

A young boy wearing a light-colored cowboy hat, a dark jacket over an orange shirt, and tan chaps is riding a brown horse. He is holding the reins and a lasso. The horse is standing in a field of tall green grass, surrounded by a large herd of light-colored cows. The horse has the number '13' written on its side.

KIDS ON THE RANGE

By Pam Asheton

One late summer's day as an equestrian journalist for a local newspaper I covered a local gymkhana. Quarter horses slid around barrels, sorrels and paints sidestepped elegantly over ground rails in the trail classes, and sweat drenched fathers topped with white Stetsons panted as they trotted laboriously through the arena's deep sand, leading ponies through bending poles.

Kirk and Shandel Thomson ranch down in Alberta's southwestern foothills and their young son, known to his kin as K's, had just turned six when this photograph was taken on the family's annual spring migration working their yearlings out to the Livingstone gap.

PHOTO COURTESY OF DESIGNFICS. PHOTO BY GARRISON GAUCI


I cover a lot of equestrian events throughout the year. Horse whispering clinics, Spruce Meadows, reining and cutting futurities, motivational trainers who connect riders and their horses in a good way, mountain horses puffing up steep scree slides with outfitters that remember Alberta's backcountry history because their great-grandfathers were there when it happened. What really struck me that hot dusty afternoon was the ease and grace of those ranch kids as they worked their horses and the thought stuck in my mind, niggled away, until finally it became an obsession to translate into words.

Hauling out to ranches and outfitters my problem on-how-to-describe them grew bigger than Alice after she slid down the white rabbit's hole. As these kids talked about horses and riding and cattle or being in the foothills and far north in the Yukon even, a pattern started showing.

These weren't kids at all.

Brought up with livestock they instinctively had animal savvy. They knew that if you ride by a river at nightfall the surrounding temperature will be colder than if you rode higher up another trail that skirted the lodgepole pine. Listening to their stories, I began to realize they often sit in school classrooms where they might be the only student from a rural background. Third, fourth and fifth generation homesteading stock, they walked between two worlds, of rural and an increasingly urban population.

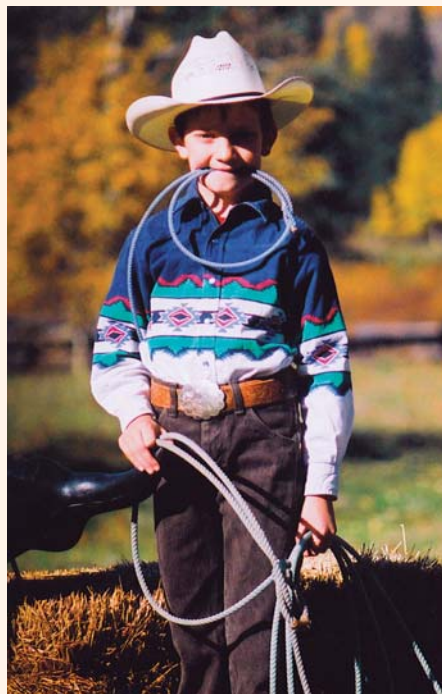
They gathered cows in the fall from remote grazing leases, opened fishing camps in the spring for clients, started colts, took telephone messages that translated into thousands of much needed dollar income. They drove trucks responsibly, bounced tractors across muddy fields and cooked stout breakfasts for a stack of visitors who might happen to be driving past and who naturally were invited in.

They were part of a much bigger picture, really needed contributors in their ranching communities. 



Sam Edge's father Marty is a traditionalist who is maintaining that lifestyle on their Beaupre Creek ranch. The family use horses, not quads, for the day-to-day maintenance work. They take salt into their summer grazing leases on diamond-hitched pack animals. "Those kind of days are fun," says Sam's sister Carlee-Jo (12), "fun and sometimes really long, it's alright when it's warm." She grins, megawatt bright, realistic. Sam (11) hops onto his horse Blueberry ("his legs turn kind of blue with his winter coat") from the fence line and neck reins him, cutting imaginary cows, with just an old halter rope for steering to show me what a great horse he is. Sam likes cats in a big way, has a barnful of them and has just sold some kittens for a good profit that he's proud to have negotiated so well.

Sam and Carlee-Jo both skate competitively, one in hockey and the other clocking up hours qualifying in figure routines which means they have to get up at truly terrible hours. "We have three sets of friends," they agree, "from ranching, then school, then skating." Carlee-Jo barrel raced with Reb this summer and Sam's steer riding and working on breakaway roping. "I can't imagine ever living in the city," they nod their heads in unison, "it's how we live, with the horses and the cows and the wildlife, no cars at night, just quiet."



Cody Richards is part of Saddle Peak Outfitting that operates in the Ghost alongside the Eastern Slopes that join up to Banff. Now ten, he's an outfitter-in-training who - when he was reprimanded by his grade school teacher for talking - smiled and told her he was still practicing for the family's guests. "I'm trying to cut it down in class," he tells me conspiratorially. Cody's favourite subjects, he says, are math and calf roping.

His horse is a buckskin Biscuit who he's "ridden for years now." Like Sam Edge he's been to Joe Lucas ("he's known as Smokin' Joe," he drops into the conversation) roping clinics and reveres Fred Whitfield, the six time calf-roping champion from Texas. His cousin is Billy Richards, who gave him the huge prizewinner's belt buckle that's just about the same size as his waist, which Cody wears everywhere and treasures alongside with a volcanic 'bomb' rock full of air holes he found on Devil's Head. "I know about the mountains," he affirms, "Everest is the biggest one in the world."



Cheyenne Adams (17) offered to escort me all the way to the family's one-room log cabin at "the top of Grand Valley" and I couldn't for the life of me see why. An hour later following her white truck I was mighty relieved I'd just filled up with gas earlier that morning. We skirted through increasingly remote backcountry, finally sliding into a magical valley where wood smoke scented poplars and an old wooden barn was shadowed, snuggled into a willow-rich creek bed.

Built in the 1940s she recalls the family's log house from childhood times where they had no electricity ("that was only seven years ago") and being conscious of "how quiet it was. In the winter time we'd go to bed really early." Her father Doug Borton (a cattleman working this outpost of the Anchor X for over 20 years now) – leaning back into an ancient green sofa where he's been entertaining her sister Michayla while letting Cheyenne get on with her own explaining – enters into the conversation. "In winter we didn't have the luxury of a truck plug-in," he chips in, "we'd have to take the embers from the fire and slide them under the engine block to warm it up. When it was really cold it made you kind of disinclined to bother going anywhere."

Cheyenne nods remembering, grins, and you realize how beautiful she is.

She's been rodeoing since she was six. "I really wanted to, knew it was where I wanted to be right from then, from go," she adds another log to the fire that's their central heating, "my dad got me a babysitter horse, Taurus. He was 15 hands and 15 years old and had been an Indian national horse." This year Cheyenne's been traveling the rodeo circuit; she's already done three years in High School rodeo and has every intention of going pro, with a ticket into the highly competitive Indian Rodeo Cowboy Association events too. This summer had her training horses for others for the first time.

"We work harder up here than most kids" she imagines, "you have to be able to think, solve a problem. Sometimes there's no one else around. It's an independence, working at chores, getting the meals ready – in the end you know what you're supposed to do."

When we go to take photographs with the horses out in the open fields, she has the herd organized with her own body language better than most horse whisperers I've seen.

Jessica (16) and Logan (13) Young are fifth generation Alberta ranching stock whose parents also additionally run a remote 12,000-square mile backcountry business up in the Yukon known as Midnight Sun Outfitting. "The original here was the Moose Hill Ranch," they chip straightaway into the conversation, "that's under the Glenmore Dam in Calgary these days."

"I was two weeks old the first time I was taken to the Yukon," says Jessie, "I went in a pack box and had my baths in the turkey roaster." Now that she and Logan are hitting the high school years their mother Mary has finally abandoned home schooling ("once it got to grade nine and the math I was finished," she exclaims). "In June," beams Jessie, "you fly in and start to get close to the mountains and it's like coming home, you get all excited." She admits, though, that she misses the news and – this year running the fishing camp on her own throughout the summer – "you long for new different people to talk to." She had, too, problems with one particular bear at her camp. "You could hear his teeth snapping," she jokes.

Logan ran one of the other camps on the Wind River. "I get up about 5," he remarks casually, "make the coffee, then the breakfast for everyone, then go and find the horses (once I went 2 1/2 hours searching in the wrong direction), then check the hunters' gear, get them mounted, check the fires are out, pack up. Later on I get dinner organized, check the horses, water them, turn them loose," he takes a breath, "then next day I start all over again!"

Both are now enrolled in the National Sports School, sponsored by CODA. Jessie's continued the killer time schedule, up at five every morning for training. She won the Mike Weigle trophy the Tiger Cup this year and is hopeful of being Olympic material one day. Logan, skiing since he was 2 1/2, he thinks, "perhaps it was when I was 3," is aiming that route too.

"We're aware," says Jessie, "at school, or the skiing training, there's so many stories we can't tell, that our world is so different." Off to Austria for a month's ski practice two days hence, and with her parents away collecting the northern outfitting horses, she and Logan gathered up 200 head summering up in Kananaskis Country. "I like the adrenalin of chasing cows," relishes Logan, "I like challenges."

