

Landon Berry chooses the family business over college

By Tim Keller — For the Comet | Posted: Friday, January 30, 2015 12:00 am

RATON – Although Landon Berry grew up moving cattle from high atop horses' backs, when he graduated from Raton High School in 2011, he accepted the standard sage advice: go to college and get something to fall back on in case the cowboy thing doesn't work out.

He spent two school years at NMSU in Las Cruces working toward a degree in mechanical engineering, though he never grew a vision of what he might do with that degree. In May 2013, he came home from college and never went back. He turns 22 next month. He's the sixth generation of his family to raise cattle for a living on the family ranch, and he has no intention of falling back.

The Berrys came from Ireland via Scotland around 1890 to work in the new coal mines around Raton. When his brother was killed in an explosion at the Dutchman mine in Blossburg, Patrick Berry left mining in favor of farming atop Johnson Mesa. By 1896 he'd bought some calves and registered a brand with the Territory of New Mexico.

Eventually the mesa-top winters drove the Berry family down into Bear Canyon and Yankee Canyon. Landon Berry lives in a family house built on the mesa before 1900 but later moved downhill, the first house in Yankee Canyon when driving from Johnson Mesa down to Raton.

The family's 17 horses run free in big open pasture atop the mesa with a year-round spring at 8600' elevation. Landon drives his pickup and trailer 11 miles to the horses from his house at the Berry headquarters. In the deep snow of winter, he has to ride one horse three miles in from the nearest pavement to bring others out. This is how the Berrys have always done it.

They're dedicated horsemen—the family doesn't own a 4-wheeler—and they need the horses for moving the cattle that provide the family its living.

Landon's grandfather, John Berry, is still working at 84, one of the reasons Landon cites for leaving college. "I wanted to have as much time with my grandpa as possible." When Landon won the 2011 New Mexico high school rodeo championship in saddle bronc riding, he followed his father, Patrick, a former



Landon Berry atop Johnson Mesa

Atop Johnson Mesa in November, Landon Berry gathered horses for the morning's work.

saddle bronc champion who's been a dedicated horseman all his life, spending large blocks of time with famed horse trainers Tom Dorrance, Ray Hunt, and Pat Parelli.

Landon has spent much of January in Mineral Wells, TX, working with Chris Cox, another famed horseman and trainer. Last year, Landon was featured on Cox's RFD-TV show in a ten-episode series called "Horsemanship Showdown," now available on DVD.

"We're horseback every day—me, my dad, mom, and grandpa," Landon says of his life on the ranch with his family. "We buy and sell cattle and tend other people's cattle. After this whole drought and cattle prices going down, it can be nerve-racking. My grandpa and I were riding one day, working, and he said, 'I don't know what's going to happen to this place.' I said, 'I don't know either, but I'm gonna stick around and find out.'"

From his kitchen table, Landon sips coffee and points out the window east to the snow crusting the mesa ridge close by. It's an extraordinary view, and gorgeous. "There's no place in the world I'd rather be," he says.

Citing the challenges of drought, inheritance taxes, and market forces, he says, "Those are the problems, but it's the best way of life there is. I'm not making any money, but as long as I can keep the land and people keep eating beef, I should be okay."

There's no mention of college or mechanical engineering or falling back on something. As he told his grandpa, he's in it for the long haul. About to turn 22, the future is uncertain, but he's game, and he's horseback.

"It's not the easy way," he says. "It's the cowboy way."