain that some cowboys could talk the ears off a wooden Indian and now he had blabbed. He wanted to apologize, but he opted to sit and be quiet, so embarrassed and self-conscious that he wanted to shrink into his saddle.

“Watch it!” Tom yelled at the same instant the black gelding spun and jumped a good six feet out from under Rusty, which left the boy dangling off the horse’s right side. The gelding was racing back the way he had come, the only thing left of Rusty on top of the saddle was his left calf and his hand which clawed at the saddle horn, the rest of him was hanging off the side of the runaway horse. His face was a foot off the ground, which was going by in a blur.

“Hold On!” he heard Tom yell. The cowboy’s voice inspired him to hang on. With all his might, he pulled with his left spur that was hooked over the back of the saddle. He felt the panic in his horse and heard hoof beats beside him. With combined effort of stomach, arm, leg, hand, and back, he pulled with a twisting strained motion and righted himself on the stampeding horse. He reached for the one rein that had not dropped, just in time to feel a sharp blow just above his knee. At once he saw the wild look of the charging stud with his teeth bared inches away. In one swift motion the stud grabbed him by the chest with his teeth and pulled him a foot out of the saddle. In a second, the boy’s look went from alarm to pain to fight. His right arm was useless as it was under the horse’s head, but he brought his left around and slapped the stud with the end of the bridle rein, which had no effect. Rusty was now in a runaway, lost his rope, hat, one rein, and had been bitten twice in a matter of seconds. He yelled at the attacking animal, which suddenly fell with a crash to the ground in a cloud of dust. Still atop the stampeding gelding, Rusty pulled to the left with the only rein he had left and circled the horse to a stop, reached down to retrieve the other rein and looked back to see what happened. Tom McAllister sat on his horse, facing the downed stud holding a dally to his saddle. He had roped the stud by the front feet while he was in the middle of charging Rusty. His rope ran from his saddle horn to the stud’s front feet. Every time the stud would struggle, McAllister’s saddle horse would back up and work the rope, pulling the enraged animal back to the ground.

“You O.K.?” he yelled to Rusty, watching the stud.

“Yes Sir,” the boy responded, sheepishly riding over.

“We’ll let him soak awhile, and maybe he’ll let us alone when we let him up. That was a nice ride; I thought you was gone.” he said calmly as he knew the boy’s confidence was shaken. When Rusty turned the gelding Tom noticed the blood on the boy’s shirt and pants. He felt a small wave of anger come over him and backed his saddle horse causing the stud to thrash against the ground as the rope pulled on him.

“You’d better start treating humans better or you’ll end up on some Russian’s plate.” the old man said to the stud before releasing the pressure on the rope enabling the horse to rise and step out of the loop. The stud jumped up, looked at the riders and ran back to the herd. Tom now broke into an extended smoker’s cough. Rusty was completely overtaken with awe at the calmness and speed at which the old cowboy handled the situation.

“You saved my life” Rusty said forgetting his shyness.

“The Hell! You had him pretty much beat back by the time I got there” Tom said, noticing the growing blood spots on Rusty’s leg and chest as he coiled his rope. The older man cursed himself for not seeing the stallion charge earlier. He had been looking at the boy’s wallet and now the boy was hurt.

“Better get off and let me have a look at those bites” he said.

The boy, embarrassed, protested politely but the old cowboy took the boy over to a spot where the river flowed clean over a gravel bar and inspected his wounds. It was worse than he thought; part of the boy’s chest muscle had been torn away and there was a deep gash almost to the bone above his knee. The old cowboy bandaged the boy’s wounds as best he could with what he had. He sprinkled lime that he carried in his saddle bag for doctoring horses on the cuts. The leg wound bothered him most as it took quite a little pressure from the boys neck scarf to slow the bleeding.

“We’ll ride over to the Leitners and get a car to Dunning’s. Can you ride?” He asked the boy.

“Yes sir, I’m fine. It was my fault... I’ll be O.K.” he pleaded and mounted the black gelding after inspecting his horse for bites or kicks. He was self conscious of having caused a change of plan. Tom McAllister made the boy put on his coat, knowing the boy may go into shock soon. It would be about an eight mile ride to Leitners ranch where he would leave the horses and get a ride to Dunnings over on Otter Creek where the boy could get doctored.

“Cross your leg over the saddle horn, it will keep bleeding if you keep your leg in the stirrup. Don’t worry about old Black, he won’t buck you off” Tom said. Rusty smiled and stroked the gelding’s neck. He was becoming light headed. He looked to the old man who was riding along side him.

“I’ll tell you about some of these big horse outfits” The old cowboy said. He was both worried for the boy and agitated at himself for not seeing the stud charge sooner. If he were a young man he would have taken out his rifle and shot the stallion, but as judgment is tempered with age, he realized that the stud was doing his duty to his herd. McAllister rode along side the boy and told him of the Indian horses, Sidney Paget, Oliver Wallop, and the thousands of well bred horses that had roamed the country. He told of Indian battles, horse thieves, sheep wars, hangings, horse races and anything else he could tell the boy to keep his mind off his injuries.

The black gelding as some horses will do, sensed the boy was hurt and rode along as gentle and smooth as if Rusty was riding an old made horse.

“Hang in there, we ain’t got far to go,” Tom said. The boy had lost enough blood that he was in a dreamlike state. The fact that Tom McAllister was riding along side of him, telling him stories, made Rusty feel as safe as if his injury was nothing more than a scrape. He felt the need to doze but every time he did Tom would raise his tone slightly to get the boys attention. As the two Cowboys rode off, the brown stallion raised his head, snorted, and herded some mares away with a bite to the back or an aggressive hazing with ears pinned back. After his show of dominance, the stallion had rejoined the herd in grazing after getting the last word in to the riders.