

# National Western

## The National Western Stock Show, Rodeo and Horse Show celebrates its 100th birthday Jan. 7-22, 2006.

by *Keith and Cheryl Chamberlain*



If the founders of the National Western Stock Show (NWSS), Rodeo and Horse Show were to attend its 100th anniversary celebration Jan. 7-22, 2006, they'd likely pop a few buttons with pride. The brainstorm of Elias Ammons, Fred Johnson and G.W. Ballantine, the first show opened on Jan. 29, 1906, for a six-day run that attracted 336 entries — a number with which the trio was mighty pleased.

The midwinter date, sandwiched between the busier fall and spring seasons, appealed to farm and ranch folks. For the show's Denver boosters, primarily businessmen, the livestock hoorah was just the fix for those post-Christmas blahs.

The first three shows took place under canvas. A big-top tent borrowed from a circus that wintered in Denver was erected in the stockyards. Grandstands, arc lights and a big coal-fired heater were installed. Each evening's show started with a parade of prize-winning cattle.

The Denver Livestock Market and the Denver Union Stock Yards Co. ran a bustling year-round operation in the yards, but they made room in their pens for the NWSS. Pen and carload cattle shows quickly became highlights of the January event. Private treaty sales, with skilled commission men keeping things genteel as buyers and sellers haggled over that last dollar or two, brought further color to the lively proceedings.

Cattle included just four breeds — Angus, Hereford, Shorthorn and Galloway. The latter disappeared for a time, but the other three would monopolize the show for six decades. In its infancy the show was open only to entries from west of the 99th meridian, but in 1910, NWSS brass swung the gates open to all comers, and the show truly became the National Western.

### Center of gravity

The yards, as the pens are affectionately known, were the heart of the show until the meatpacking industry began to decentralize in the 1960s and the Denver Livestock Market went into decline. By the mid-1970s, the sprawling complex was virtually deserted.

To preserve a venue for its trademark pen and carload shows, the National Western

began purchasing the fence-studded acres, and now, as a reminder of former times, the yards come alive each January with cattle judging, auctions, private treaty sales and the herd-sire display. When the bovines head for home pastures, the pens host the popular bison, Longhorn and yak shows.

These days, "the hill" is the cattle show's center of gravity. In 1966, Charolais, one of the Continental breeds, busted the Angus-Hereford-Shorthorn monopoly to pave the way for other bovine breeds, 19 of which now show at the NWSS. The ground floor barns in the Hall of Education roar with the sound of fans, blowers and whirring clippers as exhibitors prepare their show strings for fierce competition in the historic Stadium Arena next door.

### Equine events

The NWSS was born at the dawn of the automobile age, but mules and draft horses were still providing muscle power for farms, ranches and cities, and they were shown and sold here until 1931 and 1941, respectively. A halter and performance class horse show, sponsored by the Denver Gentlemen's Driving and Riding Club, was added in 1907. Society Night, a see-and-be-seen affair, was a highlight for decades and helped make horse shows a National Western mainstay.

Breed-specific shows began with Palominos in 1938, and the long-running Quarter Horse show came aboard in 1944. The 100th NWSS will feature Quarter Horses, Paint Horses, hunters and jumpers, draft horses, and mules. Versatility ranch horse and freestyle reining competitions will round out the event.

### Riding for the prize

Rodeo joined the National Western in 1931, when about 100 cowboys competed in saddle and bareback bronc riding, calf roping, steer wrestling, and bull riding, risking their necks for as little as \$35 in day-money. Entries grew during the Depression, and in 1939, the rodeo joined a five-city western circuit. By 1955, 350 cowboys were starting their annual prize-money quest at the National Western. In 2006, more than 700 cowboys and cowgirls will make the pilgrimage to the Mile High City to compete in those original five events, plus team roping and barrel racing.

From 1931 to 1951, rodeos and horse



# Turns 100



shows shared performances in the Stadium Arena as the entertainment whipsawed between wild and woolly rodeo events and sedate horse show classes. Though horse show partisans sometimes wistfully recalled the days when they had the arena to themselves, and rodeo enthusiasts thought horse show classes were a bit tame, the union worked, and tickets to the horse show-rodeo combo were notoriously hard to come by.

That problem was solved when Denver taxpayers, area businesses, NWSS boosters and livestock interest groups teamed up to build the Denver Coliseum, which hosted its first National Western in 1952. The rodeos and horse shows moved into their new home, and cattle shows took over the Stadium Arena. The Events Center opened in 1995 to usher in today's arrangement: horse shows in the Events Center, rodeo and professional bull riding in the Coliseum, and cattle and other livestock shows in the Stadium Arena.

## Youth participation

Back in 1906, students from the Colorado

Agricultural and Mining College in Fort Collins, Colo., now Colorado State University, brought a string of show cattle, hogs and lambs to Denver and cleaned up in the judging. For their domination, they were barred from competition the next year. They came anyway, and over the next few years were joined by students from Kansas, Nebraska and Illinois, as college and university exhibitors became regulars at the show.

In 1919, the National Western created its first youth divisions, sowing the seeds of the junior show. Entries swelled during the Depression as 4-H clubs began showing steers, lambs and hogs in increasing numbers. The popular 4-H Catch-A-Calf contest was added in 1935. It was a boys-only affair until 1974, when girls joined the fray.

Today, hundreds of youngsters ages 9 to 19 enter lambs, goats, hogs and steers in the junior livestock show. Competition is tough at this national event, and every youngster's heart is set on making the sale. The show reaches its dramatic climax at the Auction of Junior Livestock Champions, an invitation-only, televised auction where bidding for grand and reserve champions soars into the stratosphere.

Contestants with the top eight animals take home 75% of the proceeds from their champion animals. The remainder goes to the National Western Scholarship Trust, along with money from the Citizen of the West Award dinner, the Coors Western Art Exhibit and Sale, the Boots and Business luncheon, and individual memorials and contributions, to fund scholarships for agriculture and medical students bound for rural practice. Launched in 1983 with three \$1,000 scholarships, the program has grown to 60 scholarships totaling nearly \$200,000 annually.

## Colorful changes

The colorful variety of animals exhibited at the NWSS today might raise an eyebrow or two among its founders. Lambs, hogs and poultry they would expect. But, llamas and yaks? As the National Western's reputation has grown, exhibitors eager to get their species in the spotlight have come clamoring. Bison, Longhorns, alpacas, Angora rabbits — even elk for a time —

have all found places at the show as breed associations across the board have joined the affair for judging, genetic improvement and unrivaled media coverage. Today's NWSS visitors enjoy the exotic animals.

New facilities have been key to the National Western's growth. In 1909, the show moved indoors to the newly constructed National Amphitheater — known now as the Stadium Arena. Forty-three years passed before the Coliseum was built, followed by another 21 without major additions.

Three big building projects, the Hall of Education (1973), Expo Hall (1991) and Events Center (1995), brought the National Western Complex to its current size, providing much-needed space and spawning the show as we know it today. The Expo Hall and Hall of Education house children's exhibits; the Coors Western Art Gallery; and the trade show, which features 360 commercial exhibitors offering a dazzling array of goods ranging from ranch equipment to kitchen gadgets. The Events Center hosts seven multi-day equine events during the January extravaganza.

There are reasons aplenty for celebration as the National Western rounds out its first century. During its 16-day run, more than 600,000 folks will likely attend, and 12,000-plus critters — from bunnies to bison and Leghorns to Longhorns — will face the scrutiny of judges. The show will offer more than 40 ticketed rodeos, horse shows and other entertainments; there will be banquets, luncheons, breed association meetings and other gatherings.

More than 40,000 people will admire fine art at the Coors Western Art Exhibit & Sale, and 20,000 wide-eyed school children will visit the National Western on field trips — all of which would amaze and gratify those visionaries who launched the affair a century ago. For more information visit [www.nationalwestern.com](http://www.nationalwestern.com).



**Editor's Note:** This article was provided upon request by the National Western Stock Show, Rodeo and Horse Show.

## Angus events at the 2006 National Western Stock Show

### Tuesday, Jan. 10

2 p.m. Junior Angus heifer show — Stadium Arena

### Wednesday, Jan. 11

8 a.m. Super-Point ROV Angus female show — Stadium Arena

### Thursday, Jan. 12

9 a.m. Angus sale bull show — Stadium Arena (*note new time*)

2 p.m. National Western Angus bull sale, preceded by the sale of the Angus Foundation Heifer Package — Beef Palace Auction Arena

6:30-

8:30 p.m. Angus reception — Denver Marriott City Center Hotel

### Friday, Jan. 13

8 a.m. Super-Point ROV Angus bull show — Stadium Arena

3 p.m. Angus Foundation Female Sale — Livestock Center Auction Arena

### Saturday, Jan. 14

9 a.m. Angus carload & pen show — Livestock Center Auction Arena