

## Father Dick Case: a teenage wrangler on the Sunny M Ranch

Before Jesuit Father Richard (Dick) Case heard God's call at age 19, he longed to be a rancher.

The second of seven children born to Elwell and Helen Case, Dick was raised in Seattle, where his father was an insurance broker. In 1954, Dick's father invited Dick to join him on a retreat for insurance brokers and agents in the Methow Valley, to be held at the Sunny M Ranch.



*photo courtesy of Shafer Museum*

"I spent all my time out in the barn," Dick says. "Swede Miller was the wrangler and he had a couple of guys working for him out in the fields haying. They piled the hay up in these big stacks and then put it up in the barn to feed the cattle during the winter."

Although Dick, only 12 at the time, was a "guest dude," he soon convinced his father to let him stay an extra week as a helper, which he then extended to two weeks. "I got to know the guys in the barn and they let me ride with them," Dick says. "I also got to know [Sunny M Ranch owner] Joe Barron."

This connection was useful the following summer, when Dick's parents made an arrangement for him to spend the summer at the Sunny M. Elwell and Helen dropped Dick off at a Seattle hotel owned by Joe Barron, where he was met by the ranch foreman, who drove him back to the Methow Valley.

"It was a kind of summer camp for me," Dick says of his first full summer on the Sunny M Ranch. "My parents paid \$25/week for me to get to work with the horses, although eventually Joe Barron just let me work for free."

Accommodations for the junior wranglers at the Sunny M were pretty basic, Dick recalls: a recreation building with a bunkroom in the back. "All the junior wranglers slept there, but after a while the others drifted off and I had it to myself."

Dick remembers the swimming pool and the weekly rodeo at the Sunny M and says that the wranglers ventured into Winthrop quite frequently. "The Coopers had the general store where I got all my snap-button shirts," he says, adding, "I had a romanticized notion of the west. I wanted the hat and boots and snap-button shirts." He got them.

Dick has fond memories of many of the other Sunny M staff members. "Betty Lou was the cook," he says, "and Les Taylor was hired after coming back from the Army. He was the head wrangler and I was the junior wrangler. I'd go catch the horses in the corral and he would saddle them—he never trusted me to saddle them."



*photo courtesy of Shafer Museum*

Les and Dick would lead the guests on a morning ride and then put the horses in the barn while the guests ate lunch and swam. Later they'd mount another ride in the afternoon. When they'd return they'd unsaddle the horses, put them out to pasture, and then clean the barn for the evening. The next morning, Dick says, "I'd get up at 5am and begin it all again," Dick says.

Dick says he'll never forget nights spent under the stars. "One time three of us went out to fix the fences up on Thompson Ridge, where the cattle were grazing, and we camped up there for three nights," he says. "Those were pretty nights."

At the end of the summer Dick helped moved cattle back down to the big pasture on Wolf Creek and “that was the end of the summer,” he said. “It was wonderful. I got out of Seattle and I was occupied all the time. There was so much to do—working in those beautiful hayfields, moving irrigation pipe, catching horses and taking care of them, just working with my hands in the outdoors.”

When Dick returned to Seattle he knew he was changed forever. “I went back to 8<sup>th</sup> grade in Seattle but I had fallen in love with the Methow Valley. I couldn’t wait to go back the next year.”

The following summer Dick’s older brother Frank drove him over to the Methow Valley, but things at the Sunny M had changed. Les Taylor had gone to work at the mill in Twisp and there was a new head wrangler who Dick didn’t click with the way he had with Les. So he left the Sunny M and worked for Swede Miller, helping in his orchard, with haying, and with his cattle—a summer job he kept for several years. “Swede told me if I’d work hard I’d get a cow and a calf at the end of it,” Dick says. Swede was as good as his word and auctioned off the animals for Dick.



Eventually Dick moved on to other pursuits, attending Seattle University, becoming a pilot, receiving a calling, and becoming a Jesuit—a path his older brother Frank had followed seven years prior.

Dick’s theological studies took him to the Netherlands and when he returned, he began working in the campus ministry at Gonzaga Prep. A [Jesuits West article](#) says that the next summer, Dick “left the comfort of Spokane for a remote Alaskan village at the mouth of the Yukon River to fill in for a pastor who was away for six weeks. Always interested in missionary work, Dick began studying the Yup’ik language at the University of Alaska and with a year of instruction under his belt, headed to the villages of Chevak and Newtok along the Bering Coast. His long service in Alaska included time in Tununak, Toksook Bay, Nightmute, Bethel, St. Mary’s and Fairbanks, where he held leadership positions with the diocese. Both pastor and pilot, he would routinely shuttle passengers, particularly the Bishop of Fairbanks, to remote areas. He got to know the last frontier from the cockpit of a small Cessna and fell head over heels in love with Alaska and its rugged, faithful, loving people.” His career serving in Alaska lasted more than twenty years.

Over the years, Dick says, he returned to the Methow Valley to say Mass in Twisp a few times, but “people were skeptical because I’d worked for Swede—they couldn’t believe anyone who had worked for Swede was allowed to say Mass!”

“After that I lost contact with the Methow Valley,” says Dick, who now lives in a Jesuit retirement home in Los Gatos, CA, “but I never forgot it.”

We’re glad he didn’t, because Dick’s memories give us some snapshots into what life was like on the Sunny M Ranch back in the day!



*The Case family in the mid-1950s  
Dick is in the upper left, standing next to Frank*

Read more about Father Dick Case and his brother, Father Frank Case, [HERE](#).