

The Journal of the American West

# Ranch & Reata



Volume 3.2 \$14.95

Western Artist John Moyers

Great Basin Ranch Families: A Portfolio

Arnold Rojas – Brave Old Men & Their Horses

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Cover image: Photograph of "Ashley" on our cover  
by Robb Kendrick.

# Ranch & Reata



Volume 3, Number 2 • June/July 2013  
[www.ranchandreata.com](http://www.ranchandreata.com)

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*Ranch & Reata* is a bimonthly journal of  
RangeWorks, LLC  
PO Box 714, Santa Ynez, CA 93460  
[www.rangeworks.com](http://www.rangeworks.com)

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Limited Edition print journals published six-times a  
year. Subscriptions available at website. Individual  
Limited Edition copies (limited to 2,000) are  
available for \$14.95 and are sold in US dollars plus  
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## THE WESTERN HORSE

# If Horses Are In You

As adulthood looms, young people in the West's horse culture face the daunting challenge of keeping horses in their lives. Teens like 17-year-old Sierra Pillmore are determined to build futures centered on the animals.



By Tim Keller

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**S**ierra Pillmore walks from the ranch house to tend the horses, her path lit by the red sun as it inches above Johnson Mesa to her left. From her vantage at the foot of Bartlett Mesa, just below the Colorado state line, she can see the sun's horizontal rays strike the distant T.O. Ranch, Green Mountain, Tinaja Mesa, Eagle Tail Mountain, and finally the Sangre de Cristo Mountains from Cimarron to Raton, New Mexico. At 17, it's the only home, and the only lifestyle, she's ever known.

"Without a horse in my life, there'd be a piece missing," she says. "They're therapeutic, and then they're peace." There's a picture of her at a horse show at age 5 on her first horse, Blue, a Quarter Horse that raised all three Pillmore sisters and now, at age 35, lives the good

life at pasture down by the pond.

As Sierra begins her senior year at Raton High School, she faces tough choices. Next year she'll go off to a college town, leaving the ranch for the first time. Like her sisters Mariah, 20, and Alina, 14, growing up in a close-knit family on a small, animal-filled ranch has spoiled her for anything else. "The feeling I get when I'm outside with my animals tells me that I'm not made to work indoors." It's the same feeling her mother had.

Georgia Pillmore grew up "a city girl" in Greeley, Colorado, where her dad was a golf pro. But just outside town she had friends with horses whose pull was irresistible. "If horses are in you," she says, "they're in you." She rode her bicycle twice daily to feed and care



photo by Tim Keller

New Mexico's Sierra Pillmore.

for the horses. By the time she met Roy Pillmore at Colorado State University, she was the Greeley Independence Stampede Rodeo Queen. When they graduated in 1984, Roy moved to Raton and Georgia took a job at Cherry Hills Country Club, near Denver.

Roy grew up in Denver but lived every summer on what is now Ted Turner's Vermejo Park Ranch, in the high mountains west of Raton. His dad spent those summers cataloging the landscape for the U.S. Geological Survey. Roy tagged along and helped. Each summer they had a string of ranch horses. As Roy reached his teens, the cowboy crews borrowed him to help move cattle. "To me, horses were for transportation and work," he says. He never owned a horse.

In the mid-1980s, Roy was working as a geologist himself, back in Raton, but he was still courting horse-crazy Georgia. With her mom, Roy bought Georgia, for her birthday, a Quarter Horse named Rocky. "I needed to attract her here and get her away from all those eligible bachelors up in Denver."

It worked. They married in 1988. Georgia joined Roy in Raton, and they bought their ranch, three miles east of town, where they've raised three girls and countless animals.

Rocky became everybody's horse. He started all three girls and "lots of cousins and itty bitty people," Georgia says. Partial to Quarter Horses, the Pillmores added Lady, then Blue, then Carlos, then Jazzy.





photo by Tim Keller

Sierra and her rodeo horse, Carlos, compete throughout New Mexico and Colorado.

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After turning Blue into a show horse, Sierra graduated to Carlos. The most competitive of the sisters, Sierra started barrel racing and pole bending in 4-H and proceeded to rodeos, beginning in the youth division of the Maverick Rodeo in Cimarron, where she's competed every 4th of July since she was five years old. She's regularly competed in Little Britches rodeos in Colorado Springs and others in Trinidad, Colorado, and Des Moines, New Mexico. In addition to racing, Sierra enjoys entering Carlos in western pleasure, showmanship, reining and trail competitions.

Like her sisters, Sierra is an honor student in school. She's on the varsity tennis team and recently represented

Raton High at Girl's State in Albuquerque, an annual leadership conference sponsored by American Legion Auxiliary. Growing up cowgirl has taught her responsibility.

"No matter how much homework I have," she says, "I have to go spend time with my horse because he's there waiting for me. It's a good feeling. When you and your horse have a routine, your horse looks for it. He waits for you."

Her mom adds, "We all work together a lot to keep the ranch going. We come together for the animals, but it's for us, too. We're close, bonded."

That's obvious during a recent visit. When Alina leaves for an evening with friends, there are heartfelt



goodbye hugs all around, even between sisters. Each time Mariah returns to CSU Pueblo after a weekend at home, Sierra and Alina shed some tears. The girls have joined in painting each other's bedrooms and each girl's room has pictures of her sisters.

Talking about their country lifestyle, Georgia and Sierra complete each other's sentences. The girls have grown up caring not only for their horses but also for their dogs, cats, chickens, rabbits, hamsters and fish. "It's a real-life hands-on world that gives them something living to care for and be responsible for," Georgia says. "Caring for animals is great therapy, especially for teenagers going through adolescent changes. They pour themselves into other living creatures they love. The animals are like best friends who are good listeners and the love they give the girls is unconditional."

Sierra smiles as she tells of the good times she and Carlos have. "After he's been worked real hard, I like to take him to our arena just on a halter and let him out and let him run and we kinda chase each other around. That's fun. When we get rain, our pond gets really full and we like to run through that. Carlos bolts up the side after racing through the water."

The pond, in fact, is rich with memories. "We've always gone down to the pond after a big rain. You can hear the frogs right away. We'd always go stomping around in that pond catching tadpoles in big buckets, wearing huge muck boots way too big for us."

Summer memories include spraying down the horses with a cold hose. "Giving the horses baths, it

always turns into a water fight. The spray bounces off the horses and we get soaked. It's hard to bathe a horse without coming up wet. And of course you finish and



Sierra earning her first blue ribbon in 2002.

the first thing the horses do is go roll in the dirt."

4-H has been an integral part of growing up in the country life. Sierra doesn't remember ever not being in 4-H; Georgia tells her that she started at age 4. "What I've learned is so broad," Sierra says. A member of the Johnson Mesa 4-H Club, she says the list of skills she's learned seems endless. She includes friendship, leadership and responsibility alongside animals, photography, community service, horse judging, shooting and cooking. She and her teammates compete in many categories every August at the Colfax County Fair in Springer.

Raton High once offered agriculture courses and an active FFA program, but discontinued the classes just as Sierra entered ninth grade. She's competed in





The Pillmore family gathers in Sierra's bedroom under a rodeo sign painted for her by younger sister, Alina. Left to right: Alina, Georgia, Mariah, Sierra and Roy.

horse judging as a member of the now relatively inactive FFA club.

That hasn't deterred her, though, and other opportunities have been rich. "I want to be a professional barrel racer and travel the PRCA circuit, travel the country with my horse and see big things. I know I'm not close to that now but I want to get there. This town has been a good springboard for me."

Her mom acknowledges that "these economic and drought-stricken times have made it difficult to hang onto this lifestyle. Sierra hopes to ride and compete throughout college but it will be difficult and expensive for her to have her horse with her." Her sister

Mariah is studying a pre-veterinary curriculum in Pueblo; she comes home on weekends to ride and compete, as her mother did before her.

Sierra will graduate from high school next year with a certified nursing assistant license and lots of college credits after two years in her school's Health Careers Pathway program. She's shopping for a college with a rodeo team and programs in natural holistic cures, such as physical therapy or massage therapy, with an

ultimate goal of becoming an equine massage therapist.

Reaching the horses as the morning sun crests Johnson Mesa, Sierra says, "I don't know where I'll end up but it'll definitely be somewhere in the country with horses. I just have too many little memories, like hanging out at the barn, just chillin' with the horses, sitting in a wheelbarrow out in the corral, letting the horses come up to me, spending time with them. Those are the moments I'm going to miss when I'm away at college, but they're not something I can leave forever. Wherever I am, there's going to be horses. This is my life."



Tim Keller is a writer and photographer based in northern New Mexico.

See more of his work at [www.timkellerarts.com](http://www.timkellerarts.com).