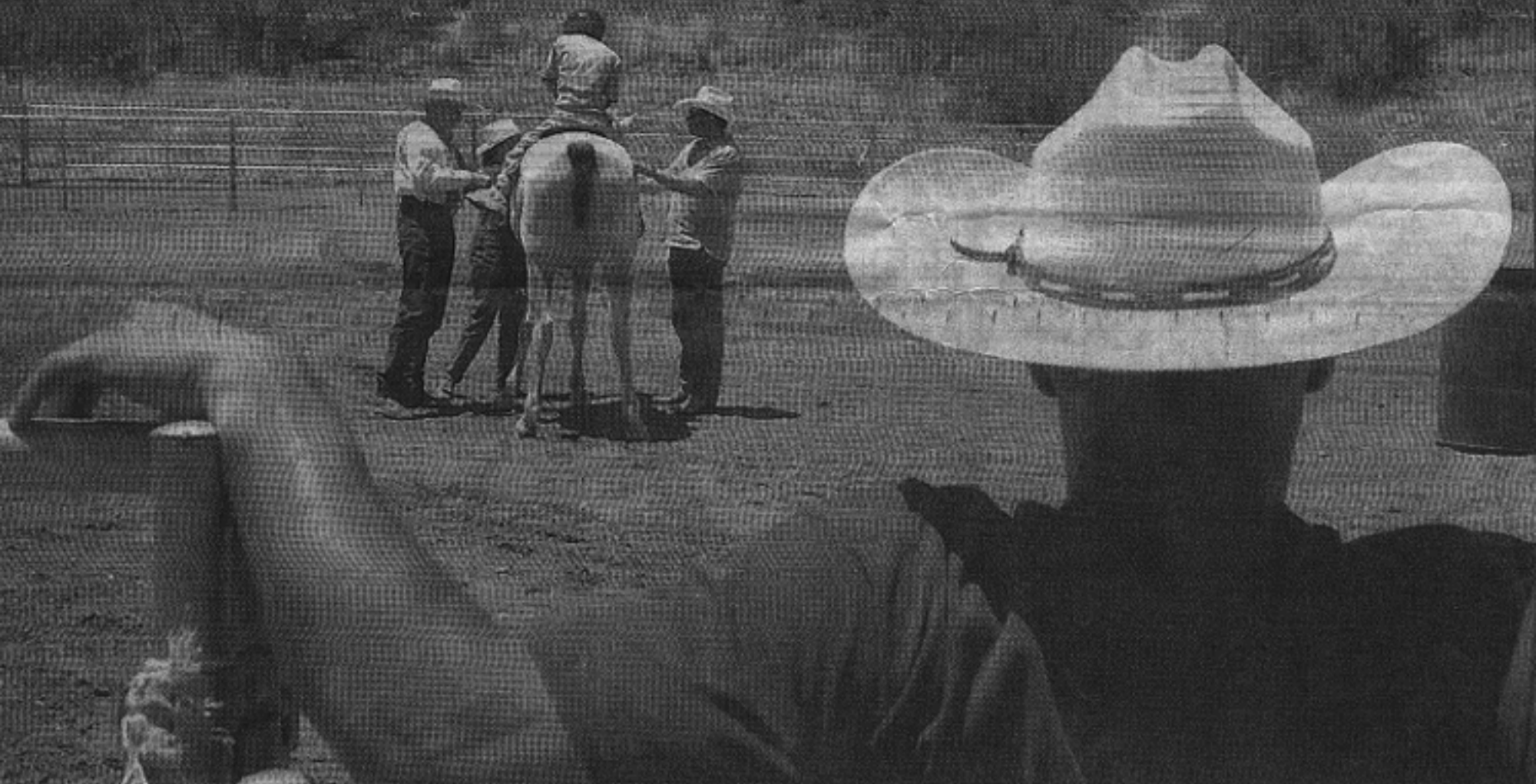


OLD FASHIONED COWBOY LOVE



David R. Crane/Staff Photographer

Kids from Los Angeles get saddled up at a ranch — thanks to Mike McNeel, who runs a program called Inner-City Slickers

Kids trade sidewalks for saddlehorns

By Amy Raisin
Staff Writer

AGUA DULCE — Far from the concrete heat of South Central Los Angeles, a group of Compton kids spent Saturday cowboy style — riding, roping and quenching their thirst with cold, pristine well water.

Mike McNeel, the drummer for the band Three Dog Night, started the Inner-City Slickers program in 1994 to give kids from cities a different perspective, as well as teach them responsibility and teamwork.

"It's fun to ride and you don't have to worry about guns, people getting killed, things like that," said Ashton Woods, 11. "When I was a little kid I was kind of scared (of the horses), but then I got to know them."

McNeel and his team run about 25 ranch days each year, sometimes with inmates from juvenile detention centers.

But Saturday's group of about 10 kids, some as young as six years old, learned about the program through their karate

See COWBOY / Page 6



At the ranch in Agua Dulce, Mike McNeel shows a group of kids from Compton some tips on being a cowboy.



David R. Crane/Staff Photographer

Six-year-old Devonte White, above, takes to the saddle on Mike McNeel's ranch in Agua Dulce. McNeel, a drummer for Three Dog Night, runs a program that brings kids from the inner city out to experience life on a ranch about 25 times a year. At right, Anjuan Robison, 17, tries his hand at spinning a lasso.



Daily News

Inner-city kids get cowboy experience

COWBOY / From Page 1

class. Ten-year-old Dawn Bonds has made the trip to the ranch before and said she has made friends not just with the staff, but also the horses.

"I feel comfortable around horses and here," she said before hopping aboard Monty, one of her two favorite mounts. "I just like the way horses react to things."

In addition to riding, the kids break into posses and learn how to lasso calves — they practice on blocks of hay topped with a ceramic bull's head — groom horses, and even get to ride a mechanical bull.

"This is really a sneaky way to get a group of kids together

"This is really a sneaky way to get a group of kids together that oftentimes don't even know each other. Just because someone has darker skin or talks with an accent, we're also alike."

— Mike McNeel
Inner-City Slickers founder

that oftentimes don't even know each other," said McNeel. "Just because someone has darker skin or talks with an accent, we're also alike."

"Just watch their faces (when they're) on the horse. They go from being scared to having a

great time. If they can control a 1,000-pound animal then they can control their own bodies, their own lives," he said.

Rika Thibodeaux, 7, has been to the ranch many times and said she loves riding the horses fast.

Her mother, also named Rika, watched from the fence as her tiny daughter rode a massive, powerful animal.

"She loves it. She loves the mechanical bull and especially the grooming," Thibodeaux said. "She's gained more confidence to where she wants her own horse. She feels more comfortable here than she does in the city."

The donation of \$15 helps keep Inner-City Slickers running, but McNeel said he's grateful for those who have donated many of the horses.

"This is a way for the kids to see another side of life. And it's helpful to get them comfortable with the animals," McNeel said. "Without fear there is no courage."

Inner-city slickers revel in ranch life's lessons

Program teaches independence, respect

By Amy Raisin
Staff Writer

AGUA DULCE — Nearly 20 city girls had a tough decision to make when they scrambled out of the Los Angeles County sheriff's vans Saturday — should they unfurl their sleeping bags in the saloon, the general store or the town jail?

Each of the Old West buildings is part of the ghost town at Inner City Slickers Ranch, a 10-acre spread run by Michael McMeel and his wife, Erlinda, where city kids learn self-confidence, respect and independence by working with horses.

"Yesterday we couldn't sleep, we were so excited to come here," said Melanie Segura, 15, of La Puente. "I like the whole little town. It's kinda funny, though, because when we were riding the horses, the horse gets kinda stubborn after a while. It just decides not to move."

Segura and the other girls, from 8 to 15 years old, are regulars in the Youth Activities League, run by deputies at the City of Industry sheriff's station. The program teaches local youth about the operations in law enforcement.

When the cowgirls arrived for their sleepover Saturday morning they were greeted by McMeel — a former drummer for the rock band Three Dog Night — and a handful of wranglers who showed the inner-city slickers how to rope and ride steers and horses.

While the horses were the real deal, the steers didn't move around much — the novice ropers practiced on bale of hay with attached plastic steer heads and horns.

"We used to sleep up in the tents," McMeel said during a lunch break at the chuck wagon. "But we figure that if we really want to get them out of the city, we're going to take them back in time, to the early 1800s and 1900s. Now we sleep in the town buildings."

Without radios, TV sets or the Internet, the girls were able to learn the ways of the cowboy and provide each other with support with few distractions.

To demonstrate the trust that must exist between a rider and her horse, McMeel had some of the girls climb onto a table after lunch and close their eyes.

"I want you turn around a few times with your eyes closed and then fall backwards," McMeel said. "You have to trust that someone is going to be there to catch you."



Former Three Dog Night drummer Mike McMeel, above, talks with weekend ranch hands about the care, feeding and saddling of horses. Below, girls get to ride horses on Saturday during the Inner City Slickers Ranch outing.



It took most of the girls a few times before they were able to let go and trust the group, but by then they were ready to bond with the horses.

Deputy Sheriff Phil Cook, who has escorted others to the ranch before, praised the program's character-building objective.

"It's a program that teaches kids respect for animals, respect for property and respect for each other," Cook said. "Mike and Erlinda put their heart and soul into this. Mike's philosophy is don't say no. He just doesn't quit."

While Saturday's group consisted of girls who are in school and out of trouble, Inner City Slickers Ranch also invites at-risk youth and juvenile offenders to experience the outdoors.

In addition to learning to rope steers and ride horses, the La Puente cowgirls were treated to a rough ride on a mechanical bull — minus the mechanics.

Instead of climbing atop a jerky bull powered by electricity, novice ranchers at the Agua Dulce site are placed on a faux bull's back that is suspended in the middle of four wood posts by bungee cords. Once the cowgirl's in place, the ranch hands gather around and jangle the cords until the rider is bouncing in every direction.

"That was scary," said Jessica Abney, 13. "You have to hold on really tight. But it was funny, too. I was crying and laughing. I like to come up here. It keeps me out of trouble."

In true Western spirit, the girls planned to sit around a campfire Saturday night and roast marshmallows.

"I really like that they do this for us," said Melanie Segura, the girl who could barely sleep the night before arriving at the ranch. "It's a great place to learn about horses and to help each other out."

City kids just horsin' around

By **KIM PRENDERGAST**

Staff Writer

AGUA DULCE — Esteban Santillan, 16, had never been on a horse, much less spent any time exploring the rolling terrain of the High Desert.

This land of ranches and cowboy culture is light years away from the inner city blight that Santillan and other disadvantaged youths are accustomed to.

But Michael McMeel, former drummer of the popular 1970s band Three Dog Night, is changing all that.

McMeel's pastoral ranch is ground zero for Inner City Slickers, a program geared at erasing racial and social boundaries among children and teens.

The ranch gives youngsters a chance to do a little ridin' and ropin'. They can even try their luck on a mechanical bull.

"I learned how to conquer my fears," Santillan, who placed first in the mechanical bull contest, said. "Like on the bull, I was really scared, but I still did it and it turned out good. It gives you confidence to take more chances and not let fear take you over."

It was shortly after witnessing the Los Angeles riots in 1992 that McMeel bought his large homestead in the foothills south of Palmdale and started the Slickers program with five men, two horses and the dream they could make a difference.

"It's a real sneaky way of getting kids together of all different races," McMeel said.

"We teach them all the (horse) basics. It's really about building courageous kids because you can't have courage."

Now, eight years after he started, McMeel and his gang of about 20 wranglers from the movie industry continue to spend a couple of weekends each month entertaining groups of at-risk children and instilling in them a sense of self worth. The program usually brings in about 3,000 to 4,000 youths a year.

Although the program welcomes any interested youngster or group to spend a day or weekend at the ranch, reserving a spot is difficult, said Coco Vazquez, supervisor on Santillan's trip and community relations coordinator for the Los Angeles County Probation Department.

Besides having children and teens visit the ranch, Inner-City Slickers make occasional trips to juvenile hall facilities and bring horses with them.

Vazquez said after a recent visit, the children in her probation department were on their best behavior for a couple of weeks.

"We teach them how to ride and handle the animals," said John Lemons, wrangler and former movie wardrobe supervisor. "We try to get them to understand how easy it is to control a 1,200-pound beast, so why can't they control themselves."

■ Foundation: Boys from Juvenile Hall get a chance to be cowboys for a day as part of a program seeking to impart more lessons than horsemanship.

By JOCELYN Y. STEWART
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Underneath a calm summer sky, the boys and the horses met.

Some encounters were smooth, like old friends meeting again.

"Hey there, Diamond," a boy named Michael cooed, gently petting the mare's face.

Most were charged with fear—and then triumph.

"Damn," one boy muttered through a smile, as he trotted along on a stallion.

On the quad at Central Juvenile Hall on Saturday, where the boys and the horses met, lessons abounded: The boys learned what it means to understand an animal, and what it means to face their own fear and conquer it.

That, say organizers, was the goal of the day.

"There's a certain magic that happens between a horse and a kid—you just have to experience it to understand it," said Michael Joseph Patrick McMeel, founder of the Woodland Hills-based Awareness Foundation, which sponsored the event.

That magic is what prompted McMeel to create his "Inner City Slickers," an "Old West Program" that provides a cowboy experience to incarcerated youths.

On Saturday, McMeel took 16 horses and a group of "wranglers"—all volunteers—to Juvenile Hall to teach the boys how to ride, care for and appreciate horses.

Actor and rider Chris Burgard offered not only instruction in the how-tos of riding, but a history lesson as well.

Much of what is seen in cowboy movies "wasn't that way," Burgard explained to the boys, all dressed in the uniform of the hall—orange jumpsuits or white T-shirts and gray pants.

"Most of the cowboys were Mexican, Indian or black. One of the best cowboys in the world was black, Bill Pickett."

The wranglers each took charge of a "posse" of about five boys. John Lemons and the mare named Diamond offered what was for most boys in his group their first riding experience.

The horse can sense fear, Lemons explained. Horses, like people, have a personality, and that must be respected. Lemons taught them about horseshoes and saddles and how to hold the reins.

"If you're going to be a cowboy, you leave your right hand free," Lemons said. "Why do you leave your right hand free?"

"To shoot with?" a 14-year-old named Leivano offered.

"Your right hand you use for roping, to handle your rope," a patient Lemons explained.

At moments like these, posturing has no place. Jose, a 14-year-old, is covered with tattoos. He ran with a gang. He once was shot.

But when it came to Mac, the black Arabian stallion, Jose was not up for the challenge.

"It was scary!" he said, after Xena Richter finally convinced him to ride. "The homies did it," he said nodding to a cluster of boys, "so I couldn't be a chicken."

A producer and director of commercials, and formerly the drummer in the rock group Three Dog Night, McMeel wanted to provide young people with an experience that would help them grow. Saturday's event was his fourth visit to a Juvenile Hall.

"The kids overcome their own fear," he said. "Getting on the horse, they have a chance to be courageous. Any time anyone pushes past their own fear, that's courage."

Not all the boys were novices.

Back in Nayarit, Mexico, another 14-year-old, named Jose, rode horses with his grandfather. The horses Saturday reminded him of those days.

"My grandpa showed me how to ride," Jose said, sitting under a tree watching the horses trot by. "That's why I wanted to come today. He passed away. I had a lot of love for my grandpa."

Where Alvin lives in Lancaster, there are lots of horses, he said. "I didn't know some of the stuff [Lemons] said."

If magic happens when kids and horses come together, something also happens with people who are serious horse lovers, like McMeel's friends, many of whom are working in some aspect of the entertainment industry.

"I get a lot of joy just sharing my love of horses with the kids," said Lisa Brown, a celebrity horse trainer, who also works at Will Rogers State Park.

Lemons, who rode out of stables in South Los Angeles and for many years taught youth there to ride, said the program would show the boys that "they're not forgotten. People still care about them."

Patrick Shining Elk, a Shoshone, lived on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming and shares Native American stories with the boys.

"This is the closest I can get to back home," he said. "I can learn from them just as much as they can learn from me."

At Home on the Range

A former rock star has transformed his own passion for horses into a way to help inner-city kids.

There's a certain magic that happens between a kid and a horse," says Michael McMeel, a producer of videos and commercials and a former drummer for the '70s rock group Three Dog Night. "I knew from experience that there was gold in that relationship."

In 1992, after riots tore through South-Central Los Angeles, McMeel began searching for a program that would build self-esteem in at-risk kids ages 9 to 18. Two years later, inspired by his own happy memories of growing up on horseback in rural Colorado, he hit upon a novel solution: a horse-skills program called Inner City Slickers—Where the Cowboys Meet the Streetboys.

Working with church groups and public schools, Inner City Slickers, a nonprofit subsidiary of McMeel's Awareness Foundation, selects children from poor and high-crime areas who have already shown signs of trouble and brings them to the program's ranch in the foothills north of Los Angeles. To date, some 2,500 young people have visited the five-acre spread—which is home to 30 horses, 23 head of cattle, a potbelly pig, and an emu—for one-day, three-day, and one-week "round-ups." Often these are the children's first ventures into the country, not to mention their first experience with horse feeding, stall mucking, singing around a campfire, and above all, horseback riding.

"We always try to bring together a mixed group—blacks, Latinos, Asians," McMeel says. "Working with horses virtually erases the color



Michael McMeel is usually joined at the Inner City Slickers ranch by daughter Amber, 10.

barrier. These kids are dealing with this enormous, unfamiliar animal, and it takes all of their attention."

When Inner City Slickers cannot bring kids to the ranch, it brings the ranch to kids. About ten times a year, McMeel takes 16 or so horses inside the high-security facility of Los Angeles's Central Juvenile Hall, the largest juvenile-detention center in the country. There, inmates have a chance to ride, rope, and groom a horse—and, prison officials note approvingly, get a firsthand glimpse into the virtues of patience, cooperation, and caring for a living creature. McMeel begins by asking if the kids have ever been involved with gangs. "Well, this is my gang behind me," he says, referring to the team of volunteer wranglers who accompany him.

"We're not trying to turn kids into cowboys," McMeel says. "We're just making them aware of the values that govern cowboy life—strength, perseverance, and hard work."

For more information, contact www.innercityslickers.org. □

problem. It just seems that learning about a relationship with a horse and the responsibility associated with caring for and nurturing that animal has got to be an alternative—or a choice that many kids don't even know is available to them. Horses cross barriers of sex, race, age and socioeconomic background. Horses don't care about those factors."

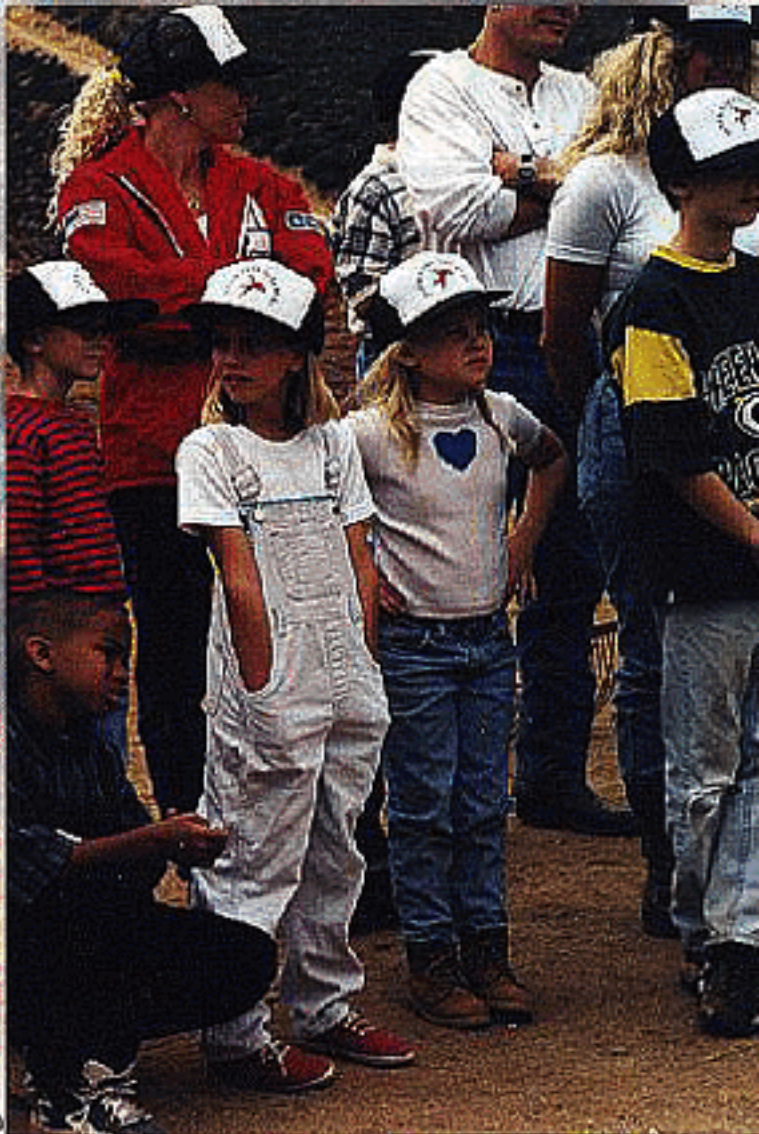
A case in point is Inner City Slickers, an ongoing "Old West" program and nonprofit project of the Woodland Hills, California-based Awareness Foundation. Founded by Michael McMeel, former drummer for Three Dog Night, Inner City Slickers uses horses to thwart gang involvement. Inner-city children participate in a number of activities that cover the basics of grooming, horse care, riding and western skills, such as roping. "This program is one of the only means that I've seen that can virtually erase the color barrier between

teens with the magic of horses and our volunteers," McMeel says. Slickers' volunteers range from Hollywood stuntmen and former rodeo pros to amateur riders, whose involvements impact at-risk youth and kids already inside detention centers.

"These children are just mystified," says McMeel. "They have this enormous animal that they're not familiar with, and they're scared of it. Consequently, they forget about color and they concentrate on the horse."

Eight-year-old Timothy Lewis, one of the organization's participants, says he already loves horses. "They're cute and they're smart and they've got good eyesight," he says. Lewis has already grasped why they're good for people. "To keep them company and to have somebody to talk with," he states.

"If you're lonely, you can get on a horse and go ride somewhere," says Brandon King, 9. Dearl Cammell, 12, the most experienced participant, says, "They're sensitive and they run fast. And they can love."



Quarter Horses
USA