

Cowboy In the Making

At only 11 years old, Ralf LeSueur has already ridden for two of Arizona's largest cow outfits.

Words and photos by Kathy McCraine.

At 7 a.m. on the O RO Ranch north of Prescott, Ariz., Ralf LeSueur sits on the top rail of the old shipping pens patiently watching the road for the vet truck. It's colt branding day in mid-May. A good shower the day before has left the early morning air fresh and cold, the ground smelling of dampness. Sunlight streams through the faded rails of the fence. Eleven yearling fillies

smiles, which is often, he flashes a set of sturdy, bright white teeth. It's hard to imagine him without his dusty, well-worn black cowboy hat, which he screws down so tight, his ears fan out beneath it.

He sprained his ankle the day before. It hurts, but he's not even limping. He had climbed a tree to check a bird nest and see if the eggs had hatched, and in typical 11-year-

to get the colts branded.

Ralf has already cowboied on two of the largest outfits in Arizona—Babbitt Ranches near Flagstaff, and the RO's as this ranch is known. He may not know the word "perfectionist," but he drives himself to perfect the skills that every cowboy needs. He can ride, rope, brand and doctor cattle as well as many grown cowboys. Ralf's dreams aren't dampened by the fact that the cowboy lifestyle faces increasing economic and social pressures in the American West.

Arizona ranchers have struggled to scratch out a living for 100 years, and today additional challenges threaten their existences. A University of Arizona study estimates that, compared to the year 2000, only one-third or fewer cattle remain on Arizona ranges. The ongoing drought, foreign beef imports, and pressure from environmentalists to remove cattle from the public lands have taken their tolls.

Even more alarming is the current trend of ranches selling out to developers and speculators. On the Interstate 40 corridor across northern Arizona, from Kingman to New Mexico, most of the big ranches, with few exceptions, have been turned into 40-acre subdivisions. As cattle numbers continue to decline, and as the remaining ranches become smaller, fewer and fewer operators can afford to hire even one cowboy. Many can't even support second- and third-generation family members.

Cody was raised on a ranch, and even though he's drifted from job to job, he dreams of settling down and having his own place someday. He is tall and slender with a handsomely chiseled face and Ralf's broad smile. He wears his pants inside tall boots and a big brimmed, "taco" style hat.

"This ranch is about as cowboy as it gets," he says about the O RO Ranch, "but most ranch jobs aren't cowboy jobs anymore—you have to be a welder, a mechanic." He wants Ralf to learn all he can about cowboying while he's growing up, but he also wants him to go to college. "There will always be cowboy jobs, but I want him to have lots of options," he says. "At least when he's 18, he'll know how



Eleven-year-old Ralf LeSueur's great-great-grandfather emigrated from the Jersey Isles of France and ranched near Springerville, Ariz. All Ralf has ever wanted to do his entire life is be a cowboy.

stand sleepily tied at intervals around one large corral. In the alley next to it, 14 colts mill, nervously awaiting their fate. Some are already shed off, slick as burnished steel. Others still wear wooly patches of winter hair on their backs and sides. Ralf is getting fidgety. Impatiently, he jumps down from the fence and begins to curry the tied fillies.

Ralf is still a kid. At five foot two, he is big for his age, stoutly built, with blue eyes, sandy hair and rosy chipmunk cheeks. When he

old fashion, decided to just jump out of the tree. He has a grown-up job this morning, though, and the sore ankle won't stop him from doing what a cowboy has to do. Today that means helping his dad Cody, the ranch's horse breaker, halter the colts so that they can be vaccinated, castrated and freeze branded. This happens to be Cody's last day here. Like so many cowboys who drift from job to job, he is moving on to another big ranch in New Mexico, but he promised to stay long enough



Ralf helps the Babbitt crew push a herd of straight Hereford cattle to the branding pens near Redlands Camp on the Cataract Plains.

to do more than shovel dirt or flip burgers.”

Ralf can't even remember when he decided he wanted to grow up to be a cowboy. He was less than a year old when his folks first put him on a horse, and by the time he was three he was following his dad horseback. Ralf's dad is his hero. Cody has taught him things like how to halterbreak and start colts, how to shoe horses, brand and doctor sick cattle, how not to go too slow or too fast on a drive—all the things it takes to be a good cowboy.

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The O RO Ranch is 50 miles from Prescott, over an hour on a winding dusty road. Because of the distance, Ralf's mother Geneva has no choice but to homeschool Ralf and his eight-year-old sister, Cody Rose. Ralf is in the fifth grade and likes school. On a typical weekday morning at the ROs, Ralf helps his dad feed and do chores. Then Geneva gathers the kids around the kitchen table and spreads out their books, diligently conducting class

until lunchtime.

Geneva is a tall woman with big eyes and honey-colored hair gathered into a ponytail that hangs almost to her waist. For the past three weeks, she has helped Ralf halterbreak

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the ranch colts, which she admits is new to her. She wasn't raised on a ranch, but the two of them manage to corner the colts in the tub of the loading chute and get them haltered. The big rangy colts outweigh Ralf by several hundred pounds and they are fresh off the range, wild as young deer and “bronky.” But Ralf has learned how to handle them with the skill of a born horseman.

After lunch Geneva and the two kids head down to the pens to give a couple of colts refresher courses. Geneva holds the colts, while Ralf brushes them and picks up their feet. The first colt does well, but the second, a headstrong buckskin, throws a fit. Ralf ties a foot up twice, and twice the colt manages to fight his way loose.

“Maybe we should just do this another day,” Geneva suggests.

“No,” Ralf fires back with a touch of annoyance. “We've got to finish it now since he did that.” In lieu of pay for this job, Ralf has elected to trade out his work for a horse for Cody Rose, a big, gentle bay gelding named Pirate that he rode at the wagon.

Ralf adores his little sister, a tiny, pretty girl with a shy grin that's missing front teeth. He likes to call her “Sister” and watches out for her like an old mother hen when she's playing out front with the neighbor kids.

On the one hand, Ralf is still a typical 11-year-old, playing cops and robbers with the



Ralf dragging calves to Babbitt cowboys Scott Westlake, Jesse Townsend and Hagen Johnson.

neighbor kids on bicycles, or playing cowboy with his prized set of toy horses and cows. He dismisses the stuffed animals neatly arranged on his bed: "Those are for little kids. I don't even want them there anymore." But when he gets on a horse, he's all business, mature beyond his years. With all the attention he gets from the older cowboys, you might think he would get a big head, but he doesn't think



Ralf winning the go-round in the 12-and-under steer riding at the Cowpuncher's Reunion Rodeo, Williams, Ariz., in July 2008. Ralf has been breaking colts since he was nine years old.

he is anything out of the ordinary. "I'm okay," he says. "I don't think people are supposed to brag about themselves. I don't know if I'm good or bad."

Scott Westlake, who runs the W Triangle division on Babbitt Ranches, is one of many mentors Ralf has had in his quest to become a top hand. In the spring of 2006 when Ralf was just nine, Scott saw him struggling to learn to rope by heeling a fence post. He told him, "You come on the wagon and I'll let you drag calves every single day." Ralf never missed a day,

and by the end of spring, he was dragging calves with the best of them.

"He was a good hand," Scott says, "and he rode some horses that weren't kids' horses either. He'd get farted off, get up, get back on, and away he went."

Ralf has been bucked off—and ridden—more bucking horses than he can count. There was one two-year-old filly at Babbitts that he named Black Betty. "She bucked me off a bunch," he says, "but a cowboy has to get back on, so I got back on her, and sometimes she'd buck me right back off and sometimes she wouldn't."

Another time he was riding a horse named Bailey in the pasture near the house. Bailey was 18 but he didn't need much of an excuse to buck. This time when he blew up, he bucked all the way across the field, finally threw Ralf off, and then danced in the middle of him. Ralf got back on and rode back to the barn like nothing was wrong, only to find out that a vertebrae in his neck had been cracked and his collar bone broken. "He didn't even start crying until I asked if he was hurt," Geneva says. "That's how tough he is."

Scott Westlake remembers one time when they were gathering the 70,000-acre Blanco Pasture on the Cataract Plains at Babbitts. Somehow, Scott and Ralf ended up alone with 700 yearlings that were "giving us mortal grief," Scott recalls. Ralf was on a fast, hard-

mouthed horse called Digger. With three bunches of cattle, and three to four miles between the leaders of the first bunch and the drags of the third bunch, the two cowboys were running themselves ragged trying to keep the cattle together and headed in the right direction. When Scott saw the leaders headed off in the wrong direction again, he hollered at Ralf to go head them.

"That kid just drug the bridle reins off that horse's hind end and took off," he says.

But when Digger got to the leaders, he just kept on going, running as hard as he could, with Ralf laid back in the saddle pulling back as hard as he could. The horse ran out of control for over two miles.

"Ralf was just a speck out there, too far for me to chase him," Scott says, "so I just sat on the hill and prayed."

Finally Ralf got the horse pulled into a circle and stopped. Scott tightened Digger's curb strap, and Ralf went back to work, but 30 minutes later he had forgotten the whole incident, and when he started to take off again, Scott had to holler, "Just LOPE up there." They got the cattle under control, but they never did find the hat Ralf lost in the runaway.

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The LeSueur family has high hopes for the new job in New Mexico. It's only 50 minutes from where Cody grew up, and the children will be only 15 minutes from a real school. Ralf is excited about attending the new school, but one thing's for certain—his biggest classroom will still be the open range. There will be more cattle to work, more broncs to ride, more colts to halterbreak. Maybe one day he'll go to college as his parents hope. And in this changing world, that could open doors for him on the ranches that survive.

It's not hard to picture Ralf as a ranch manager someday. Even when he watches TV, which isn't often, he turns to RFD TV, the rural station, to study the livestock market reports rather than the cartoons. Sometimes he watches another program on horse training, too, but it bugs him. "They do weird stuff...I think they're lying to you when they say they're riding a two-year-old, and it's his first ride, and they hop on him and ride him with no bridle and stuff, and the horse never bucks. I don't believe that."

Ralf may be only a kid, but he's already been there. He's a cowboy in the making. ■

Kathy McCraine ranches and writes from Prescott, Ariz.