

White Grass Heritage Project “Sharing the Legacy”

INTERVIEWEE: Louisa Stevensen Sandvig (L), former dude

INTERVIEWER: Brittany Chapman (B)

LOCATION: White Grass Dude Ranch, Grand Teton Nation Park,
Moose, Wyoming

DATE: September 5, 2014

Transcribed by Julie Greene in 2021

Note: This transcript has undergone minor edits e.g., false starts and some text were removed to make it more “reader friendly”. Louisa’s complete interview transcript is below.

B: Tell us about your background, when you were born, where you grew up and your family.

L: Well, that was a long time ago. I was born in 1945. When I was 10, I came to the A Bar A Ranch in Cantlet, Wyoming. I was from outside Philadelphia and I came with the Mather family from Philadelphia. When my daughter turned 1, the bells went off and I thought it was time to go to Wyoming. We were living in Greenwich, Connecticut at the time. I tried to get into A Bar A at the last minute but they were full. A friend of mine had gone there when she was 16. It was very fancy. I ended up coming to White Grass and it wasn’t fancy; it was towards the end of the White Grass era. We loved it. I brought my daughter out for 2 years. I came the first week of the season that it was open because it didn’t want to be with a lot of other people. Another friend brought one of her kids out with me. The third year I was here, and that was the year Frank died, I bought my son out. After that we went to the R Lazy S because the ranch was closed.

B: What years were you here?

L: I was here in 1983 and 1984 with my daughter and with my son, Robbie, in 1985.

B: Tell us about some of the wranglers.

L: Well, the wranglers were a riot. One was serious. Rick Singling was always quiet and serious. Our most favorite wrangler to ride with was Mike McCord. He died in a horse accident in California maybe in 1985, the same year Frank died. He would take my friend and me out, and sometimes the girls came with us, but we would have the wildest ride. We would go flat out across the sagebrush. My husband and I fished and we would walk through there and I would think that I couldn’t believe that we ran through this

stuff. The horses would jump the holes and I don't know why somebody didn't break their leg. When I rode with Mike, you always ended up at the Moose bar, no matter when you went.

One Sunday, Mike said one of the cleaning girls was going to ride with us and we let her decide where to go. Mike said we would go to Moose and I said, "No", that we weren't going to Moose. So, we went to the Chapel of the Transfiguration, walked around and then we went to the Moose Bar. He didn't drink a lot, probably one beer and I didn't drink anything, and then we would come home.

One time we were at the bar and a storm was coming and Nona, Frank's wife, came and raced the storm home. We ran as fast as we could back to White Grass and the horses were all lathered up when we got back to the barn. We had a lot of wild rides.

The last day I rode, Mike took me towards the mountain and he let me ride his horse, Smokey, who I heard just recently died at almost age 40. That was a big deal. I rode back East and showed. We switched horses and we were sitting on the mountain overlooking the valley. I asked him what he did when he wasn't wrangling. He'd get on Smokey and ride straight up the mountain, turn around and then gallop straight down the mountain. I couldn't believe he was doing this. This guy was so much fun.

One day, my daughter was sitting up on the fence in the corral and they were getting the horses ready for riding. Mike was jumping around and he had his chaps on that read MD and then MC for McCord. My daughter asked him what the D stood for on his chaps. He said "dogshit", Mike Dogshit McCord. I couldn't believe he just said that to my daughter. That was Mike. He would go to a ranch in California for the winters. Once he wrote me a letter that looked like a 6 yr. old had written it. He wasn't illiterate but he did not have a high education.

(7:40) The wranglers would always invite us to their campfires because there were only a few guests here that first week. Frank would always come and he always made me laugh. Everyone loved Frank. He was just really warm and funny. He was a big man and at dinner, he would ask if we wanted to go see a "baar"? We would say, "Yes" and he would drive us out to the dump, which was illegal, and a bear would come. Sometimes, he came to Moose on Fridays, since it was pay day, and all the wranglers would go to the bar. One time the guys were being really rowdy and whoever was at the bar said that White Grass would be out of there if they didn't settle down. It was always just fun.

B: (9:21) How old were the wranglers?

L: I don't have any idea, maybe late 20s; Rick was probably 30 and Curley, the head wrangler, was here the first 2 years and he was sorta gruff but nice to us. I think some people were not fond of him.

B: What do you think your kids gained by being here?

L: I don't know, I guess by being out in the open space. They both enjoyed the riding. My daughter fell off each year. Once she got jumped off because the horse jumped over the logs from a standstill and she was launched in the air. She was fine. Another time we were on top of Blacktail Butte and her pony got kicked by another horse and it was bleeding. Rick took us out that time and he put his finger in the artery because it was pulsating to get it to stop bleeding. She had to lead the pony down because he did not want her to ride it anymore. She led him down the Butte and then road double with him back to the ranch. The pony was fine.

The ranch was pretty run down when we were here but nobody cared because it was so much fun. You would be taking a bath and a mouse would peer out of the corner. One time we were in the big cabin up on the hill and there was a beam over my bed. In the middle of the night, a mouse fell off the beam into the middle of my bed. I screamed and flipped off to the floor and my daughter thought that was hysterical.

B: (11:42) How did it change your relationship with your kids?

L: It probably made us closer. I would have to ask them. It would be interesting to hear my son, because he was here the last year when Frank died, and then I took them to R Lazy S. I love the Sterns that own it but it wasn't White Grass.

B: What was Nona's personality like?

L: Well, I don't think Nona liked women a lot. She didn't like that I was friendly with the cowboys and the wranglers. I think when I was leaving, Little John, who was a short cowboy, took me to the airport and she didn't like that at all. I think she thought maybe I was running around with them, which would never occur to me. They were just friends and wonderful people.

The first night, they would invite us down for drinks at their house. Frank always had his spot at the long table in the dining room and I don't remember where Nona sat. I don't remember her around or a lot of interaction. I remember they had a lot of Indian art and artifacts in their house.

B: What was the food like?

L: (14:51) I don't remember that either. I am sure it was fine. I don't know that it was gourmet but regular home cooking.

B: What was a typical day like from the time you woke up till you went to bed.

L: I would hear them round up the horses around 6am and they would come galloping past the cabins. Some of them had on bells so you knew it was time to wake up. Then you would go have breakfast and then go back to your cabin for a minute. Then you would go out and ride all day long. Sometimes the kids were with me and sometimes, when we were doing the wild stuff, they were not with me.

B: We got an email from your daughter concerning some of her memories. She was astounded that you could just ride out in the wild and you weren't confined.

L: She rode a little at home.

B: Did all your kids have riding lessons?

L: No, I don't think my son did. He probably got on a horse the first time here. Years later we took him on a pack trip. Wendy had ridden. I was a rider.

B: When did you start riding?

L: I think when I was 6. I used to do a lot of the east coast horse shows. The trainer kept the horse and you met him at the horse shows. We would go to Southern Pines in the winter. It was big until I had my 3rd child and they had to put my horse down. He had gotten hurt in a field. It was getting really expensive so I didn't ride any more.

B: What was the wildlife like?

L: I don't remember other than the bear at the dump. One time while we were riding in the woods and a big bear stood up. It never occurred to me that we could get hurt.

B: I heard stories about pranks that were done between staff and dudes.

L: No, I didn't see any of that.

B: (18:30) It must have been interesting for you to be at the end of things.

L: It was run down. The mice lived in the cabins with us.

B: What else were the facilities like?

L: It was just run down but I didn't know that because it didn't know it when it wasn't run down. People would talk about it. We came up out here in 1986 and you would hear people talk about White Grass; Frank had died. It was about the people and the riding and being in the open spaces.

B: What did you wear when you were here?

L: Blue jeans. I don't have cowboy boots.

B: Were there any special activities that you would do at White Grass?

L: The campfires were special. My friend and one other family would go. You just sat around on logs and the cowboys were drinking so they would get louder and Frank would come. I don't remember Frank being loud. They would put Frank on the running board and drive him home. I wasn't like he was wobbly and we thought that was funny.

B: What was Frank's personality? Could you tell that he was an older man?

L: No, it never occurred to me. One day Frank was late to lunch and he came in and sat next to me in the empty spot. I thought that was so nice. I don't remember having conversations with him but we really loved him. When I got up to say goodbye, I leaned over to kiss him on his cheek. It came to me if I would ever see him again? Then two weeks later, I got a call from one of the wranglers that he had died. It was weird.

B: How did you feel?

L: I was surprised. I didn't think of that right away. First, I felt honored that he sat with me because he always sat in his seat. He was from Philadelphia too. Maybe there was just a connection.

B: You brought a beautiful picture of the barn. Tell us about that.

L: There was a guy here named Carl. I am not sure what he did but he was an artist. The day before we left, he gave it to my son. It is a picture of the barn and everyone signed it and Frank signed it in the center. It is really special. I hope someday, my son will donate it here. It clearly means something to him.

B: Any personal memories of using the barn when you were here?

L: No, we didn't tack up the horses. I remember going in there and seeing the saddles and it was very dark. One time the wranglers decided that they could sleep-in and I could wrangle the horses. I get up and go to the barn at 6am and somebody had my horse ready. I go out by myself and the horses know what time to start to wander down.

I go out to the lower part of the mountain and they were moseying on down. It was nighttime and I could hear the bells. I got behind some and I ended up in a bog and the horse sinks to his belly. I had to jump off and I am hanging on the reins. I knew I would never hear the end of it if I let go so the horse finally gets out of the bog. We get back to the barn and the horse is solid mud. Of course, the wranglers thought this is hysterical. They thought it was a riot.

(29:55) One time I went hiking to Phelps Lake with 5 women and we got lost. One woman was from Germany and we were coming down and it was getting to be dinner time and we weren't back. I think we were out there for 5 hours. We finally ended up near a driveway at the bottom of the ranch. We walked back but I don't understand why nobody came to find us. We were late for dinner. We had told people we were going hiking so I thought they would send a search committee out for us. I did think it was odd that nobody missed us or came to look for us.

B: Did you have any traditions that you would do?

L: The campfire with the wranglers. On Sundays, they had a cocktail party with the wranglers. They would come and have dinner with us. I don't know how comfortable they were with that; it may have been a little awkward for them.

B: Why do you think it was awkward for them?

L: I think it was a different culture. A lot of wranglers were smart but there were the dudes and they were the ones that worked here.

B: Were there any religious services on Sundays?

L: I don't think so; we didn't go to the Chapel to go to the Chapel. We just went on the way to the bar.

B: Did you keep in touch with any dudes that you met here.?

L: The one family that lived in New York City. My daughter and their daughter, Ray, (I

can't remember their last name) became friends and they spent the night together a few times. Oh, Goldring was their name....David and Nancy Goldring.

B: Did you of your children keep in touch with any of the other children or wranglers?

L: Just the people in New York.

B: (35:43) Why have you come back for the reunion?

L: Well, I live here now. The father of my children and I would come out and ski for a week every year. We moved here for a year and our lives changed and we ended up divorcing. After that, I never went back to the East.

I married a second time to somebody I went to dance class with in Philadelphia. Our families were very interconnected but we didn't know each other. My mother and his mother went to the same girl's school. He passed away 3 years later. I remarried just 3 years ago.

We came across Frank's headstone when we were walking in. I went to the reunion at the Hofley's and then I was not included in the next reunion. Somehow, I heard about this one and I asked Rachel. She has done a great organizing.

B: During the reunions, have you met people that you actually were at White Grass with?

L: No, we came out the first week because we didn't want to meet a lot of people. I could just ride with Mike or my friend from Greenwich. Mike wore a black hat.

B: Did you experience at White Grass influence your decision to move here later?

L: Probably but not consciously. We loved the open. When you went back to Greenwich, you felt closed in.

B: Did your kids settle in the West?

L: No, my daughter is in Portland, Oregon. I have 2 boys, one in Charlotte and one in Charleston. My youngest son is very allergic to horses. I would love to do a family thing at Red Rock Ranch but Michael would have a problem.

L: Did you grow up doing pack trips?

L: No, I was with my second husband and he suggested going. We went with the Triangle X (dude ranch in the Grand Teton Park) and went into the thoroughfare in 1988 (the year the fire was going on). Harold Turner, one of the owners, took us out on the pack trip. His son, Robert, came along, and we were on the Yellowstone River and a ranger came through. He told Harold that if he shot his gun at 7am, it would indicate that the fires are too close and we would have to get out by going over a canyon. It never occurred to me that we were in any kind of danger. At 7am the gun went off and we had to go down the canyon. As we are going down the canyon, you could see the flames and hear the roar of the fires and see the sparks. But again, it never occurred to me that a spark could light us on fire. That was very exciting.

B: There was a huge auction in 1985 after Frank died. Did you come or were involved?

L: No, I think I was sad. I think I didn't want to come back. I don't feel sad about being here now. I asked Roger (Butterbaugh, Caretaker at the ranch 2011-2018) about a porch on the main cabin not being here and he said they took it back (restored the building) from before that time.

B: Was there any music here?

L: No, we might have; I don't remember that. I just remember them being rowdy and laughing.

B: (45:54) Is there anything else you would like to share?

L: I can't think of anything. We loved Frank...he was warm, friendly and fun.

B: Did you feel like he remembered you from the previous years?

L: Yes, he must have felt a connection because I never saw him go sit beside anyone but me; he always sat in his spot.

B: Do you remember how much it cost every year for you to come?

L: No, \$800 just came out but I don't remember.

B: How long would you stay?

L: We were here for a week.

B: What dreams did the White Grass experience fulfill for you?

L: I have no idea. I loved the riding and it was time to bring my daughter out. It was great and she has wonderful memories.

B: Why did you come today?

L: I didn't want to do the interview. I came to reunion because I love White Grass. I am looking forward to meeting Rachel. It will be fun to hear the stories. I never met Frank's daughter and I guess she is coming. It will be fun to tell her how much I loved her father. It has memories in your heart and it will be fun meeting people.

B: Thank you so much.

L: I remember one thing. Frank told me the last year that the Park bought his ranch twice and he thought that was hysterical. I can't remember how the story goes but he thought that was hysterical that he had put one over on the Park. That was the last story he told me.

Note: Attached below are descriptive notes written by Louisa Sandvig and her daughter, Wendy, about their experiences on the ranch. Also attached is a barn painting by Carl, a staff member and artist, given to Louisa's son, Robbie, that was signed by the staff. It remains a meaningful gift to Robbie.

My History at White Grass Ranch

1983-1985

When I was 10 years old, I went to the A Bar A Ranch in Encampment, WY with a family from Philadelphia. When my daughter, Wendy, turned 10, the bells went off and I said, "it's time to go to Wyoming!" We were living in Greenwich, CT at the time.

A Bar A was full, so a friend directed me to White Grass. For 3 years I would bring one of my children out to White Grass the last week of June. Twice we came with a friend, Sheila, and one of her daughters.

Wendy, my son, Robbie, and I have wonderful memories of our weeks at White Grass. Many stories and many wild rides with my most favorite wrangler, Mike McCord, who died in CA in a horse accident. Mike would take Sheila and me out riding, and we would ALWAYS end up at Dornan's bar on the way home. I think Mike would get a beer.

Rich Sieling was another wrangler favorite. He was MUCH more SERIOUS than Mike. And there was Steve, Little John, Phil and Curly. The wranglers would ask us to their campfires and take me to Dornan's on Friday night...their PAY DAY!!

Of course my favorite of all was Frank Galey. We'd go bear "bar" hunting to Frank's illegal dump at the back of the ranch to see a black bear after dinner. Frank would join us at Dornan's for Friday night Pay Day, and he'd often come to the campfires.

Frank was kind and entertaining. He had a big heart and I was very sad when he passed away. Our last visit to the ranch was June 1985. We were flying out after lunch; I had a FAST ride with Mike in the morning. I came into the lunch room (dining hall) and the table at which Frank sat was full so I took a place at

another table. Frank's seat was always the same, at the head of the long table. Frank was late to lunch that day. When he came in, he surveyed the room and rather than take his usual seat, he came over and sat next to me. I'm sure we chatted. I got up to leave, and as I leaned down to kiss Frank goodbye on his cheek, it went through my mind, "I wonder if I'll ever see you again." Two weeks later Ranger Rick, as Wendy and I nicknamed him, called me to tell me Frank had died.

My kids and I LOVED White Grass, Frank, the wranglers and employees who took care of us. White Grass holds a special place in our hearts.

Wendy Olsen's Memories of White Grass- daughter of Louisa Sandvig

White Grass 1983-1984

I grew up in a family of five- my two brothers, two parents and me. We did a lot as a family- traveled as a pack. So branching off with just my mom for an adventure was a huge treat for me. Leaving tight, compact Connecticut for a week in wide open Wyoming for a "girl's week" with my mom and another "mother/daughter couple" was exciting.

I had no expectations of what White Grass would be like- I just knew it wasn't going to be the barn where I grew up riding in my hometown and knew that I didn't have to wear my riding helmet!

When we drove up the dirt road to the ranch- I remember being excited and nervous. There were no little rings to trot my quiet, push button English pony around here- it was WIDE OPEN SPACES with frisky horses and men with the biggest chaps I had ever seen. There was an older man who walked up to welcome us and immediately I felt like he was someone I wanted to spend time with- Frank. Frank was larger than life and his huge personality seemed to fit perfectly with the huge space all around the ranch.

I have lots of memories of our week in Wyoming- my mom getting up early to "chase the moon" with some of the wranglers to round up the horses before the sun was even up (even though no one told me- I knew this wasn't something all of the guests got to do), filling out the forms for our sack lunches that would be packed on the horses so we could head out for hours at a time and not have to come in for lunch, having a big night out at the rodeo (and thinking those barrel racers were the coolest things ever!), jumping sagebrush as our horses ran across open fields, riding into "town" (Moose) for lunch at Dornan's, playing pool above the barn while listening to the wranglers down below, having a little crush on one of our wranglers- Mike D. McCord, sharing a bunk room with my mom and giggling as we fell asleep- exhausted from the day.

I loved our time at White Grass Ranch. I loved the people we met, the horses we rode (even the ones that I fell off of!) and the time we had there as a mother and daughter.

White Grass Painting

This painting of the White Grass barn was created in June 1985 by Carl who worked at the ranch, and given to my son, Robbie Mansson. Signed by the employees and Frank in the center of entrance of the barn, of course!!



