

coming of age, horseback

For the children of Skogen Livestock, a Montana cattle outfit, riding on their first trail drive opens a new chapter in their journey to become horsemen. A new standard of quality for Skogen horses ensures their success.

Story and photography by RYAN T. BELL



Above: Allyson and Chad Hitchcock work the drags. "When the kids were born," says their mother, Tanya, "[their father] Mike realized that he couldn't get hurt and not work, because he had people depending on him. Mike and I had a sit-down. Here we'd been trying to raise family horses, but at the same time have ranch horses. We decided if it's standing at the barn, it should be something any one of us can climb on."

Left: Chad's horse, Rooster, is by an Eternal Sun and Jet Deck Quarter Horse stallion that Mike bought from the Carroll Brothers Ranch in southwest Montana. Not every foal makes the cut at the Skogen outfit. "My rule is that by the time a horse is 4, if my kids can't ride them, they go down the road," he says. To date, Mike has parted ways with 15 horses that didn't meet standards.



Orville Skogen raised daughter Tanya and her brother, Brian, to respect the value of a hard-earned dollar. "Growing up, my parents were of the mindset that if you didn't earn money yourself, you wouldn't appreciate it," Tanya says. "Brian and I raised 4-H steers every year, and the paycheck went into savings for college. We're doing the same with Allyson and Chad. They won't be one of these kids that goes to college, then drops out. They're going to work hard because it's their money."



Above: When Allyson was 3, Mike assigned her a tall roan gelding. He'd started the grade horse as a 2-year-old. Allyson looked at the gelding and said, in language inspired by her favorite cartoon characters, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: "That's a big dude." The name Big Dude stuck.



Left: Orville and Tanya cook breakfast, while the Skogen crew rounds up horses. Chad and Allyson are expected to work long hours. "The kids have to keep up," Mike says, "because I'm doing a job and can't babysit them."



One of life's sweeter ironies is that children are loudest when they're trying to be quiet.

At 4 a.m., 9-year-old Allyson and 7-year-old Chad Hitchcock snuck into a bunk room where seven cowboys slept. Their feet shuffled across the carpet, snare-drum loud in the library-quiet dawn. They stopped to conspire about what to do next.

"You say it," one whispered.

"No, you."

Then, in unison: "Time to get up, Grandpa."

Orville Skogen flipped the light switch on the wall next to his bed. The kids pounced on him.

"Ready for the big day?" he asked.

"Yes, Grandpa," they said.

A few tickles sent the kids scattering from the room in a fit of giggles.

"An awful way to wake up," Orville joked.

It was the first week in July, and today Skogen Livestock would trail cattle into the Highwood Mountains of central Montana. For Orville and the cowboys, it was just another day in the saddle. But for Allyson and Chad, it was a momentous event because Grandpa Orville had finally given the okay for them to ride along.

Downstairs, Orville's daughter Tanya told him, "I haven't seen the kids this excited since



Many of the cowboys at Skogen Livestock have worked together for years. By riding along with them, Allyson and Chad observed how the horsemen work in sync to sort and move cattle.



Chad relaxes in the saddle at the end of the drive. "I don't know if ranch-raised kids get sick any less than city kids," Mike says. "But mentally, I think they just 'go' because that's the way life is. So you've got a cold; what good's it do to lie on a couch? You may as well go to work. If you make yourself go do something, you're going to feel better than if you lie around."



Wes Seward, Trevor Dean and Mike Hitchcock wait out a downpour. The cowboys are treated like extended members of the Skogen family, earning the moniker "uncle" from Allyson and Chad.

Christmas. Ally woke up at 2 a.m., and I swear she asked every 30 minutes if it was time to get dressed."

The kids' excitement was contagious, and even Tanya, short on sleep thanks to Allyson, was cheerful while she made sandwiches for the crew to eat on the trail.

She and husband Mike Hitchcock are integral to Skogen Livestock, as will be their kids one day. Tanya pulls double-duty, as both a ranch wife and a pharmacist in Great Falls, while Mike works full-time as Skogen Livestock's cowboss.

Orville is Grandpa to the kids, but Boss to the cowboys who crawled out of their sleeping bags that morning. He is a self-made cattleman who scratched together a small empire of private and leased land, a patchwork quilt on the map that extends from Idaho to the Canadian border.

As one of Montana's largest year-round cattle operations, Skogen Livestock calves 1,800 head of registered and commercial-grade Black Angus, puts up more than 2,000 acres of hay, and ships upwards of 600 semi-truck loads of cattle each year. But he leaves the horseback side of things to his son-in-law, Mike.

"Because of the kids, my priorities for what I expect out of a horse have changed," Mike says. "Used to be that I was happy with a horse that was 90 percent broke. If it got squirrely, well, that was part of the fun. But with the kids coming up, there's no use having a horse around that they can't ride."

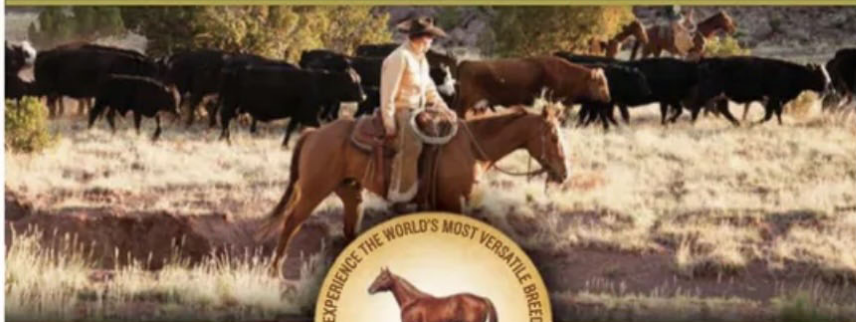
By 6 a.m., Allyson and Chad were seated on their horses—Big Dude and Rooster. Rainy weather had them wearing yellow slickers, and as the drive kicked off, they rode beside Tanya, looking like chicks with their mother hen. Two and a half hours later, the drive reached the grass meadow for which Orville and Mike had been aiming.

To the cowboys, the drive was uneventful, perhaps even boring. But the kids had experienced a coming-of-age moment, part of a regenerative cycle that ensures the future of American ranching. 🐾

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