



Ice Cream Wages

Big outfits should include bubblegum benefits.

Words & photos by Lyn Miller.

The American cowboy is a modern-day gypsy, always in search of better horses and longer branding seasons, moving consistently with green-up and the cold. It's a common malady for any rancher frequently sent hunting for permanent help. For the unenlightened, it is painted as a dreamer's paradise: riding colts, roping calves, sleeping in a tepee on cool summer nights and, best of all, there is the cookhouse after a long day and wages at the end of the month.

But what about those who don't get to wander over the hill to the next place when the going gets tough? The true unsung heroes of America's frontier? It all started back when folks couldn't afford help and they had to raise their own. This was practical and a common method of acquiring desperately needed help. Today, these brave little folks carry on, shouldering a tradition started more than 100 years ago, clinging tightly to the reins of quirky horses that lesser riders couldn't handle.

Rolly Miller, eight, pauses in his helicopter rotation of the tail of his rope to again

check the contents of his saddle pack. Chief, 21, who has dedicated his life to the whims of cowboys, finds this pint-sized version an unpredictable tangle of energy who clearly takes his orders from someone else. For Chief, it's like having the instructor's chicken brake in a driver's ed car operated remotely.

"My favorite part of cowboying is the fruit rollups," Rolly comments. Without further detail, he picks up his "over and under" and reapplies it as a "round and around." Chief has learned to ignore most of the things going on above him, but when Dad barks, everybody gets faster, even if they don't know where they're going.

"I want to compete at the American someday," says 11-year-old sister Rose. "You know, when Clifford and I are a little more consistent on the barrel pattern." Rose is no stranger to a long day in the saddle while gathering and sorting in steep country. She learned important lessons early, like how to keep long underwear from bunching up around the knees and that sweatshirts can be

removed but forgotten winter gear can't help when the wind picks up. Her mare, Clifford, could moonlight convincingly as a member of the Budweiser draft team, yet Rosie can handle the massive energy through long days of practical use; if cattle don't leave the bunch to begin with, Rose doesn't have to either. It is unclear whether Rosie will make the American, but perhaps that isn't the real question. When she's spent her formative years running through brush and rocky hillsides to turn cattle back, maybe barrel racing won't be quite exciting enough.

"Good kid horses are expensive," says Jake, father and leadoff of the three-kid cowboy crew. "But the good ones are more than worth the money. What they teach those kids, the confidence they give, you can't put a price on that." Jake is a fifth-generation Idaho rancher who raises cow/calf pairs and operates a non-confinement finishing yard. The lessons his kids are out learning with the livestock he recalls learning himself.

Roy, 13, was asked recently if it would be



Roy and border collie Handsome on the four-wheeler Roy bought after selling his 4-H pigs. That was the year he decided 4-H was a short-term goal. He wanted long-term. **RIGHT:** Rose swings a loop at a branding aboard Clifford. The mare is plenty of horse for Rose, but for Clifford, it's just a good chance to showcase her patience. **OPPOSITE:** Jake, Roy, Rose, and Rolly gather on weaning day. Jake has mastered the fatherly art of riding four horses at once through vocal commands and hand signals.

better if the family moved to easier life in town. "Go ahead," he said, "but I'm gonna stay right here with the cattle." Roy's accompaniment resembles something out of a Wilson Rawls story; it consists of Handsome, a border collie, and Kiss, a fidgety throwback to cutting-horse bloodlines. Though the horse is built like a traditional cutter, Roy never told Kiss she was small. Roy tried 4-H but decided there was little point to brevity in any business. So he bought registered barrows and intends to raise and sell his own "bacon seeds."

"There are still days we need extra adult help," says Jake, "but the kids are getting good enough that those days are fewer and fewer." The days of ponying kids on retirees faded and now they ride steep country with only a dog for company, having time left over to enjoy a hearty round of laughter born from sending a dog after the stud bunch while waiting for Dad.

To stay connected to the leadoff, there are Motorola radios. More than

forgetting important gear during inclement weather, occupies himself taking up airtime with random noises. It won't matter how many times his dad tells him to keep the radio clear. Jake is riding two draws over and can't do anything about it anyway.

"It's nice to work with my own crew. We know each other. They know how I want things done. They might be young, but they're handy," Jake admits. "We're teaching a tradition and integrity that will be lost if we don't. In animal husbandry, there is lots you must do right, and the more you do it the bet-



once on a crisp fall morning on shipping day, the silence of the hillsides will be interrupted with the breaking of a radio and the eight-year-old voice of Rolly providing his best "Star Wars" impressions. Rolly, notorious for

ter you get at it."

That doesn't mean everything is easy from experience for Jake. "Being patient is not natural to me. Communication isn't easy. How do you tell kids to see it, to watch for the troublemaker in a rodear when they have a short attention span?"

Being the oldest, responsibility often falls to Roy, who daily rides pens at the finishing yard. Out of necessity, he's gotten good at sorting cattle alone. "Roy can part out six head and bring them. His hustle and diligence are better than mine was when I was his age," Jake says. Roy also ropes competitively and, despite his laid-back attitude, has a streak of perfectionism. "Roy doesn't like the feeling he gets when things don't go as he planned them."

Holding rodear, Rolly's mind might drift to more entertaining subjects, but when a red brockleface leaves the gather, the thundering pursuit the duo makes straight up the hillside is enough to make any mother hold her breath. "He might be young, but Rolly is a thinker. He's got it," Jake says. And it always helps to have saddle bags packed with a few edible distractions...and bubble gum. Bubble gum will shorten the duration of a hot after-



The Miller family, from left to right: Rose, 11, Jake (Dad and leadoff for the kid crew), Lyn (Mom), Roy, 13, and Rolly, 8.

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ABOVE: Chief spent 19 of his 21 years on Nevada's YP/Petan Ranch before becoming Rolly's junior rodeo mount. He's still recovering from the career move. BELOW: Imparting necessary wisdom isn't easy for Jake, who admits, "Being patient is not natural to me." Roy, 13, listens intently, even though roping advice is hard to put in action.



noon, an important tip shared by a family friend.

For a kid crew, the good things are simple. There are sandwiches and chips back at the pickup, and of course there are day wages. Unlike most day help, their wages are figured a bit differently than the average cowboy, and the harder the day, the more important the reconciliation of wages to effort. When they get home, the feedlot will still need checking and chores will still need to be done.

No matter the route Jake takes home, they have to pass civilization. Just as they hit the

edge of town, inevitably there will be a pause, and then from the backseat Rolly will ask, "Dad, did we do good today?"

It's a trick question, one Jake knows all too well.

"Well," Rose will reason. "If we did good, then can we stop for ice cream?" ■

Lyn Miller is Jake's wife and mother to the "Three R's" in this story. She's had a front-row seat to the antics dished out by the kid crew and never misses a moment. Visit her at www.authorlynmiller.com.