

A Day with McRae

*At home on Montana's Rocker Six.
Words and photos by Jessica Brandi Lilland.*

In the late Indian-summer days, the southeastern Montana grasslands turn a golden yellow. At the Rocker Six Cattle Co., Wally McRae and his wife Ruth rise before dawn. Their son Clint joins them for a quick breakfast. He lives just up the road on the same property with his wife Tammy and their children, Kathleen, 14, and Elizabeth, 11. After filling their bellies, Clint and Wally grab their hats. Wally refills his white diner-style cup, grabs the thermos filled with steamy coffee reserves, and off they go to saddle up the horses.



Cowboy poet Wally McRae is a third-generation rancher. He lives and works on his family ranch, Rocker Six Cattle Company near Colstrip in southeastern Montana, with his wife Ruth. His son Clint and his family also live and work on the ranch. Sept. 16, 2007.

Cowboy poet and performer Wally McRae has unquestionable talent and a reputation for writing that reaches across the American West. He also has a reputation for strong opinions, a quick wit and sharp tongue. Some would say he is an old-fashioned curmudgeon. So much so, that the

name of one of his poetry books is titled, "Cowboy Curmudgeon and Other Poems."

Most who only know him through his poetry, onstage performances and reputation may be unaware of a more tender side of Wally, the side he'd be the last to admit exists, the side that loves his family and home and is

fiercely dedicated to his ranch. He and Clint manage the ranch and continue a family tradition that dates back over a hundred years.

Wally, 72, is a third-generation rancher running cattle in the same county that both of his grandfathers homesteaded back in the 1800s. In fact, all around the McRae home there are photos and memorabilia which serve as windows into their proud family history and their connection to the region.

Both of Wally's grandfathers were Scotsmen. John McKay came to Montana from a Scottish farm in Minnesota; John B. McRae emigrated from Scotland. Both settled in the area to ranch in the 1880s. The two men ranched eight miles apart along Rosebud Creek. Although not located on exactly the same ranch land, the Rocker Six lies along the same creek in the same county—Rosebud.

The ranch is only a stone's throw from the Cheyenne Nation's land. The closest town is Colstrip, Mont., which is just a dot on the map. The land is typical of southeast Montana, tall golden grassland that stretches out along rolling hills, with an occasional tree-lined creek, cozy home or deserted homesteader's cabin. Rocky red crags jut out here and there. Cows and horses roam as far as the cattle guards and fences will allow them. Occasionally one can spot antelope bouncing across the fields. It is an iconic vision of western grassland.

The task for this day is to wrangle 21 three-year-old steer "leftovers" from the fall shipping and bring them to town for auction. Wally's neighbors and his dog Rose, a year-and-a-half-old border-collie mix, join them. Before long, from off in the hills comes the thumpity-thump sound of horses' hooves and an occasional "Yeehah!" as riders corner the cattle. Just a couple of hours later, they are rounded up in the corrals, then loaded into the trailer bound for Miles City Livestock Center, where they will be auctioned off.

Later that evening, Wally stops by Clint's house. Clint is attaching a new corral gate and Wally's granddaughter Elizabeth is itching for an evening ride on a new paint horse. Together, three generations of McRaes walk out to



Clint McRae brings in five stragglers on the Rocker Six. Clint and his father Wally run the outfit together. BELOW: Wally's dog Rose—a close companion—takes a break in the shade under the pickup.

the horse and Elizabeth saddles up. It is the same horse Wally rode that morning.

Says Wally of the dun-colored gelding named Casey, "It's Elizabeth's horse now. It used to be mine and we joke about whose horse is that really. Is he my ex-horse?"

This past summer Elizabeth took Casey to the Rosebud County Fair to compete. She and her sister Kathleen both came back with a whole fistful of blue ribbons.

"We were all proud," Wally says.

About 90 percent of the land the McRaes ranch on is privately owned. They use no growth hormones or antibiotics and their cattle are grass fed. They run the ranch without hired help, relying on each other. "This is our deal," says Wally.

One of the things Wally loves most about ranching is that "every day is a different challenge. Every day has different opportunities....

You never know what the day is going to bring...unpredictable animals, unpredictable weather."

One of the most difficult things about ranching in southeast Montana today is "to

resist all the pressures from energy companies in this area... 'cause I live in an area that has one of the largest deposits of coal in the world." Some nearby land, including the place Wally was raised on, has been mined.

He says any of the ranch families in the area could have a more financially stable future if they just sold out. But, he adds, "Our ancestors settled this land and we hope our children continue to do what we do.... You hope your kids will be ranchers."

The next morning, summer has become fall. It is raining. It is cold. With the help of an overnight frost, the trees have turned red. When the rain tapers off to a dull gray day, Wally and Rose set out in his pickup loaded with bags of cattle salt and head out for a drive across the rolling hills of





the Rocker Six. At each stop, Wally methodically mixes the salt and minerals in the feeders. Rose jumps off the truck, scampers around and jumps back on. They move to the next stop and the next, repeating the scenario over and over again. After the chores are done, it is back to the house for another of Ruth's home-cooked meals.

Wally says that probably the thing he enjoys most about his life is he only has one boss. Who is that boss?

"Well, she's a tough taskmaker—Mother Nature." ■

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:

- ▶ When Wally pulls into the pasture in his pickup, the McRae family's herd of horses gather around the boss.
- ▶ Wally and his dog Rose ease around the corrals after completing the gather. Wally is riding a new horse that he is "testing out."
- ▶ Wally and Clint (white hat) retrieved the renegades quickly, with the help of neighbors.
- ▶ At the auction house in Miles City, Mont., Wally holds the receipt for 25 head of cattle in his mouth, to keep his hands free to close up the trailer.
- ▶ After dinner, Wally and Ruth chat at the kitchen counter, planning the next day's chores.

