

New South meets the Old West... Hidden Creek Ranch Beckons Would-Be Cowpokes

Ky Vinsant slips into a white hat and saddle the way a bird slips into springtime - natural, graceful, confident - and when you see it, things feel a little more right with the world. Vinsant, 53, who grew up in Cahaba Heights, left behind his city upbringing and his construction company nearly 5 years ago and returned to the Sterrett cattle and horse ranch his family has owned for more than 40 years.

Spurred by his love of the Old West, Vinsant and his wife, Leslie, are transforming the Hidden Creek Ranch. They envision a living, working homage to a generation of cowboy heroes such as John Wayne, who captured the imagination of kids, dads and granddads in the last half of the 20th century.

It's a vision in progress, one that's not quick, cheap or easy to create.

"We teach a way of life here - an old traditional way of life," Vinsant said. "We say 'yes sir, no sir, yes ma'am and no ma'am,' we take our hats off inside, and it's always ladies first. Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, they were gentlemen in their movies, but they also lived that way."

An Idea Is Born For years, the Vinsant family land was mostly used for raising horses and cattle. But when family and friends started visiting, Vinsant realized how people of all ages were drawn to the ranch lifestyle, and the character-building effect it could have on people.

They, along with daughter Ashley, now 18, and son Austin, 17, rallied behind Vinsant's idea to stretch the ranch beyond raising horses and cattle. They decided to expand the business to teaching adults and kids how to rope and ride, re-enacting Old West shootouts, hosting rodeos and creating a place where cowboy adventures come true.

"We are trying to bring back the old, authentic cowboy," Austin said.

Jeffrey Honea, 12, of Chelsea, has been a student of Hidden Creek for five years. He ropes cattle, moves cattle, rides horses. When people ask if he's a cowboy, he figures he is. "I like riding my horse," Jeffrey said. "It's really fun

and it's really peaceful."

Jordan Champion, 15, of Chelsea, is a student, bull-rider, instructor, and now, a part-time ranch hand. "The cowboy way is living your life how they used to," Jordan said. "It's about being a simple man, being with God, and not doing things that are harmful."

Jordan's computer whiz father is astounded watching his outdoorsy son teach adults to ride bulls. "It's weird because he's only 15," Michael Champion said. "He's part of the ranch now, it seems. It's the boots, it's the hats, it's the horses, the ranch. There's something about it that draws people."

It's a way of life for the entire Vinsant family, and extended family living around the property, a la the TV show "Dallas." They keep cowboy hours and pitch in to do what needs to be done.

"Being the wife of a cowboy is a lot of sacrificing," Leslie said. "It is never a dull moment. But a lot of the benefits are knowing the people Ky affects. Our whole family is behind this."

Daughter Ashley says the cowboy spirit is contagious in her family.

"A lot of people say to us, 'Do you really think this ranch is going to fly?'" Ashley said. "My dad prays about it, and we pray as a family about it and it's rewarding."

However, Leslie, who grew up in Mountain Brook, jokes that the toughest parts of being a cowboy's wife are keeping supper warm and getting her husband to take off his beloved cowboy hat. She's given up on the hat, though.

Vinsant's cowboy ways are a hit with parents, who like his manners and responsibility. Older folks see nostalgic traces of their childhood, when "Mr. Ky's" ways were more the norm than the exception.

"Ninety-five percent of our students come here to learn 'the cowboy way,'" Vinsant said. "We make no bones about it, we are a godly place. If you don't believe in God, then we are sitting on horses looking at the valley at sunset, we are not going to be on the same base."

During riding or roping lessons, the rousing themes from classic Westerns such as "Bonanza," "The Big Valley" and "The Magnificent Seven" drift from

the barn sound system, across the pond and through the meadows. Scattered around the pastures, Texas Longhorns, calves, as well as bucking bulls and broncos graze. Arizona the cat ambles around the place.

Young riders, not unlike The Duke's team of young cattle-drivers-in-training in the 1972 film "The Cowboys," mosey up dirt roads after their riding, roping or herding lessons. They unsaddle and groom their horses with the skill of full-sized men, and the manners of Opie Taylor.

It's as though the ghost of John Wayne could step around any corner, appear over any horizon.

"John Wayne stood for a lot of things I'm for," Vinsant said. "He was bad to the bad guys and good to the children and had manners most of the time. There's nothing more American than a cowboy."

For Vinsant, it's not a role, it's a commitment.

"He is not like most guys in 2007, he is like guys in 1880," said Jennifer Justiss of Chelsea, whose eldest daughter, Hanna Kate, 13, has taken lessons there for three years.

At Hidden Creek, they raise cattle and break horses as part of the routine. They also host professional and amateur rodeo events, such as their popular Dusty Bottoms Rodeo for children ages 2 - 16. They teach classes for all ages, are certified to use horses to work with troubled kids and families, and they have an informal rescue service for homeless horses.

For Western-style outings at Hidden Creek, the public can book a range of events, from budget-priced to full-blown trail or wagon rides, starlight campouts, shootouts, or campfire meals from burgers to sirloins.

"There's a little bit of cowboy in all of us," Vinsant said. "You get up every day, put each foot on the floor and work toward the dream. I live for my dreams."

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