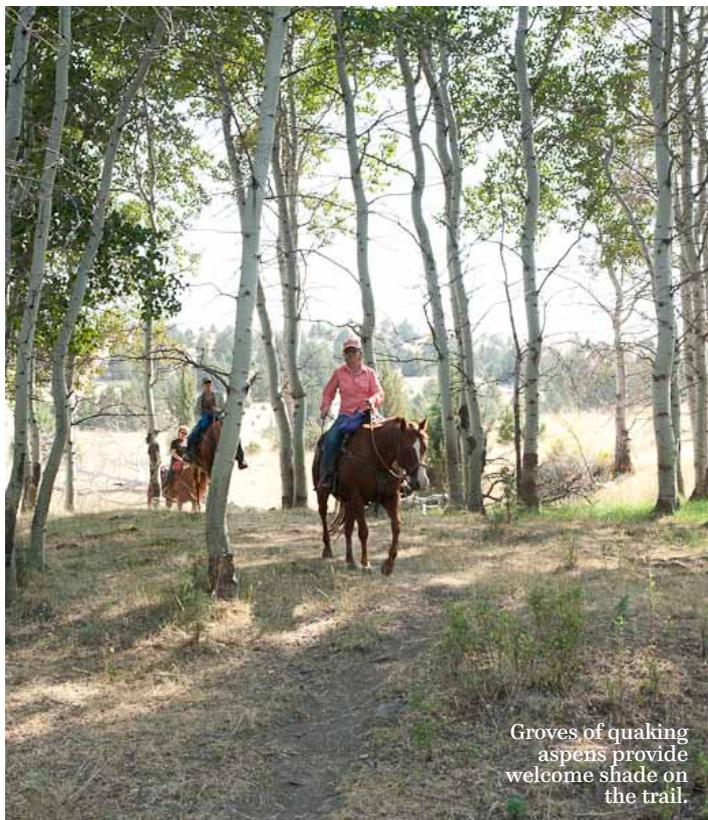
A person wearing a cowboy hat and a light blue shirt is riding a brown horse through a hilly, wooded landscape. The background shows rolling hills with sparse trees and a clear sky. The title 'BACK IN THE SADDLE' is written in large, bold, brown letters with a distressed texture, framed by large, matching curly braces. A yellow ribbon graphic is at the top center.

BACK IN THE SADDLE

A visit to the John Day
Country's **Wilson Ranches**
Retreat confirms that the
West is still wild.

I know a happy horse when I see one. As a kid, I learned how to jump horses at a stable in rural Indiana, where I took riding lessons in exchange for mucking out stalls. Then after college, I took a job driving a horse and carriage around downtown Chicago to help pay down my loans. But out of all the horses I've met over the years, none has seemed as exuberant as Tecumseh, the steed I am riding today.

{ **BY TED KATAUSKAS** }
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN MYERS



Groves of quaking aspens provide welcome shade on the trail.

Reining Tecumseh, a spirited quarter horse who's anxious to run and scraping the ground impatiently with a hoof, I'm seated high in a well-worn saddle beneath the dome of a seemingly infinite azure sky, savoring the gritty grandeur of the Wilson Ranches Retreat, a 9,000-acre working cattle ranch near Fossil that's loaded with quintessential Eastern Oregon vistas. Hillocks of juniper-dotted bunch grass undulate outward in all directions. And further, beyond on the eastern horizon, the abrupt ridges of the Blue Mountains look as if they were stolen from a Louis L'Amour book cover.

While I'd like to pretend that I moseyed up here on my own, like some high plains drifter, I'm not exactly alone. At my side, my two children, a 10-year-old girl and a 12-year-old boy, each sit astride their own mounts—streetwise city kids from Portland, a bit out of their element here but flabbergasted nonetheless by the epic coolness of our surroundings. And watching over all of

us is Kara Wilson Anglin, a bona fide cowgirl with wind-burned cheeks and auburn curls poking out from beneath a dust-crusting Resistol.

"When people come out here for the first time, they're just amazed," says Wilson Anglin. "We invite them to be part of our life—to share the experi-

Guests become full-fledged ranch hands.

ence." Since 2000, her family has treated city slickers like us to a grand slice of the Old West with a stay at their spread—one of the few working cattle ranches in the state that operates as a bed-and-breakfast. Here, guests become full-fledged ranch hands, encouraged to join four generations of Wilsons as they go about their chores, be it moving a herd of 400 cattle, branding yearling calves, collecting eggs, or, of course, riding the range.

Bringing in the herd on the 9,000-acre Wilson Ranch near Fossil.



While some guests prefer to do nothing at all, the work isn't without its rewards. Each day begins with a communal breakfast served in the snug dining room of the Wilsons' Sears Roebuck kit house (which replaced the family's original homestead in 1910). Seated at the head of a long table, ranch patriarch Phil Wilson passes platters heaped with scrambled eggs and biscuits and oatmeal and ham. A dashing 61-year-old who channels Eastwood, Redford, and Jack Palance, the elder Wilson is a garrulous host, dishing out a steady stream of humor—as well as ranch wisdom. "I was raised around hilarity," Wilson tells his guests. "When you have to deal with life and death every day out here, you learn that if you take life too seriously, it'll get ya."

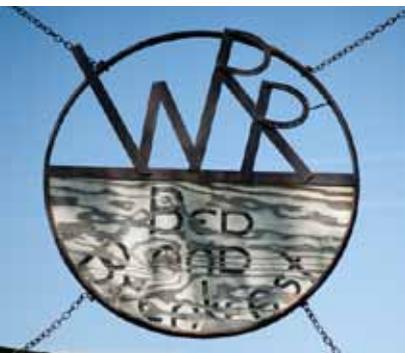
After breakfast, we follow Wilson Anglin and her husband, Brian, who encourages us to ride abreast like a Wild West posse instead of single file, reminding us that these aren't your typical trail-ride nags but cunning cattle horses that need to think and act independently to rein in herds. A wrangler who also teaches

science at Wheeler High School, he points out claw marks left by cougars on a grove of quaking aspen while ticking off wildlife encounters on the ranch: herds of antelope and deer and the occasional rattlesnake. For more than an hour we lope uphill, inspecting fence, scanning the horizon for stray cattle, until we arrive at that magnificent overlook, where we pause to take in the view.

"I don't know how to describe it, other than magic," says Wilson Anglin. "There's a sense of freedom, to have total and complete release from any stresses in life and to fully trust your horse and just let go."

And with a "giddyap," I spur Tecumseh, an unforgettable horse for whom letting go also means hanging on.

IF YOU GO: Wilson Ranches Retreat; 16555 Butte Creek Lane, Fossil; 541.763.2227; www.wilsonranchesretreat.com. Double room from \$89; two-hour horseback rides (available to guests only), \$60



ABOVE: The Wilson Ranches Retreat brand welcomes visitors to the property. BELOW: The Wilsons have been hosting city slickers inside their cozy and completely renovated Sears Roebuck Ranch House since 2000.



ABOVE: A hearty breakfast is just one of the rewards for Wilson Ranch guests. LEFT: The Wilson family raises plenty of chickens for farm-fresh eggs.