

PORTRAIT OF THE WEST

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE. KALEB WAYNE DONKER IN MONTANA'S BIG HOLE VALLEY.

WORDS BY CYNTHIA BALDAUF. PHOTOS BY JESSI DONKER.

After a trip to the city, it's easy to get discouraged. Seeing some crazy kid walking down the sidewalk holding up his sagging jeans is just depressing. Of course, he's talking on his cell phone with his free hand. Texting would be his choice, but that requires two hands and you know what would happen then. It forces the question: "Who is going to run the world?"

Luckily, before sliding too deep into the quagmire of "what if," it's time to visit the Ruby Ranch for branding. Eighty miles from a town of any size, the ranch is located in Big Hole Valley, Mont. Jessi and Nick Donker and their four boys live in a tiny cabin on the vast outfit. Nick aspires to the old ways and is a member of the ranch crew. He rides and trains horses, works cattle, feeds in the winter with a draft-horse team and helps any way he can. Jessi runs the home school.

The three oldest boys come running to the truck. In short order, faith in humanity is restored. They call me "Ma'am." Garrett, age seven, opens the gate and his older brother, J.D., age nine, closes it. Baby Wade is in the house. Laying aside their toy guns, they want to show off their good horses. Excitedly, they list the qualities of their rides as they mount up.

"My horse's name is One-Eyed Wonder."

"My horse never bucks!"

"This horse only bucks my dad!"

All three are replicas of their father, but Kaleb Wayne Donker, soon to be five, carries it to the last detail. He insists on wearing his cowboy suit and vest every day to home school. Putting his own twist on things, Kaleb recently added a string tie and badge to his daily wear and without a trace of a smile he announces: "I need a nickname. Call me Tricky!"

Tricky tells about training Dory, his aunt's 30-year-old miniature stallion. Dory cuts a wide path in the draft-horse pen, flattening his ears and sending the big horses flying. "Once he lets me catch him he follows me everywhere." Petting the stallion, Tricky talks of the future: "I want to be a cowboy and a horse trainer like my dad!"

If Kaleb Wayne Donker or his brothers are in charge, the world is going to be okay. ■

Cynthia Baldauf specializes in ranch and agricultural photography, sometimes with a quirky viewpoint. Along with husband, Andy, she logs thousands of miles each year roaming the West. Contact her at cgbaldauf@tds.net or www.cynthiabaldaufimages.com.



Kaleb Wayne Donker, with bent ears and one spur, always dresses to kill for home school. LEFT: Dory the miniature stallion is in charge of it all.