Harry O'Rourke, his four siblings and their families, continue a horse operation founded by his great-grandfather, Michael, in the late 1800s.

Green Mountain Grown

High in the mountains of Vermont, horses have helped generations of the O'Rourke family power Pond Hill Ranch, the largest working horse ranch in New England.

Story by KATIE NAVARRA • Photography by KIM STONE

THREE RIDERS DISAPPEAR BEHIND THE SLATE OUTCROPPINGS where Vermont's northern edge of the Green Mountains and southern ridge of the Taconic Mountains meet. The region's steep talus slopes are carpeted with lush grass, and dense stands of evergreen and deciduous trees provide natural shelter from the elements. Beyond the ridgeline, Birdseye Mountain—the former site of a ski resort—reaches 2,200 feet into the sky.

A dust storm builds from behind the ridge, blocking the sweltering summer sun. The ground rumbles. Whinnies pierce the silence. Within a half-hour of the riders' departure, 400 ponies, horses and draft crosses begin to appear from hidden alcoves in the trees. A kaleidoscope of coat colors accents the mountainous backdrop as brothers Bryan and D.J., and their cousin Rick—who represent the fifth generation of the O'Rourke family—drive the horses into a holding pen made from red corral panels.

This is just one herd belonging to the family's Pond Hill Ranch, the largest horse leasing and sales outfit east of the Mississippi. It's hard to fully grasp the breadth of the Castleton, Vermont, ranch and the family that runs it. The ranch encompasses a camp-horse leasing and sales business, a 48-year-old professional rodeo company, a 60-stall boarding barn and a tack shop. The main ranch is the hub of a giant wheel that keeps the business and the family connected. And saddle horses power the entire operation.

THE CORRAL SITS AT THE BASE of the small mountain pasture adjacent to three barns where much of the ranch's business takes place. An indoor arena serves as a sales center and place for exercising horses. The barn to the left of the indoor is lined with straight tie stalls where sale horses wait for the next customer. A manure gutter system commonly seen in dairy barns keeps the alleyway clean with minimal labor. The barn to the right includes a grooming stall and more than a dozen tie stalls where the ranch-owned trail horses patiently await their next riders.

ABOVE: Harry walks through a herd fresh in from pasture. In the spring, horses come to the main ranch to be sorted and legged up for their annual six-week to six-month assignments.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Pond Hill Ranch owns approximately 800 horses, most of which are leased out to summer camps and resorts in as many as 11 states.

The family almost exclusively uses horses to gather horse herds for summer camps, sort cattle, collect stock for rodeo nights, check fences, harvest lumber for firewood and much more.

"We feel we do as much with saddle horses here as any ranch in the world," says Harry O'Rourke.

His cellphone rings 10 times or more in an hour with inquiries from buyers and lease clients. Harry's wife, Laurie, barrel races, and their daughter, Kaci Jo, works for National Reining Horse Association $3 million rider Craig Schmersal in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Harry, his four siblings (Debbie, Dick, Judy and Colleen) and his three nephews currently operate the ranch. While they each have a specialty within the various aspects of the ranch's operations, in reality every family member must be ready at a moment's notice to fix fence, show off a sale horse, lead a trail ride for tourists, sort camp horses or feed stock.

They do not take the responsibility inherent in the working ranch lifestyle lightly. Five generations of the O'Rourke family have stewarded Pond Hill Ranch, with each subsequent generation as committed as the one before it.

"It's our livelihood and we get to keep the legacy going that our parents worked so hard for," says Debbie O'Rourke, the eldest of the siblings. "We all work together, but we each have a special part of the business."

HARRY RUNS HIS HAND OVER the rump of each horse as he strolls through the tightly packed corral filled with the horses driven in from the mountains. In his mid-50s, the lean, mustached cowboy easily weaves between horses standing no more than a foot apart. With hindquarters nearly touching, the horses have assembled in groups based on pecking order and the summer's herd dynamics.

Harry is inspecting the horses because they have just returned from summer camps across the Northeast. Most return home around the third week of August, but some don't come back until September or October. Inside the ranch's main corral the horses are tagged with numbered breakaway collars. From there they'll be divided into smaller groups and spread out among several pastures. Pond Hill Ranch owns 2,000 acres and leases another 2,000, which serve as pasture for their saddle horses and rodeo stock. Some is also tillable land for growing hay and grain.

Depending on the weather and available grass, the horses are caught in November and December and sorted based on their condition. They are moved to winter pastures where they receive feed rations designed to meet their nutritional needs.

"We ride our saddle horses and take halters and some grain when we go out to catch the horses," Harry says. "We have a system set up for separating and catching them."

From December through May the horses' diet consists of large square or round bales of hay placed daily. In winter, the ranch feeds more than 150 bales each week. Many of the horses are also fed corn silage and minerals, while a small percentage of horses receive free-choice grain and minerals. Once spring arrives, the horses are brought back to the main ranch, sorted and sent off to camps from Maine to Florida and points in between.

Harry, the third in his family by that name, explains that his parents, Harry Jr. and Josephine, had the vision for what Pond Hill Ranch eventually became. In 1955, the couple lent a string of trail horses to a local boys and girls camp for the summer. At that time, the local tourist economy was booming. Nearby Lake Bomoseen was a world-renowned destination. Trail rides entertained children while parents relaxed at the spa, boated or golfed.

The O'Rourke family had operated a farming and horse-trading business on

Cousins D.J. and Rick O'Rourke (pictured) and D.J.'s brother, Bryan, work horseback daily moving horses and roughstock and running the arena for the ranch's rodeo.

the main ranch property since the late 1800s, when Michael O'Rourke (Harry's great-grandfather) first emigrated from Ireland and bought the land. Lending out horses to meet the tourism demand was a logical business expansion.

After that first summer, Harry Jr. and Josephine knew they were onto something. In the four decades that followed they focused on growth. Under their leadership, the ranch grew the herd to approximately 650 English and Western horses. Today, clients include a diverse mix of private family-owned operations, resorts and children's camps.

To meet the demand, the ranch buys horses from across the United States, frequenting the largest Western sales. At any given time, brands from outfits such as the Four Sixes Ranch, Haythorn Land & Cattle Company and others can be seen in the Pond Hill corrals. The ranch owns about 800 horses, but there's never a time they are all on the home farm at once.

Pond Hill's horses go to as many as 11 states and as far as 800 miles from home in one of six truck-and-trailer rigs or semis. Horses are leased for a few weeks at a time, the entire summer or six months at a time. Before a client's lease contract begins, one of the O'Rourkes exercises each horse. There are fewer than five non-family employees who assist with day-to-day operations. Before the horses leave they've also been shod and vet-checked.

"Because they have such a large herd they have a great selection, so we can have a good mix," says Shannon Donovan-Monti, executive director at Chimney Corners Camp in Becket, Massachusetts. "We can get ponies through 16-hand-tall horses and even some that are more advanced for jumping."

Chimney Corners, a YMCA camp, leases a string of 16 horses throughout the summer for campers who come for a week or a month. The campers primarily ride hunt seat, but Shannon also incorporates Western riding into the camp's program.

"If a horse isn't working for us or gets sick, they will replace it immediately," Donovan-Monti says. "They never make you feel bad for requesting a switch."

"They let me ride horses at the ranch to see which ones will work best for us," adds Louise Bienieki, the stable manager at Mountain Top Inn and Resort, another Pond Hill client, in Chittenden, Vermont.

The luxury resort leases 20 horses for its trail rides and lessons offered Memorial Day through Columbus Day. Bienieki appreciates that she can request specific horses back each year. Although she has nearly two decades of experience working with Pond Hill Ranch, the inn's relationship with the ranch began more than 50 years ago.

The family's knowledge has been handed down from one generation to the next.

"The entire family is so knowledgeable; equine history and the lifestyle is in their blood," Bienieki says. "I learn something new every time I talk to them."

A YOUNG COUPLE SITS on bleachers at the main ranch's indoor arena, watching Harry's middle sister, Judy, ride a horse they want to buy. Judy runs the tack shop, works with sale clients and

serves as the Vermont state director for the National Barrel Horse Association. She organizes about 12 barrel races at the ranch each year and oversees a Make A Wish Benefit Barrel Race that averages about 200 entries.

Two middle-aged women inquire about a bay horse they've come to see. Harry fields several inquiries from colleges, training stables and private customers looking for their next horse. The ranch sells approximately 500 horses a year, primarily from their lease herd. The herd is culled annually based on age, training level and maintenance expenses. Horses that are sold are later replaced by others purchased at sales.

"Our philosophy is to keep the middle," Harry explains. "We sell the horses that may have increased in value while away at camp and those that may be at a point of requiring extra care."

When Judy isn't demonstrating a sale horse's ability, she's assisting with making sure the ranch's guided trail rides leave the barn uneventfully.

For the daily trail rides, Colleen, Harry's youngest sister, greets customers and directs them to the sale barn or the mobile office, where riders sign a release of liability and pick up a helmet. Colleen is a skilled breakaway roper and the ranch's matchmaker, pairing the horses with the ideal riders.

"If you choose the wrong horse for the wrong person it could be a bad outcome, so you have to be able to match the right horse to the right rider," she says.

Every generation of customers is a little farther removed from agriculture, which makes this aspect of the business challenging, Colleen explains. People show up in flip-flops, high heels, fashion boots and everything in between. The changing culture is balanced by the second and third generations of families who return for a ride each summer.

"We get a lot of families who rode here as kids with their parents or grandparents," she says. "Today, they're bringing their own children or grandchildren."

Back outside, Bryan, D.J. and Rick mount up and head back out to check stock, catch horses, mend fence and check water supplies. In addition to camp and sale horses, the ranch owns roughstock and 200 to 250 cattle for rodeo, roping and sorting jackpot events.

"Anyone can chase one with an ATV, but using horses throughout the ranch keeps the lifestyle alive," D.J. says. He learned the tradition of doing chores horseback from his father, Dick, Harry's older brother.

Dick has always been a stickler for using live horsepower for any task on the ranch. Even when it's 25 degrees below zero Fahrenheit, he uses a team of horses rather than one of the tractors to move hay from one pasture to the next and to check the stock.

"Why wouldn't I take the horses?" asks Dick, who avoids the spotlight and prefers to stay behind the scenes.

A handy teamster who lives for the rodeo, Dick inherited his affinity for draft horses from his grandfather Harry O'Rourke, Sr. During the Great Depression, Harry Sr. owned, sold and leased draft horses and ran a dairy. His workhorses built many of the area's roads, logged the land and mined the slate quarries. They were also used to deliver their home farm's and a neighboring dairy's milk to nearby creameries. At a time when other landowners were forced to sell, Harry Sr. was able to buy land.

Neither rain nor sleet nor driving snow off the surrounding mountains keeps the family from being horseback, even when winter temperatures plunge below zero. The mountains temper the hot summer sun, but humid air is common.

"We bundle up in chaps or chinks to keep warm. Once we get on the horse and get jogging along we warm up pretty quick," Bryan says. "In the summer our hats and long-sleeved shirts protect us from the sun."

Boots and spurs, starched jeans, a pressed shirt and cowboy hat are as central to their days as the horses.

FANS LINE THE RAIL at the final event of the Pond Hill Ranch rodeo season, and fill the bleachers on both sides of the open-air arena. The crisp fall air drives the crowd to the food trucks for hot chocolate, tacos and pizza. The weekly rodeo—sanctioned by the American Professional Rodeo Association and the International Professional Rodeo Association—welcomes tourists, but it's really a horseman's event. You're more likely to see regular cowboys and cowgirls than out-of-towners.

Local contestant Dan Brown started coming to the rodeo as a second-grader with his uncle. Today, he participates in team roping and ranch rodeos. He brings his own children and nephews to watch.

"There's no rodeo that is more honest than what you get here," he says. "The O'Rourkes are horse people; they are not trying to put on a show or a concert. It's all about the [cowboy] lifestyle."

There are no rodeo clowns, trick ropers or entertainment acts; two bullfighters stay virtually out of sight unless needed. The only non-rodeo activity is a 20-member adult drill team. Extra entertainment isn't necessary because the weekly rodeo includes ranch rodeo events. It's uncommon on the East Coast for spectators to see wild cow milking or a trailer-loading contest, but Pond Hill has offered both. In the trailer loading, three-person teams rope a cow from a herd, and then load it and one horse into a stock trailer. The clock stops only when all three riders jump in the truck cab and close the doors.

In addition to hundreds of camp and sale horses, the ranch runs more than 200 cattle for rodeo, roping and sorting events.

"This is my favorite event because it relates back to our everyday lifestyle and the activities we do on a daily basis to keep the ranch running," says D.J., who—like all of the family members—pitches in with whatever needs to be done.

The rodeo draws seasoned competitors and rookies alike. It boasts the largest bronc and bull-riding divisions in the Northeast, largely because it goes out of its way to nurture novice riders, who can ride two-handed until they hit the ground or eight seconds are up.

"This gives young riders a positive, supportive environment to get started," Harry says. "It helps our entire industry. It generates interest in these events and we want to encourage people to get involved."

On any given night there are nearly 20 bull riders and more than a dozen bronc riders. The ranch-owned roughstock includes 35 to 40 broncs and 100 bucking bulls of various ages that are largely from breeding programs such as that of late Oklahoma rodeo producer Charlie Plummer.

The rodeo was started in 1968 to complement the trail-riding business. It runs every Saturday night from July 1 through Labor Day, and contestants haul in from across New England. The official rodeo ends around 11 p.m., but slack riders line up outside the gate. Most rodeos don't end until 2 or 3 a.m. Sunday.

For Bryan, D.J. and Rick, the rodeo is the most rewarding part of the family business. When it kicks off at 8 p.m., the three men make sure it goes without a hitch. The cousins are in the arena the entire rodeo, pushing stock, setting barrels and working as pick-up riders.

"It means everything to me to be a part of something we all work so hard for the next generation to inherit one day," Bryan says.

THREE MILES DOWN THE ROAD from the main ranch, Debbie oversees the family's 60-stall commercial boarding and training stable that includes an indoor arena and a heated pine-paneled tack room. The stable is the hub for youth activities, where young riders take lessons

Pond Hill Ranch roughstock includes 35 to 40 broncs and 100 bucking bulls.

and get involved with club sports. For 38 years, the stable hosted a 4-H club with an emphasis on participation in knowledge-based events, but in 2012 Debbie transitioned to junior high and high school Interscholastic Equestrian Association team competitions.

Jessie Backmann, 23, has ridden with Debbie since she was 6. She credits Debbie with preparing her for veterinary school at Cornell University.

"At the beginning of vet school they teach you how to handle animals. Even the other students who had been around horses didn't have the basic horsemanship skills I learned from Debbie," she says.

Even though Jessie is away at school most of the year, the O'Rourkes continue to play a significant role in her developing career. She was invited to help the ranch's herd veterinarian perform routine vaccinations and draw Coggins test bloodwork.

"I got to give 200 vaccinations and pull blood from 200 horses," she says. "It was a really good experience."

Jessie's sister, Allie, also started her riding career at Pond Hill Stables. As her horsemanship skills blossomed through lessons, she was soon active in all parts of the ranch. She rides on the drill team, competes in breakaway roping at the rodeo, and helps prepare camp horses for delivery when she's not at college.

"It was the best place in the world to grow up," she says.

Although removed from the main ranch, the stables are one of the many spokes on which the main hub relies.

"We all have our own niche, but everybody works as a whole to keep the entire business rolling," Debbie says.

AT DUSK, YOU CAN STAND atop the hill that gives Pond Hill Ranch its name and gaze across 2,000 acres with only the stars and moon for light. Since the mid-1800s the O'Rourke family has accumulated surrounding tracts of land. Sixteen distinct land deeds in two different townships converge at the home ranch atop Pond Hill.

"It was the coolest thing in the world to gather stock the morning of a rodeo and stand on the top of the mountain and see the sunrise," says Chuck Ward, a former ranch hand who worked for the family for nearly 14 years.

The entire O'Rourke family is proud to live and work beneath a piece of sky that is free of commercial and residential lights.

The ranch operates a thriving trail ride business out of the home farm's old barns.

"We've worked very hard to preserve the open sky you'd find on any ranch out West," Harry says.

Even though Harry Jr. and Josephine both passed away in 1998, their children operate the ranch as if their parents still owned it. The coming sixth generation of O'Rourkes have big boots to fill, but their training is already under way. DJ's oldest two, Weston, 5, and Jasper, 4, hold gates and pitch in with other pint-sized chores. Their 1-year-old sister Presley will catch up soon. Bryan's son Marshall, at 15 months, is just getting to the age where he can get involved. Rick's daughter Tayler, 9, rides every day.

"Every day we wake up to make Mom and Dad proud," Colleen says. "It makes me happy that we've been able to carry on the family business and that we'll be able to give it to the next generation."

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MAKING TWO MARKS

KACI JO O'ROURKE is more than 2,500 miles from her family's Pond Hill Ranch in Vermont, but never far from a horse.

Part of her family's fifth generation to be raised at the ranch, she doesn't know life without horses. Her family's herds of saddle horses combined with the lush green mountain pastures and the ranch's weekly rodeo provided much inspiration to a young Kaci Jo as a budding artist. She sketched the camp horses that came and went, and froze twisting, leaping broncs on countless pages in her sketchpad. She drew purely for pleasure, but the more she practiced, the more sophisticated her work became. She credits her mother, Laurie, and her grandmother Josephine for encouraging her to stick with it.

"As I started to see progress in my drawings, I got hungry to continue improving my skills," she says.

She also showed successfully as a youth in the National Reining Horse Association. Riding Smart Lookin Juice, she won the Novice Horse Level 2 Affiliate Championship at the NRHA Futurity in 2011 and 2012.

In 2013 she accepted a professional position with reining trainer Casey Deary at Deary Performance Horses in Weatherford, Texas. She wanted to follow in her father Harry's footsteps and spend a life working with horses. To pursue reining, she needed to move west.

"Landing a job for Casey marked my transition from non-pro to professional," she says.

Working for the Dearys opened another door of opportunity. Casey and his wife, Nicole, encouraged her to establish Kaci O'Rourke Custom Artistry and complete a bachelor's degree in business, which provided valuable insight on running both training and art businesses.

Juggling training with school and art was a challenge, especially since the 23-year-old devotes between 30 and 50 hours on each of her drawings.

In the fall of 2017, Kaci loaded her drawing supplies, her gear and her horses onto a trailer and headed farther west to work for NRHA $3 Million Dollar Rider Craig Schmersal in Scottsdale, Arizona. Schmersal won the 2017 NRHA Futurity on Face The Attitude.

"Though I've only been here a few months, I've already learned a lot. Craig prepares his horses to have long-lasting careers, and that's what I'd like to strive for," she says. "It was really cool getting to watch Craig prepare his [NRHA] Futurity horses. He never asked more of them than what they knew because he'd done his training at home, and focused on keeping his horses healthy and mentally prepared. I hope I can pick up on that consistency."

In addition to learning from Schmersal, she's bringing along a string of young horses bearing the Pond Hill Ranch brand. She and her father have purchased several futurity prospects for Kaci to train, show and sell.

"My yearling was the first colt that was born and raised at the ranch. His mother was the first prospect my dad and I bought and sold," she says. "I plan on training him throughout his 2-year-old year and we're really excited about him."

She draws for a few hours every night and on her days off. Once she starts a piece it can take four to five weeks to finish, depending on her horse show schedule.

She prefers working in graphite pencil, and uses an array of unconventional tools and tricks to make her drawings look as real as possible.

"I use everything from an embossing stylus to cotton balls to marker and pen. My goal is to include every detail I possibly can," she says.

Reference photographs—from posed full-body images to dynamic action shots and close-up headshots—provide a starting place that allows her to skillfully recreate intricate details that bring a portrait to life. She says that headshots are among her favorite because they allow for detail and show emotion. Specifically, she prefers to work from a picture that clearly shows the subject's eye.

"That's where the expression is and that's the one thing I really try to emphasize in my drawings," she says.

Commissions keep her busy and it's a line of work she plans to continue. However, she's eager to expand her horizons and delve into Western art like that of Tim Cox, whom she admires.

"Drawing ranching scenes brings me back home a little bit," she says. "I love depicting the good, solid ranch horse."

Harry's daughter, Kaci, works for reiner Craig Schmersal and is raising Pond Hill Ranch reining prospects.

As an artist, Kacie favors working in graphite pencil.