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HOLD ON, BOYS

The Wright family, with its long history of ranching and rodeoing, is hoping a combination of the two can provide for future generations.

Article by **JOHN BRANCH**
Photographs by **JOSH HANER**

THE 1,000-FOOT CLIFFS of Zion National Park that border the open range of Smith Mesa glowed orange and red, like hot coals. The sun slinked low on the opposite side of a wide sky.

Bill Wright, 60, stopped his pickup on the dirt road last spring, dusty from drought. He walked west, weaving through green junipers, scraggly shrub live oak, flowering barrel cactus and dried cow pies. His pointed boots left a string of meandering arrows in the red sand.



The boys were off riding saddle broncs on the professional rodeo circuit's Texas swing — somewhere between Austin, Nacogdoches and Lubbock, Bill could never

keep up. Bill's wife, Evelyn, was at home, two hours north in Milford, Utah, teaching at the elementary school. Bill was alone, living in a camper, eating from a skillet, surrounded by silence and 20,000 acres of rugged rangeland hiding a few hundred of his cattle.

The sand gave way to stair-stepped rocks, like risers on which enormous choirs might perform, until the last one dropped off several hundred feet. The canyon below was a deep and jagged cut in the forever landscape of southern Utah, as if carved by impatient gods with a dull knife. The Wrights have been running cattle in the area for more than 150 years, since great-great-grandparents arrived beginning in 1849 during the Mormon migration.

"My boys will be the sixth generation," Bill said. His mouth never opened very far when he spoke. "And Cody's boys will be the seventh."

Cody Wright is the oldest of seven boys among Bill and Evelyn's 13 children. The boys, ages 18 to 37 and similarly built — like a litter of



Top, Bill Wright is a rancher whose family has deep roots in southern Utah. Three of his sons are world champion saddle-bronc riders, and some of his grandsons, including Ryder, above, also compete in the sport, a classic rodeo event.

puppies, Bill said — are a posse of the world's best saddle-bronc riders. Taut-muscle and not too tall, they are able to muster the guts, strength and balance to ride a bucking horse like few others, as if genetically gifted to do so. A Wright boy has won the saddle-bronc world title every even-numbered year since 2008.

Cody won twice, in 2008 and 2010. Jesse, now 25, won in 2012. Jesse's twin, Jake, was second in 2013. In 2014, those three and a fourth Wright boy, Spencer, 24, qualified for

the sport's most prestigious event, December's National Finals Rodeo — a record for one family.

But rodeo careers can end without warning, as quick as the next try at an eight-second ride. So the boys, most with families to support, increasingly plug their rodeo earnings into Bill's modest ranching business. While they crisscross tens of thousands of miles to more than 100 events a year across the West,

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