



# Willow Creek Ranch

*Fall roundup. Words and photos by Adam Jahiel.*

It is the end of September, and ranch owner Barry Crago, Nate Nix, Mike Burkich, and Clint Black have finished gathering. They are moving the cattle from the high summer pastures to ones close to the ranch headquarters near Kaycee, Wyo.

Cowboys follow a line of cattle down through dry-yellow meadows that parallel the Red Wall, a long, northwest-to-southeast escarpment of red sandstone and shale. The Red Wall lies at the southern end of the Big Horn Mountains and borders the 57,000-acre Willow Creek Ranch on both east and south sides. Here, the cowboys ride through open range, rolling hills, deep canyons, and wide, dry washes. With the Big Horn Mountains as a backdrop, the ranch elevation changes from 5,200 feet to 8,200

feet. The Red Wall rises 350 feet above the cowboys. It is 50 miles long, with only two places to cross.

An immigrant sheep rancher, Kenneth MacDonald, founded Willow Creek Ranch in 1882. Like many of the small ranchers, MacDonald was on the outlaws' side, both for self-preservation and because it was a time when the little guys and the big guys were squaring off against each other. The ranch was passed from generation to generation until it was sold to its present owners. It remains a working horse and cattle ranch and can accommodate visitors during the summer months.

The horses' hooves kick up little clouds of red sandstone dust. Cattle nibble on the green grass from the last rainfall. The rain



*Cowboys trail cattle at the base of the Red Wall, which reaches 350 feet high in places and stretches for 50 miles. There are only two locations to pass to the other side.*

*Barry Crago calms an energetic horse in the Willow Creek Ranch barn as Clint Black looks on. No stranger to horses, Crago's family in nearby North Dakota have produced award-winning quarter horses since 1976, based on their own need for good ranch horses for their cattle operation.*





*Mike Burkich stretches his legs after long hours in the saddle. The weather is changing, but earlier that morning the cowboys were fighting wind and snow in the high country.*

*Nate Nix brings in the Willow Creek cavy in early morning.*





*Cowboy tepees are set up at the original Hole-in-the-Wall camp, where a group of cattle rustlers and other outlaws—including Kid Curry, Black Jack Ketchum and Butch Cassidy’s Wild Bunch—once hid out. Even today, this is remote and hard to access.*

didn’t add up to much, but any moisture is good moisture and this summer has been windy, as always, but mild. Although the annual rainfall is typically just over 12 inches, what did appear this year has fallen in the right places at the right times and much of the landscape still has a green hue.

Made famous by Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch Gang, the Hole-in-the-Wall refers to both a large, lush valley once home to stolen livestock and the actual narrow trail that leads to an even narrower notch, the actual Hole-in-the-Wall, which was used to move stolen horses and cattle from the area. The trail up the crumbling red sandstone is treacherous and steep. Neither

man nor horse would attempt to travel up to the pass unless desperate, insane, or both. ■

*Adam Jahiel is an internationally recognized photographer who lives and works in the American West. Mostly known for his photography of the American cowboy, his poetic and dynamic images have been exhibited and published all over the globe and are in museums, corporate and private and collections all around the world. He lives in Story, Wyo. For more information, check [www.adamjahiel.com](http://www.adamjahiel.com).*