NATHAN SANDERSON

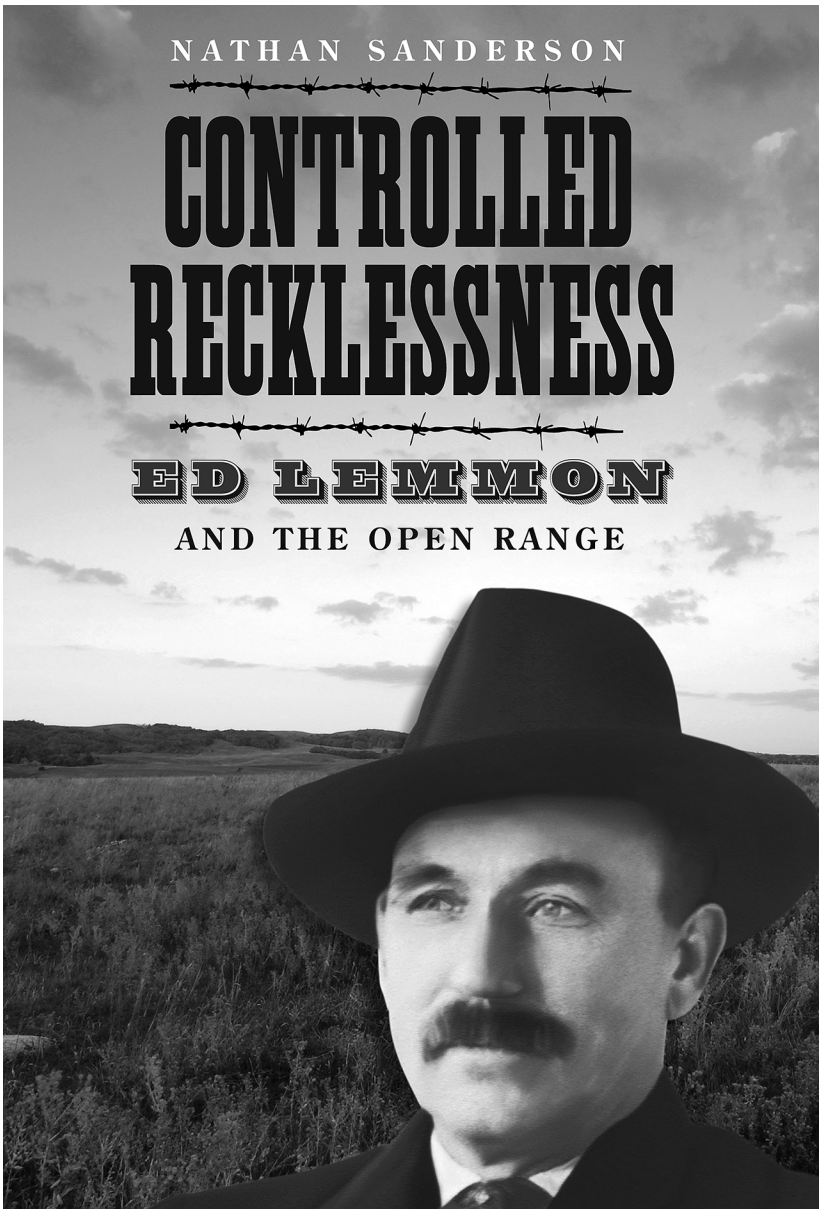
Book Excerpt

Controlled Recklessness: Ed Lemmon and the Open Range

George Edward ("Ed") Lemmon (1857–1945) ran an 865,000-acre ranch, bossed one of the nation's largest roundups, probably saddle-handled more cattle than any man who ever lived, and became an early member of the National Cowboy Hall of Fame. He helped to found several towns in both South Dakota and North Dakota and guided the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad across the Missouri River. Despite amassing a considerable fortune, he died nearly bankrupt.

Controlled Recklessness: Ed Lemmon and the Open Range, *published in 2015 by the South Dakota Historical Society Press, tells the story of a man whose career on the Northern Great Plains paralleled the region's economic and social transformations as the open range of his youth gave way to the fenced homesteads and boomtowns of his middle age and later years. Author Nathan Sanderson explores two competing sides of Lemmon's personality—the organized, controlled cattleman who employed a methodical, calculated approach to doing the job well versus the reckless, fun-loving cowboy who often took unnecessary risks to get the job done quickly. Lemmon's skill in the cattle business brought him wealth and influence, while his penchant for risk-taking contributed to several severe physical injuries and ultimately led to the downfall of his business empire.*

The excerpt presented here follows Lemmon from an 1890 range accident in South Dakota that left him with a broken leg and shoulder to a stay at his father's Nebraska farm as he contemplated whether to continue the cattleman's life.



Chapter Four

ROUNDUPS

. . . Every year, Lemmon looked forward to the "action, swapping experiences, [and] fun" of the spring roundups. With his lifelong fondness for storytelling and constant desire for action, the annual roundups suited his personality perfectly. Unfortunately for Ed, he would miss all but one day of the 1890 roundup due to a severe injury. Since his last major accident fifteen years earlier—the 1875 fall that crushed his right leg, crippling him permanently—Ed had managed to avoid serious injury save two broken collarbones, the left in 1884 and the right in 1886. Neither of these accidents caused him any great inconvenience, although the fracture of his right clavicle forced the right-handed Lemmon to start roping his mounts left-handed. But his lucky streak ended on 11 May 1890, just a day after the start of the spring roundup.

For most of the day, Lemmon had been leading a circling party of eighteen men not far from Smithwick Station in Fall River County in the southwest corner of the newly admitted state of South Dakota, gathering bunches of cattle and sending them back to the main roundup grounds with pairs of cowboys. He had just directed his last two cowboys to return to the roundup site with three hundred head when he noticed a group of fifty to sixty cattle that apparently belonged to a nearby homesteader. As his men left for the roundup, Lemmon rode alone about three-quarters of a mile to check the brands on the small herd, intending to return any "rangers" to the main roundup. He spotted six rangers among the group and cut them from the main body but could not prevent one of the settler's steers from joining his cut. Ed kicked his mount—S. I. Bay, the same horse he had used to swim the Cheyenne River in 1888—to a gallop to remove the steer from his half-dozen, but as he did the bay broke through a gopher tunnel on the edge of a hill, causing horse and rider to tumble forty feet to the bottom. S. I. Bay survived the fall uninjured, but as they rolled, the horse had flailed "all four of his ragged hooved limbs right in my face, digging it all to pieces, but nothing serious only as to looks." In addition to the cuts and bruises on his face, Ed had once again broken his right leg severely and fractured his left shoulder, as well.

After the fall, he tried to get the attention of his two cowboys. They were still within view but had not witnessed the accident, and Ed's voice could not carry against the stiff wind blowing in his face. Once they passed out of sight, Ed began the agonizing process of trying to set the broken bones in his leg and shoulder, but his efforts proved futile. Because he could not mount his horse, he decided to make himself as comfortable as possible and wait for help. He assumed that as the roundup boss, he would soon be missed and riders would come out looking for him. Getting comfortable was a difficult proposition, however, because in addition to the excruciating pain in his leg and shoulder, a light dusting of snow had fallen the previous night and had not yet melted in the chilly air. Ed was wearing only a thin shirt; his heavy flannel jacket and waterproof "slicker," or overcoat, were tied to the saddle and out of reach, and he "soon became so chilled," he said, that "I could only utter a guttural sound." . . .

Lemmon's accident prevented him from rejoining the 1890 roundup, but instead of staying with his wife and sons at the Flying V headquarters on French Creek, he spent the next several months at his father's farm in Thayer County, Nebraska. Ed's older brother Moroni had died on 27 February 1888 at only thirty-two, and Ed had not gone home for the funeral. He may have returned to Nebraska to pay his respects and to visit his sister Alpharetta and her husband, who lived nearby. In addition, according to Ed, his father James had been "clamoring" for him to "quit the range and come back to our old Nebraska homestead and settle down before I got killed chasing the longhorns." After breaking his right leg for a third time, Ed finally heeded his father's suggestions and returned home for the remainder of the 1890 cattle-handling season.

Lemmon appears to have made a genuine effort to give up his cowboy life. He loved everything about the open-range cattle business, but he was only thirty-three years old and had already suffered several severe injuries. Perhaps he began to question how long his body could hold out, given the physical demands and inherent dangers of his profession and the fact that both of his older brothers had died in their thirties. What seems clear is that concern for his wife and sons played little part in his decision. Ed did not spend his time away from the Flying V playing with his children, showering affection on his teenage

Frank B. Fiske photographed Ed Lemmon astride his horse at the McLaughlin Fair and Rodeo around 1927.

wife, or sitting at the ranch headquarters deciding what to do next. He spent it building an independent cattle business. . . .

While Lemmon tended cattle in Nebraska in 1890, two additional accidents made him rethink his decision to leave the open-range cattle business. He owned a string of purebred shorthorn cattle that he grazed on a ten-acre area of corn stubble within a larger cornfield. The cut section was "fenced" on its boundaries by the tall, uncut corn stalks. Ed cared for the animals himself, and on one occasion, as the cattle attempted to cross into the standing corn, he spurred his horse into a gallop to head them off. As he raced across the field, his horse stumbled and fell, throwing Ed from the saddle. He landed face-first into the cut stalks, with one of the sharp edges making a deep cut near his left eye. Placing a hand over his right eye, he brushed the blood out of his left and squinted "to see if daylight would appear, showing my eye to not be gouged out, and to my delight[,] daylight appeared."

Later that winter, Lemmon had the steers in what he called a "river feed lot," with the steep banks of the frozen Little Blue River forming the southern barrier of his makeshift corral. To make the most of his investment, Ed also owned a hog for each one of his steers. Because corn kernels would often pass through a steer's body undigested, he ran these hogs in the same pasture to clean up the waste grain, maximizing the cornfield's profitability. The river ice was relatively thin; it could hold the weight of a hog, but not a steer, so while the cattle remained north of the river, some of the hogs crossed to feed on the south side. The nearest bridge was a mile and a half away, so it took Ed quite some time to ride to his wayward animals, gather them, and return.

On one occasion after he had collected the hogs and driven them back across the river, he decided to try to take his horse the few hundred yards across the ice rather than make the three-mile return trip. The choice was perhaps the quintessential example of Lemmon's controlled recklessness. He rode to a shallow wagon ford two hundred yards upstream from his feed lot, dismounted, and limped out onto the ice to test its strength. The ice was solid except for a ten-foot-wide section in the middle kept open by the current. Using a stick to test the depth of the open section, he found the river only four feet deep. Ed decided that he would lead his horse out onto the ice, mount the animal, spur him into the current and force him to climb the ice on the far side, thus saving a half hour of riding time.

His plan did not go as expected. Lemmon's horse made an awkward plunge into the frigid river, dragging him in head-first. He had not removed any clothing, not even his heavy overcoat, and this poor decision combined with his crippled leg and the ice-cold water rendered him nearly helpless in the swift current, which carried him downstream. Luckily, one of his father's hired men was working near the Little Blue and heard his call for help. The man threw him a rope as he passed by the house and dragged Ed, soaked, freezing, and probably embarrassed, from the water.

Lemmon survived this latest near-death experience with no long-term effects—he even managed to retrieve his expensive Stetson hat—save one. As soon as he reached the house and met his father, Ed "did not hesitate to make it plain to him that no matter where a person

was[,] they encountered about equal dangers, and in the spring I certainly would go back to the open range, and longhorns, which I did." This single incident, which took place within the space of perhaps a few minutes, clarified Ed's thinking about his future more completely than the months he had spent in Nebraska. After Moroni's death, Ed probably sensed his own mortality and reasoned that if he wanted more time on earth, he ought to choose a safer way of life. Any semblance of a new approach vanished, however, after his river rescue. Once again, Ed felt free to pursue his life's work without guilt. He decided that if he was going to die, he might as well die doing what he loved. Ed loved working cattle. Never again would he question his gut instincts.

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On the covers: The popularity of baseball in South Dakota dates back to territorial days. For more than two decades in the mid-1900s, Pheasants baseball was a fixture of summertime entertainment and the local economy in Aberdeen. In this issue, Daryl Webb details the rise and fall of this professional Northern League team.