

The Story of Dennis George – Section One

By Stephenie Tanguay

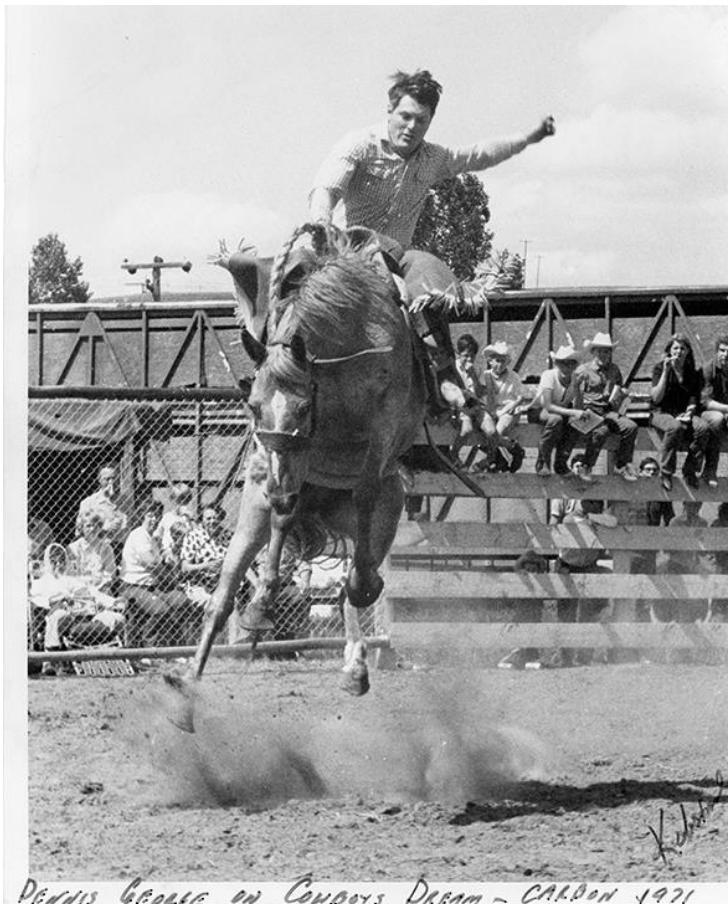


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“The date on the handle of that tool says it was made a little before I was born,” Dennis George says during a tour of his saddle shop. Everything has its place. Each tool strategically located depending on its use. Dennis claims he cleaned the area in anticipation of his guests, however, in an interview with a regional journalist several years back, Dennis’s grandson, Colt, reported that grandma says it needs to stay clean.

As World War II raged in the year 1944, Dennis George took his first breaths in Douglas, Wyoming. Looking over the creek in Sinks Canyon, Dennis remembers his boyhood days, “My dad used to bring us fishing here. The bin would be stuffed full and overflowing when we headed home.” Raised

in an area of the state and during a time when people still hunted to survive, Dennis knows the numerous honey holes in the region.

The glove worn by the elder Mr. George, Dennis's dad, hangs solemnly next to his picture on the wall in the saddle shop. One of many memories held in reverence and within eyesight on the walls of the saddle shop. "My dad worked in the shop late in his life sewing the horns and cantle bindings," Dennis says. "His name was Gene George. He was almost age 94 when he passed."

Born to Buck

Over the last century, the life of a ranch kid has not changed much. Like many of the local boys, Dennis started riding calves at brandings. An adolescent demonstrating his handiness. The area ranches combined the efforts of their crews during branding season each year. Everyone pitching in, moving from ranch to ranch. The tradition gets the job done and continues in the present day.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s around Douglas, Wyoming, there was not a shortage of calves. Soon Dennis was hooked. "I got in the calf riding when I was about eight or nine at the Wyoming State Fair. When you brought your rope back (to the producer) you got a silver dollar, and I made a business out of it," Dennis says. He earned four or five extra silver dollars each year by loitering behind the chutes. "Any boy that chickened out, I would drop down and nod my head."

"I never rode a saddle until I was 13. I rounded up cattle, everything, bareback."

"When I was in grade school, I showed sheep at the Central Wyoming Fair & Rodeo," Dennis remembers. "I snuck in behind the chutes during the rodeo and watched guys like Casey Tibbs. Every year up until I was about a sophomore in high school, I would be back there talking with the guys," he says.

The lanky young cowboy watched the bronc riders as they focused on their equipment. Amiable and eager to learn, "I got a lot of good tips and I don't think the cowboys even knew they were providing them."

Dennis graduated to bucking horses at "a little homemade arena not far from my folk's place in Douglas." A couple of colts at the arena needed someone to test them and Dennis stepped forward. "I crawled on and then it

was in my blood. I never lost that want to," he declares with the sparkle of youth in his eye.

From that point on the fearless young cowboy climbed aboard any available bucking horse. "I would go anywhere to get on a bareback horse," the former rough stock rider recollects.

In high school, Dennis started riding bulls in addition to broncs. "As a junior in high school, I started working all five events and went to the short round at state in all five," he says. The five events were bull riding, bareback riding, bronc riding, steer wrestling and calf roping. "We had our State High School Rodeo Finals in two days. So one day I had five runs and the next day I had ten runs. Talk about being tired out at the end of the day," Dennis says shaking his head.

Qualifying for the National High School Finals Rodeo in both steer wrestling and bareback riding, Dennis finished fourth in the bareback riding during his junior year.

As a high school senior, Dennis qualified for the short round in all five events and won the steer wrestling event at the State High School Finals Rodeo. Standing 6'2", Dennis says, "My size made riding the bronc saddles hard, but I loved it."

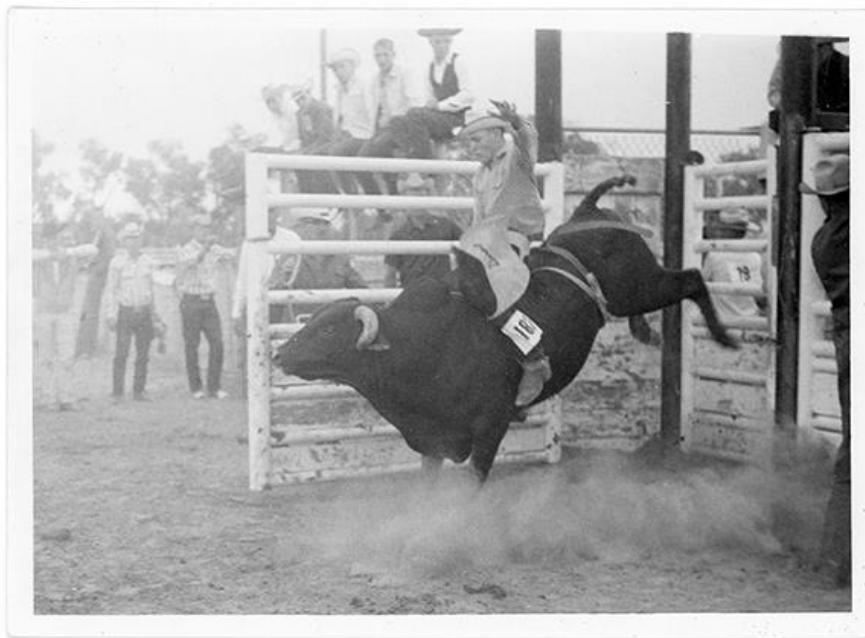


Image courtesy of the George family

With high school complete in 1962, the young rough stock rider became a permit holder in the Rodeo Cowboys Association or RCA, a precursor to today's PRCA. "I amateur rodeoed 'til I filled my permit, and then I just went to RCA rodeos."

Throwing Rocks

Sitting in their cozy living room Dennis remembers noticing his wife, Barb, for the first time. "I threw rocks at her when we were teenagers," he chuckles, "trying to shoo her away." After 50 years of marriage, his relationship with his wife sits at the top of his list of proud accomplishments.

"Oh, we used to keep our horses at the fairgrounds when we were young," Barb chimes in, "Dennis was there bucking out horses. He was a junior or senior in high school and I was in 8th grade." She laughs at the initial disinterest.

When their paths crossed again, Dennis definitely did not shoo Barb away.

Always have an Out

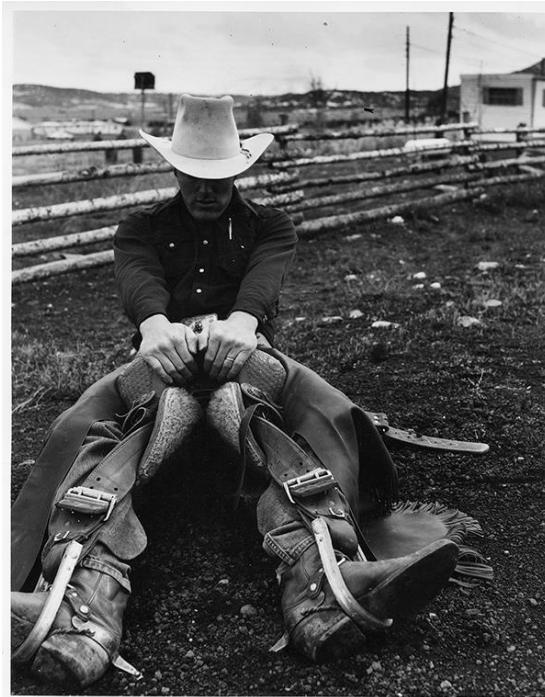


Image courtesy of the George family

Fresh out of high school and full of exuberance, Dennis spent the warm Wyoming summer nights under the bug-filled glare of arena lights and aboard an equine determined to unseat him at the nearest rodeo. During the day, he worked for his dad in the concrete business. Familiar with the seasonality of construction work in Wyoming, Dennis anticipated the approaching winter layoffs. And although supportive of his son's rodeo career, Gene George was also a caring father and a trusted source of valuable guidance. "My dad said if I was going to rodeo then I needed a job I could do if I was injured."

Dennis thought about what his father said. "I knew every town needed a bartender and a barber. I chose barber because I could work sitting down if I had to," Dennis explains his rationale.

A year later the bronc rides became fewer and farther between. Dennis married for a brief term in 1963. In 1964 he moved to Denver, Colorado, and with a little help from the state in the form of educational loans, attended barber school. "At the time of going to barber school and the year before, I was not rodeoing much. I had my 16-month-old daughter from my first marriage and was raising her by myself."

"Paper diapers didn't exist back then," Dennis continues, "I used cloth diapers." Dresses were preferred over pantsuits for the young Miss Roxanne. "My daughter wore dresses and they were ironed," states Dennis emphatically.

Coincidentally, in 1964, Barb found employment cooking on a nearby ranch allowing the young people to visit frequently. The calendar flipped to New Year's Eve and brought with it a community dance held at the local Moose Lodge. Barb arrived at the event with Dennis's cousin, but after dancing with Dennis she changed escorts, much to the displeasure of the cousin.

Commuting frequently from Colorado to Wyoming and still a bronc riding junkie, Dennis carried his gear with him wherever he roamed. With bareback rigging needed some rawhide he went in search of the material. Stepping through the doors of the Salisbury Saddle Shop and navigating the haze of leather dust, Dennis surprisingly found an old college friend working.



Dennis displays a crosspack rig he built for Larry Mahan.

Image courtesy of the George family

The saddle shop's owner, George Salisbury, designed and patented the method of creating fiberglass saddle trees. "After a short time, I got interested in the idea of the fiberglass bronc tree," Dennis says.

"This is when I started to go to work in the saddle shop on weekends and when I could. I would start my saddle and they would finish it during the week and then sell it before I had a chance to ride it. This happened three times," grumbles Dennis.

In 1965, after graduating from barber school Dennis was in search of a place to build his barbershop experience. "I had the chance to go to Fort Collins, Colorado to work part-time in the Salisbury saddle shop and a nearby barber shop."

Soon he was spending his days working in both the barber shop and the saddle shop. "When it was slow in the barber shop, I would ride my bike to the saddle shop and work there. Then when it got busy at the barbershop, I would head back that way," Dennis explains his dual employment arrangement.

He and Barb married shortly thereafter. Extra love accompanied Dennis into the new relationship in the form of his daughter. Barb loved Roxanne from the moment she laid eyes on her and raised the child as her own.

First Steps

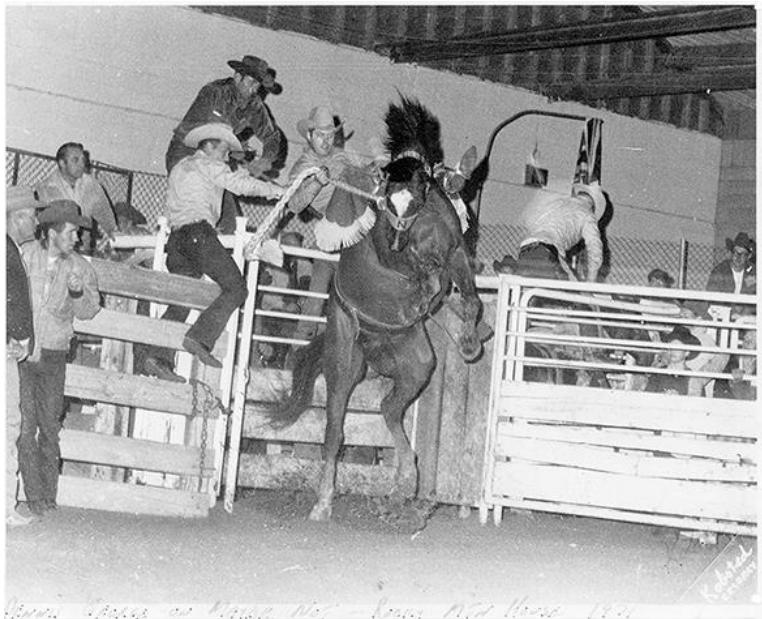


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With Barb's encouragement and support, Dennis was able to return to the rodeo circuit. The likes of Chris Ladeaux and Larry Mahan kept him entertained when away from Barb and Roxanne. In 1970, the couple celebrated the birth of their son, Randy.

"At this time, Chris LaDoux was just getting started riding bareback horses and making his own tapes of his singing," Dennis remembers of his occasional travel partner.

"Rodeo was different back then," Dennis continues. "Now it is all business," he says before recalling a time when the rodeo trail was more light-hearted. "Guys today talk at each other, but back then we played more practical jokes on one another."

Sharing a specific memory Dennis says, “Larry Mahan put flattened paper cups in the buckles on his stirrup leathers to shorten them up just a little. Everyone saw what he was doing and they would start changing all the adjustments on their saddles. Just before (Larry) got on he would put his saddle back to the original settings and make his ride.” Snickering Dennis explains, “It was a way to mess with everyone’s head and thus their confidence.”

Life for the young couple continued on in the same manner for several years. There were frustrations, of course. However, the naturally inquisitive Dennis focused on innovation and continued self-educating on the process of building saddles.

“Eventually, I swore off of saddle shops,” Dennis says. “I don’t know any saddle makers. I’ll bet I haven’t been in 10 saddle shops in my life. When I tried, hell, they laid their tools down. They wouldn’t talk to me about saddles. They wouldn’t show me anything. A lot of times they would take a piece of sheepskin or whatever and cover up their work.”

Early in his career, Dennis became annoyed with an old-timer in Douglas, Wyoming. Dennis said to the saddle maker, “You know this is a bunch of BS. I am not going to take any business away from you. You’re going to be dead before I can ever make saddles.” Laughing at the memory Dennis continues, “He was in his, well, he was my age now.”

“I know he had a lot of good information, but he wouldn’t show me,” a still frustrated Dennis complains. “I have looked at his saddles since then. We had two or three out at the ranch that were really rode hard and they were full carved.” Initially, Dennis felt the saddle maker was extremely talented. Looking back, he feels like he may have been a bit naïve in the assumption.

Move to Canada

1970 brought another significant change for the George family. “I had always wanted to go to Canada and after talking with Ivan Davis at a rodeo in El Paso, Texas, (Barb and I) made a trip to Alberta,” Dennis says. During the visit, Dennis and Barb discussed a permanent move to Canada, specifically Innisfail, Alberta located about an hour and a half north of Calgary.

Brothers Ivan, Franklin, and Glen Daines made an enticing offer. As owners of a western store, they had a profitable outlet for Dennis’s saddle and leather work.

A formal four-person partnership was formed, the terms of which were renegotiable after one year. The brothers sponsored Dennis, Barb, and the two children's documents for the move to Canada.

"Ivan was giving advice and advertising. Franklin was running the western store in Red Deer, and Glen was the silent one," Dennis says. For his contribution to the partnership, Dennis borrowed money, posting his tools as collateral for the loan. "They were to furnish startup money and an outlet for the equipment. I was furnishing the know-how and the equipment and supplies."

Prior to departure, everything was inventoried down to the last pair of socks. Barb and Dennis spent days cataloging every item. Then they loaded up the trailer and headed north. "I rented a U-Haul truck. I had a trailer with a shop in it, my pickup and camper," the bronc riding barber recalls.

The trailer was sealed when the tiny caravan crossed into Canada. Dennis tells the tale of checking in with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police when the family arrived in Red Deer. "When the (inspector) was checking us in, he opened the back door and rawhide slid out. I caught it just before it hit him in the head," Dennis says with a smile. "He looked at the papers I gave him and he signed us in."

Back during his time at the Salisbury Saddle Shop, Dennis built a bareback rigging for a young bronc rider from Lusk, Wyoming. "Dennis was the shop foreman at the Salisbury Saddle Shop when we met," says Randy Corley.

Something about the youthful Corley stuck in the mind of Dennis and when he needed shop help the first call he made was to Randy. "Randy Corley had just graduated from high school and came up to Canada with my help and started living with us, making chaps and helping on other equipment," Dennis continues. "We talked rodeo day and night. Sometimes we worked around the clock," Dennis remembers. "Randy (also) moved back to the States with me." Late night work sessions gave the two copious amounts of time which were spent discussing the opening their own shop.

Mr. Corley remembers the time well. In a voice tinged with the cadence of a Texas Swing singer, Corley says, "I stayed in touch with Dennis and when he offered me a job in Canada building chaps, I accepted."

Now well known as the man behind the mic at rodeos across the nation, Corley continues, "Barb was an adoptive mom for me. She would reprimand me for going out to the bars and trying to meet girls." Laughing he says, "She didn't need to worry. I was a nerdy little bareback rider. No one was interested."

Over the course of that first year, it became evident that Canada was not the place for the George family. “We had a house and a shop was in the basement. We loved it in Canada, but the partnership went bad,” says Dennis.

Looking back the saddle maker feels the brothers’ intentions were less than honorable from the beginning. “As it turned out, they insisted I put all my equipment up for collateral so I would not be able to leave,” George states.

“I wanted to rodeo, but barely made enough to live on and worked all of the time,” Dennis explains an additional source of his dissatisfaction.



Image courtesy of the George family

Things devolved after a particularly bad fight with Franklin. “They didn’t want to pay (Randy). I was getting almost nothing out of the partnership,” Dennis says. “A thousand dollars out of \$40,000 worth of inventory and Randy received \$700.”

Even with the hubbub surrounding the arrangement, Randy Corley fondly reminisces about the time. “We stayed in the basement working and sometimes we would only come up to eat. That’s the thing about Dennis. He has an amazing work ethic. The deal he made before leaving was to turn all of the raw material into product,” Corley recalls. “It required a lot of late nights, but we got the job done. I built over 70 sets of chaps.”

“We stayed one year and 2 days and didn’t leave with anything,” Dennis mutters, “only my equipment, a pickup, and a trailer we rented from U-Haul.”

“An old Ford pickup truck and a rented trailer, that’s what we drove south in,” Randy snickers again. “Dennis had this barber chair he had gotten somewhere. It rode in the bed of the pickup all of the way to Arizona,” Corley recalls.

Another stipulation of receiving their money - Dennis was required to build the Canadian Championship saddle and deliver it to Tom Bews. “It was 65 degrees below zero when we left...I had to sign a paper saying I would not return to Canada for ten years,” Dennis says.