

# The Cowgirl Way

The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame honors hard-working, high-spirited cowgirls.

Story & photos by *Sheryl Smith-Rodgers*

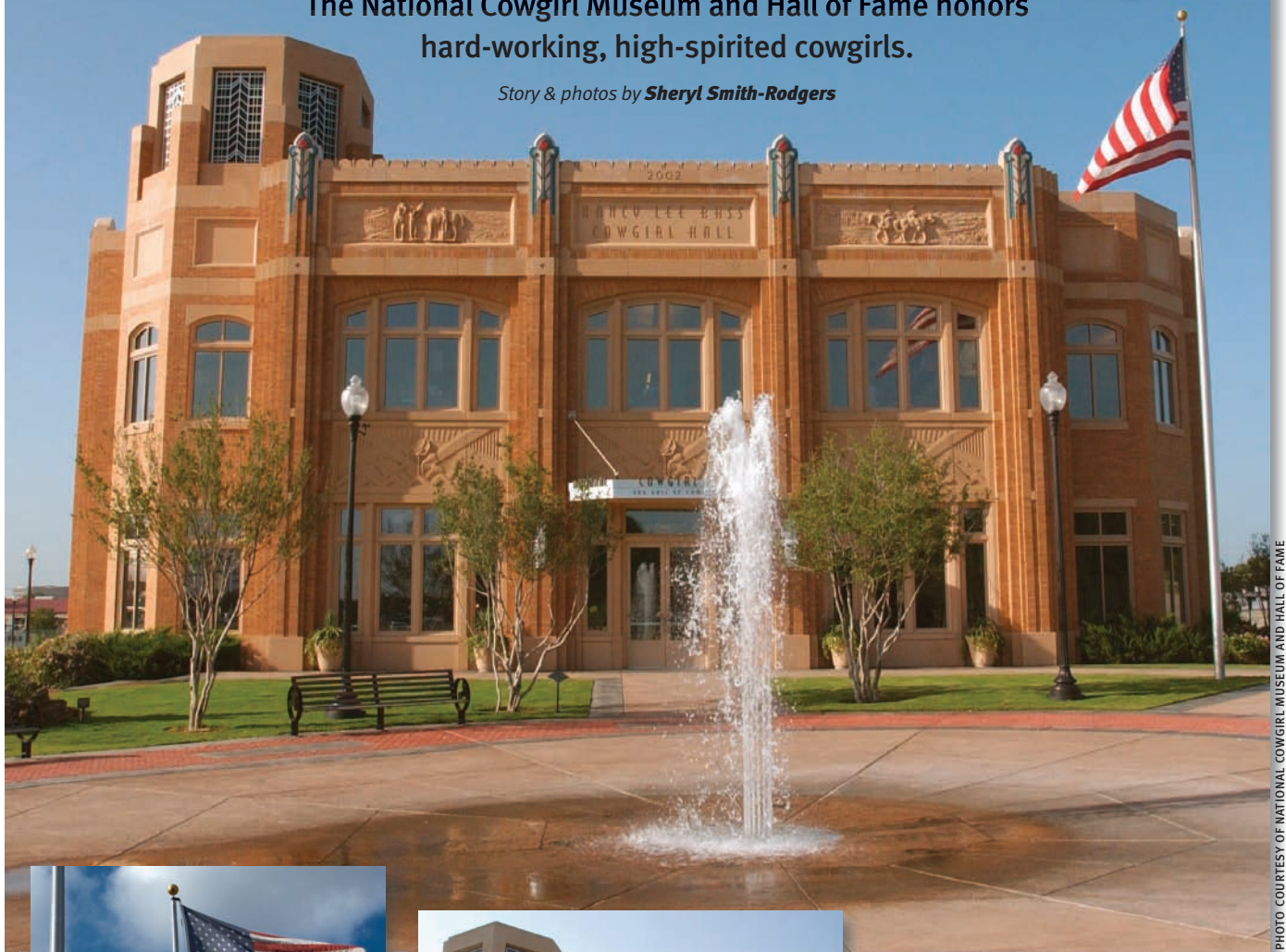


PHOTO COURTESY OF NATIONAL COWGIRL MUSEUM AND HALL OF FAME



► **Above:** Flags fly at the museum, located in Fort Worth, Texas.

► **Right:** "High Desert Princess" — a lifesize bronze sculpture by artist Mehl Lawson — stands near the museum's front entrance.



Imagine a toothache so excruciatingly painful that you'd wrap a wire around it and yank it out yourself by stepping off a trunk. That's what pioneer Evelyn Cameron did. Isolated on a Montana ranch in the 1890s with no doctor nearby, she handled the problem herself. Then after triumphantly showing her husband the offending tooth, Cameron cheerfully went about her business and cooked breakfast.

Tough, resourceful, hard-working and high-spirited, Cameron exemplifies the extraordinary character of a true American cowgirl who — over and over again through the generations — has overcome adversity and shunned convention in order to live life her way.

Cameron, sharpshooter Annie Oakley, author Laura Ingalls Wilder, singer Patsy Cline and rancher Minnie Lou Bradley (the first female president of the American Angus

Association) are among hundreds of trailblazing women — both pioneer and contemporary — you'll learn about at the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame in Fort Worth, Texas. Film presentations, interactive exhibits, and scores of artifacts and photographs document the lives and accomplishments of these remarkable women who have helped shape the American West through the years.

### Defying convention

It was long after her death in 1928 before Cameron became known as an accomplished photographer. She taught herself the skill when her husband's horse business began to flounder. Using a mail-order 5x7 Graflex, Cameron sold the pictures she snapped of neighbors, cowboys, animals and landscapes. Those 1,800-plus photos, along with 35 volumes of diaries she penned, tell about life on the rugged Montana frontier.

Practical-minded and stubborn, too, Cameron defied local protocol and often wore a split riding skirt so she could ride her horse "clothespin" style. Even though a buttoned-up front panel turned the wide-legged pant into a dress, Cameron still got into trouble whenever she wore it in public.

"So great at first was the prejudice against any divided garment in Montana," she wrote, "that a warning was given me to abstain from riding on the streets of Miles City lest I might be arrested!"

A heavy canvas skirt, much like one Cameron wore on the Montana frontier, hangs in one of many exhibits at the 33,000-square-foot (sq. ft.) facility, located in Fort Worth's Cultural District. The museum first opened in 1975 as the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame in the basement of a library in Hereford, Texas. The late Margaret Formby, a 1994 Hall of Fame inductee who directed the museum for many years, expanded it to include a Western Heritage Center and research library. In 1994, the museum moved to Fort Worth, where planning began for a permanent location. In June 2002, the museum moved a final time into its new \$21-million home.

### Cowgirl spirit on display

Architecturally, the two-story National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame reflects the bold modern-style design of the nearby Will Rogers Memorial Center, built in 1936. Exterior walls, constructed of brick and cast stone, memorialize the cowgirl story through a series of hand-carved cast relief panels. Terra-cotta finials painted in brilliant hues of red, blue and green form wild-rose motifs, a symbol of a cowgirl's beautiful yet resilient character. Wild rose bushes are also planted in beds around the building.



► **Above:** The five cowgirls in artist Richard Haas' *trompe l'oeil* mural seem to be galloping off the museum's east side wall.

Near the front entrance, the "High Desert Princess" — a life-size bronze sculpture by artist Mehl Lawson — captures a cowgirl leaning gracefully against her horse and gazing contemplatively into the distance.

Emblazoned across a wall on the museum's east side is a dramatic *trompe l'oeil* (trick of the eye) mural by Richard Haas of New York City. The painting shows



► **Below:** This is one of the hand-carved cast relief panels on the museum's exterior walls.

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### Minnie Lou Bradley: Angus cowgirl

When the phone rang last July, Minnie Lou Bradley was eating lunch and taking a break from the stifling heat. She and her crew had been hard at work all morning, moving cattle, trying to find grass on her family's drought-stricken ranch near Memphis, Texas.

"I plumb near fell off my chair when I heard the news!" Bradley recalls. "The lady said the judges had made their selections for the 2006 inductees and that I was one of them."

Every year, the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame names four or five outstanding women who exemplify the pioneer spirit of the American West. To date, the prestigious list honors 181 outstanding women who have affected the Western way of life in their own special way.

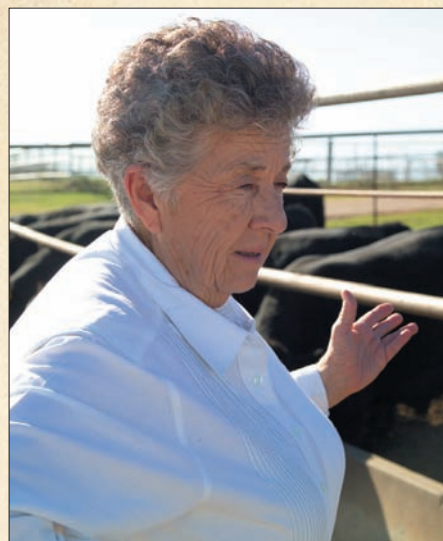


PHOTO BY SHAUNA ROSE HERMEL

Bradley, for instance, was the first female to earn a degree in animal husbandry from Oklahoma State University, the first female member of the Intercollegiate Livestock Judging Team, and the first female president of the American Angus Association.

"Minnie Lou paved a way for young women to enter into the arena of livestock breeding and management programs," her Hall of Fame biography reads. "She ... is considered a leader in the beef industry."

Being named to the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame surprised Bradley.

"I've had my dreams and goals, but receiving this honor was never in the back of my mind," she says. "Yes, I'm a cowgirl in the sense of being a cow person, but I'm not a singer, a writer or a rodeo star. So I was very honored that they'd pick someone who's been in the cattle business all her life."

### Other 2006 Hall of Fame inductees:

- Suffrage leader Esther Hobart Morris (1814-1902)
- Champion bronc rider Bonnie McCarroll (1897-1929)
- Barrel racer Sharon Camarillo
- Hawaiian horsewoman Rose Cambra Freitas

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five cowgirls galloping at high speed on horseback, seemingly off the wall and right at you.

Inside the museum, a volunteer at the information desk smiles in welcome. Then you're standing beneath a grand 45-ft.-high domed rotunda, the museum's light-filled focal point and exhibit area for the Hall of Fame. In the center, a large bronze sculpture pays tribute to Sacagawea, the Shoshone Indian woman who guided Lewis and Clark into the Louisiana Purchase territories.

Look up, and you'll see 12 large "lifetiles" created by optical artist Rufus Butler Seder.

These glass-tiled "Movies for the Wall" slowly transform into different images as you walk beneath them: Artist Georgia O'Keeffe appears young, then older. Movie stunt rider Alice Van Springsteen and her horse make a daring leap. A cowgirl on horseback ropes a calf.

Around the rotunda's walls, the Spirit Trail showcases the names of Hall of Fame inductees on etched-glass stars. You can learn more about their individual lives via two huge electronic touch-screen yearbooks built into the walls. To date, the hall honors 181 distinguished women.

In the Spirit of the Cowgirl Theater, an eight-minute film introduces you to the cowgirl story. Sit back in a finely tooled leather seat, and listen as singer Michael Martin Murphey narrates this presentation. Another short documentary tells about the current year's Hall of Fame inductees. Then head up one of two staircases to tour the museum's three exhibit galleries.

### In the spotlight

In the "Claiming the Spotlight" area, you'll learn how cowgirls influenced our pop culture, ranging from Western movies and television shows, to popular music and advertising. First, plunk down on a leather bench (or a saddle seat) and enjoy "Reel Cowgirls," an eight-minute film about Hollywood cowgirls narrated by actress Katharine Ross. A second brief film tells the story behind Jessie the Cowgirl of Toy Story 2 fame and how she came to receive the 2000 Patsy Montana Entertainer Award.

You can sit on a stool at a diner-style counter, put on a pair of headphones, and listen while Reba McEntire, the Dixie Chicks or Emmylou Harris croons a tune from a tabletop jukebox. Turn the dial on a 1950s Zenith television, and watch clips of cowgirls from vintage TV programs, such as Dale Evans in "The Roy Rogers Show" and Barbara Stanwyck in "The Big Valley." Be a star, too, when you strike a pose in front of a digital camera for your own movie poster, available for purchase in the gift shop.

A "Kinship with the Land" gallery showcases true cowgirls who share common bonds — they connect spiritually to the land, they don't mind hard work and they love animals. In this gallery, videos and exhibits bring those bonds to life.

Sit on a bench, and watch a sweeping panoramic film, "Closer to the Land," that follows women ranchers as they work their land from dawn to dusk. In an adjacent exhibit, snapshots taken by ranchers show everyday life on their land and in their homes: ranch dogs riding in pickups, men loading bales of hay, kids milking cows, cattle grazing in the snow, a woman cooking and a girl playing the piano. For this display, the museum sent disposable cameras to ranchers across the country.

### Into the arena

Through the years, cowgirls have performed in traveling shows, rodeos and horse races. The "Into the Arena" gallery traces the history of those professions along with famous cowgirls like "Sure Shot" Annie Oakley who thrilled audiences in the 1880s,



► Julie McMahon French (left) and Heather Lichtie stand on either side of Minnie Lou Bradley after she was inducted into the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame.

### If you go ...

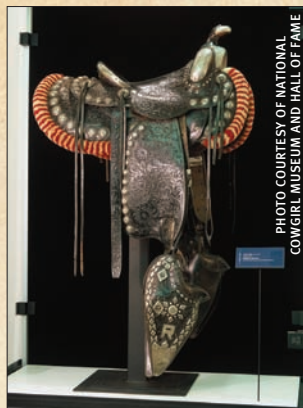
The National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame is located at 1720 Gendy St. in the Fort Worth Cultural District. Hours are Monday through Thursday, 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., Friday and Saturday, 9 a.m. to 8 p.m., and Sunday, 11:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Admission is \$8, \$7 for those age 60 and older, \$7 for those ages 3-12, and free for visitors age 2 and under. A discount coupon can be printed out from the museum's web site. Tickets also include admission to the Fort Worth Museum, and Science and History hands-on exhibits.

Visitors may request an audio tour via the complimentary use of X-Plorer MP3 players and headphones. The 77-minute tour (available in Spanish, too) features the voices of narrator Michael Martin Murphey and Hall of Fame members, such as entertainer Dale Evans, trick rider Mitzi Lucas Riley, and Associate Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

For more information call (817) 336-4475 or 1-800-476-3263, or visit [www.cowgirl.net](http://www.cowgirl.net).

► **Left:** Western saddles are some of the many artifacts found at the museum.



trick rider Tillie Baldwin and bull rider Jonnie Jonckowski.

At a downscaled arena of sorts, watch a choreographed video, "Greatest Rides," that replays Tad Lucas trick-riding at the Deadwood rodeo and jockey Julie Krone winning the Belmont Stakes. Other exhibits examine cowgirl attire, ranging from flamboyant costumes to Western hats, boots and buckles.

For fun, climb on the "Bucking Bronc"

and hold on while the mechanical horse "bucks" rather slowly. Wait a moment, and laugh when you watch yourself perform as a crowd of rodeo fans cheer behind you (take your ticket, and later download your video from the museum's web site).

Downstairs, any kids in your crowd will enjoy some time in the "Discovery Corral," a children's corner that features a chuck wagon, teepee, cowboy gear to wear and other activities.

Finally, stop by the museum's gift shop and browse; you'll find a huge selection of cowgirl-related books, jewelry, clothing, toys and more. Look up to see a whimsical statue of Mamie Hafley, sitting astride her white horse as they dive off together from a 50-ft.-high platform into a barrel of water. The pair performed that astonishing feat a mere 628 times from 1908 to 1917.

Daring and amazing — that's a cowgirl for you!

