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Reality series captures every move of Montana ranch families

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The spotlight has shined on Bill Galt of White Sulphur Springs before, but not like this.

Galt and his ranching family are the subjects of an upcoming reality TV show on the Animal Planet channel that will debut later this year.

The show, titled "Cowboys," follows three families that own and operate cattle ranches in Montana through the ups and downs of a season.

The docudrama spotlights calving, weaning, cattle drives, auctions and more. The network describes the show as "set against the majestic backdrop of Montana." The show is set to start airing eight one-hour episodes in March. Also featured in the show will be Avon ranchers Earl and Glenna Stuckey and the Hughes Mountain Guest Ranch in Stanford.

"From the traditional rancher who does everything by hand and on horseback to the modern ranch that uses high-tech equipment and all-terrain vehicles, each family's fortune depends on the success or failure of the season," the show's description reads. "Facing unpredictable weather, disease and injuries, thousands of new births and hungry predators waiting for an easy meal, these modern ranches continue the great American tradition of life on the range. 'Cowboys' is larger-than-life, life-and-death, real-life drama."

Two award-winning cameramen followed the Galt family around for eight months starting last February, documenting the days and nights of Bill Galt, his wife, daughter and son. In the process, the film crew almost became like members of the family.

"They just kinda moved in with us. They were nice fellas," Bill Galt said.

The film crew brought families along as well, bringing the total number of people staying at the 90,000-acre ranch on Birch Creek to 10. Galt's family has had the ranch since the 1940s. He has two brothers who also are ranchers. His 9-year-old son, Jack, will be the fourth-generation of Galts to ranch in Montana.

"I think it was the perfect childhood and the perfect adolescence," Bill Galt said of growing up on a ranch. "I don't think there's a better place to grow up."

An earlier book about the Galt ranch is what led film crews there. Journalist David McCumber's spent a year as a rancher there and wrote the critically acclaimed "The Cowboy Way." McCumber has said he was trying to change long-held perceptions about the lives of cowboys.

A "sizzle reel" was shot around February 2007 to record footage to sell the show to networks. The Discovery Channel passed, but its Animal Planet network picked up the idea. Having his every waking moment filmed by huge high-definition cameras was a change of pace for Galt. After a while though, he forgot they were there.

The Montana Film Office worked hard to get the series filmed in Montana, according to Sten Iversen, manager of the office. Show producers took advantage of the incentives of the Big Sky on the Big Screen Act, which offers refundable tax credits for producers.

"We think it's a great boon for the economy, both in the fact that it's going to be a national television series, which will give the state great exposure, as well as the fact that they spent literally hundreds of thousands of dollars in rural Montana," Iversen said. "It's going to hopefully be great."

Although Galt doesn't know what footage will be shown, cameramen captured everything, he said. Cameras were there when chilled or soured calves were saved, and they captured Galt helping fight forest fires. Crews also filmed coyote hunting and conducted interviews on the death tax and its burden on agriculture producers. Crews also interviewed ranch hands, and no one else on the ranch was allowed to know what was asked or hear the answers.

There were times when crews wanted to shoot a "pick up," or a re-enactment of moments they may have missed, but on some occasions that would not be possible, such as during calving.

"You don't know what they're looking for. They'd film the damndest things," Galt said.

Galt added that some TV viewers don't know what it's like to work seven days a week — even in the bitter cold — as ranchers do. He said he is a little nervous about how the show will portray agriculture and the ranchers — will they look like heroes or hicks?

"I hope it will open some eyes on where food comes from and the reality of a ranch life, the harshness of it," Galt said.
