

National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame Celebrates Cowgirls in Reality and in Spirit

Honorees range from Sacagawea to Dale Evans By Linda Wommack

Western women don't necessarily have to lasso a steer or ride bareback to represent the cowgirl spirit. "Cowgirl is an attitude, really," said Dale Evans, longtime singing partner and third wife of Roy Rogers. "A pioneer spirit, a special American brand of courage. The cowgirl faces life head-on, lives by her own lights and makes no excuses. Cowgirls take stands; they speak up. They defend things they hold dear." That spirit echoes through the halls of the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame in Fort Worth, Texas. Dale Evans (1912-2001), a 1995 honoree, was a worldwide celebrity, of course, but relative unknowns have also been inducted into the hall of fame—nearly 200 women in all since 1975.

In the 1970s a civic-minded group in the panhandle town of Hereford, Texas, hatched the idea of creating a museum focusing on the talents and accomplishments of women in the West. The group began displaying its modest collection of belt buckles and artwork in the basement of the local library in 1975. Word got out, and the group added saddles, Western clothing, rodeo costumes, rare photographs and the personal items of pioneer cowgirls. In 1993 Executive Director Margaret Formby called for a larger site, and more than 30 cities from six states petitioned to host the cowgirl museum.

The board chose Fort Worth, for its cowpuncher heritage and for the livestock show and rodeo it has held annually since 1896. The collection moved there in 1994, and in February 2001 work crews broke ground on a 33,000 square-



The current museum building opened in June 2002.

foot, two-story museum building. The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, showcasing more than 5,000 artifacts and 6,000 historic photos, opened to the public in June 2002. Its stated mission is to honor women, past and present, "whose lives exemplify the courage, resilience and independence that helped shape the American West."

Of all the women featured, sharpshooter Annie Oakley is perhaps the most famous. Born Phoebe Ann Mosey, she took the stage name "Annie Oakley" in 1882 and became one of the biggest attractions in Buffalo Bill Cody's Wild West. The museum does justice to her legend, displaying her wedding ring and traveling trunk (a recent acquisition), among other objects.

One of the featured rodeo cowgirls is Tillie Baldwin, a Norwegian immigrant who became a trick rider in 1912 and may have been the first woman to compete in bulldogging. Also take note of Vera McGinnis, Florence Hughes Randalph and Bea Kirnan, performers with the Tex Austin Rodeo, which in June 1924 drew crowds of more than 100,000 to London's Wembley Stadium.

The museum's Into the Arena gallery highlights the history of America's champion rodeo cowgirls. Among the extraordinary saddles on display are those of National Cutting Horse Association hall of famer Sheila Welch and champion jockey Julie Krone. For the fashion-minded, check out the chic cowgirl outfits over the years.

The sprawling Kinship with the Land gallery presents the stories of Western women ranchers from the mid-19th century to the present day and includes a large display of saddles and riding gear. The popular Claiming the Spotlight gallery features all the cowgirl glitz and glamour of Hollywood and Nashville, highlighting the women who brought the cowgirl to life through film and song. The gallery includes several artifacts from cowgirl icon Dale Evans' films, including movie posters and sheet music. Gallery visitors are treated to jukeboxes playing the Western hits of Patsy Cline, Loretta Lynn, Emmylou Harris, Reba McEntire and Evans herself. In the theater a film narrated by Katharine Ross presents clips of Western actresses, from damsels in distress to gun-toting, Stetson-wearing cowgirls.

At the heart of the building is a beautiful rotunda, home to the Cowgirl Hall of Fame. Honorees range from Sacagawea of the Lewis and Clark Expedition to artist Georgia O'Keeffe to Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. Anyone can submit a candidate for hall of fame consideration.

This kicking cowgirl museum is at 1720 Gendy St. in Fort Worth. For more information, please call 817-336-4475 or visit www.cowgirl.net. ww



Clockwise from top left: Cowgirl outfits and a saddle that can only be called "dazzling"; the museum gift shop; the rotunda is home to the Cowgirl Hall of Fame; a cowgirl rides hard on the cover of this pulp magazine; jukeboxes in the Claiming the Spotlight gallery delight visitors with the songs of such popular Western singers as Dale Evans and Reba McEntire; the Hall of Fame honors more than 200 women "whose lives exemplify the courage, resilience and independence that helped shape the American West."

