

THEY CALLED THEMSELVES GIRLS!

They were daughters of the West, lovers of challenge, and mothers of women's competitive role in the modern sport of rodeo.

When doors closed on their rodeo dreams, they opened a new door of their own and rode right through it.

The Girls Rodeo Association was established in San Angelo, Texas, in 1948. Known today as the Women's Professional Rodeo Association, it is the oldest women's professional sports association in America.

One man, photojournalist James Cathey, championed the young GRA and helped ensure its success and long-lasting legacy.

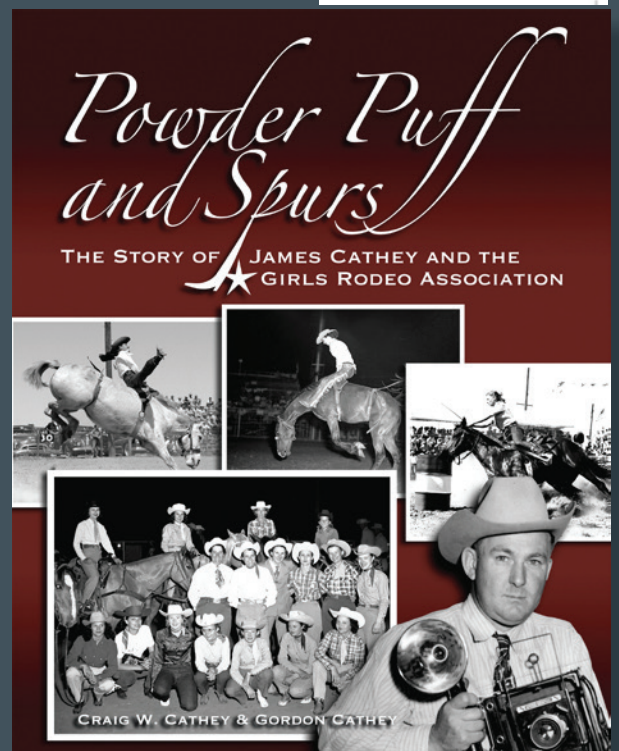
Powder Puff and Spurs, written by Craig W. Cathey and Gordon Cathey, tells the inspiring story of the legendary giants of the early GRA. James Cathey's historical photographs take you into the rodeo arenas of the late 1940s and early 1950s, where these fascinating women made rodeo history.

Many of the GRA founders are now honored members of the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame. For his lifetime contribution to the sport, James Cathey was posthumously inducted into the Rodeo Hall of Fame in 2018.

**Forward by
Gail Hughbanks Woerner**

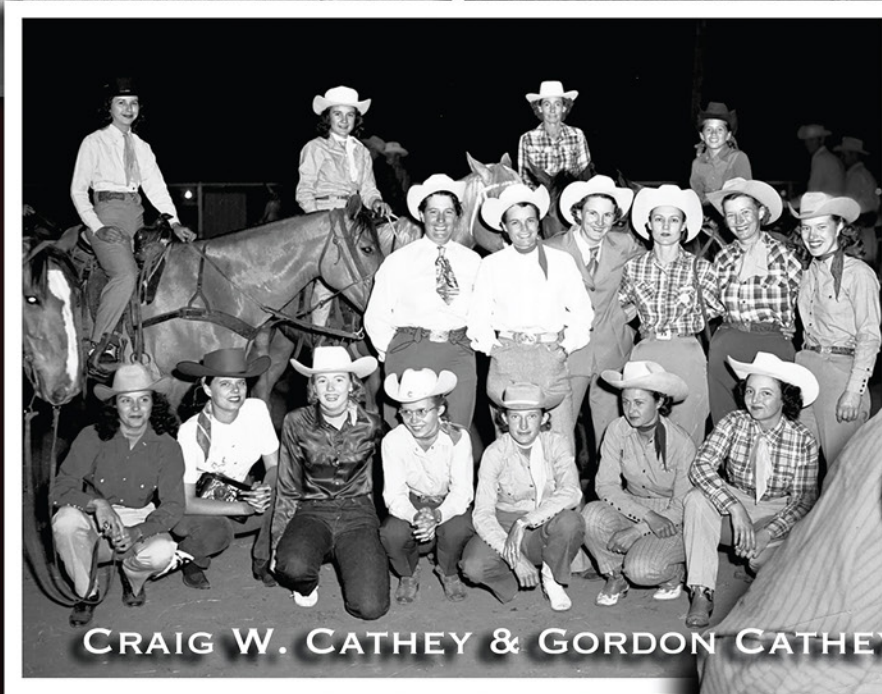
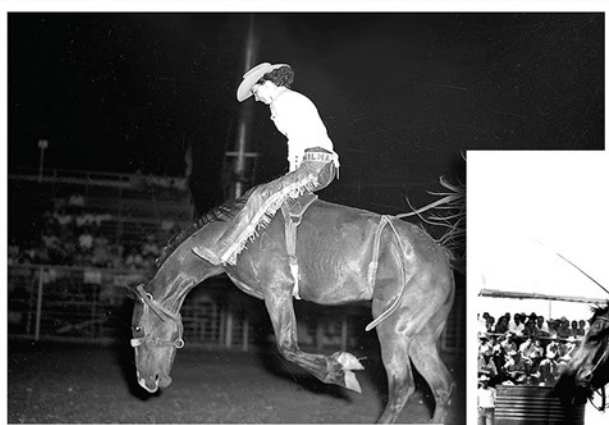


Look inside ↓



Powder Puff and Spurs

THE STORY OF  JAMES CATHEY AND THE
GIRLS RODEO ASSOCIATION



CRAIG W. CATHEY & GORDON CATHEY



Powder Puff and Spurs

THE STORY OF  JAMES CATHEY AND THE
GIRLS RODEO ASSOCIATION

CRAIG W. CATHEY
AND
GORDON CATHEY

FEATURING HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPHS BY
JAMES CATHEY

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF
JAMES J. CATHEY
AND
MARGIE ELEASE JOHNSON CATHEY

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CHAPTER 1 — BONNIE MCCARROLL'S LAST RIDE



Photo by Ralph R. Doubleday, from the Bruce McCarroll Collection of the Bonnie & Frank McCarroll Rodeo Archives, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, RC2006.076.107

Rodeo cowgirl Bonnie McCarroll, riding Bear Cat at the Tex Austin Rodeo in Chicago, probably in 1926.

M

ore than anything else, it was the sound of Bonnie McCarroll's head hitting the ground as her horse continued to somersault that told Ollie Osborn something was wrong.

"I could hear that girl's head hit the ground from where I was in the bleachers," Osborn, a Wild West show cowgirl and champion saddle bronc rider, said in an interview about McCarroll decades after her death. The horse bucked at least six times, Bonnie's head hitting the ground each time.²

"I thought," she recalled, "that don't sound right.' And when they went in to pick Bonnie up, the horse stumbled. He didn't go flat down, but he went down to his knees."

Osborn's account of what happened that day was one of dozens that film producer and writer Shirley Morris captured after learning about the role that McCarroll's death played in the history of women's rodeo. There were others, and not one was easy to listen to.

² Shirley Morris, "Horrible Cowgirl Saddle Bronc Wreck 1929 Bonnie McCarroll," August 9, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtw-t7nvB8g>



Photo by W.S. Bowman, from the Bruce McCarroll Collection of the Bonnie & Frank McCarroll Rodeo Archives, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, RC2006.076.312-1

Bonnie McCarroll in her rough dismount of a bronc named Silver at the 1915 Pendleton Round-Up.

Nineteen-year-old Pendleton rodeo clown Monk Carden, McCarroll's husband Frank, and several other friends and competitors were in the arena or within feet of Bonnie that day. When the snubber, the man whose job it was to remove the bag covering the bronc's eyes, pulled off the blindfold, they all watched in horror as both history and tragedy unfolded in front of them.

The first rider of the day, McCarroll had drawn Black Cat, a horse that Carden described as agitated before McCarroll ever got on him.

McCarroll didn't hesitate. She'd been around agitated horses before.

In fact, fifteen years earlier, rodeo photographer Walter Bowman had taken a picture of McCarroll tumbling off the back of a horse named Silver in her first bronc-busting competition at the Pendleton Round-Up. The image had gone about as viral as it could back in the time before cell phones and the Internet.

McCarroll is shown in Bowman's famous photo headed ground-ward, upside down. Her legs are splayed in the air, her curly hair flying, one gloved hand just touching the hard-packed clay arena as she prepares to hit ground. Silver rears

up on his hind legs, his back arched skyward, the remnant of a broken or severed rope hobble visible on one stirrup.³

She survived that fall, and fifteen years later, on September 18, 1929, Bonnie returned to the same arena for what was to be her farewell ride before retiring from rodeo.

McCarroll shook her dark brown hair out of her face, pulling it back behind her ears before putting her wide-brimmed felt hat back on her head. Like other famous cowgirls of her day, Tad Lucas, Bea Kirnan, Prairie Rose Henderson, Mabel Strickland, Princess Mohawk, Ruth Roach, Kitty Canutt, and Prairie Lillie, McCarroll was a real champion cowgirl and the fans knew it. True, some of the more urban audiences were uncomfortable watching women bronc busters, but they came anyway.

Before the snubber pulled the blindfold off Black Cat, McCarroll had a lot to look forward to. She was only thirty-four years old at the time, and this would be her farewell ride. She and her husband, Frank, would retire from what had been, by any standard, a long run in an extreme sport. The McCarrolls had thousands of fans, but it was time to put their saddles away—at least when it came to entertaining in them—and enjoy their lives together.

According to witnesses that day, Black Cat was agitated, twitchy, and anxious about being there, but he had to wait to wait long. McCarroll was getting up her pants, tugged at her boots, pulled up her leather gloves, and

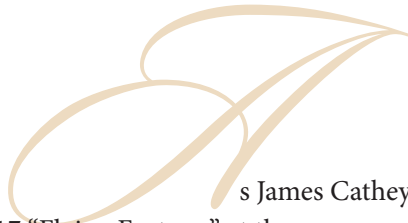
CHAPTER 3 – JAMES CATHEY ENTERS THE ARENA



Photo by Rodney_X/ASlamy.com



Photo by U.S. Army, provided by the Cathey family.



As James Cathey looked out from his B-17 “Flying Fortress” at the snow-covered countryside passing 20,000 feet below, he viewed the tops of white clouds that looked almost like more snow. He reached for the machine gun mount to steady himself and gazed at the large formation of war machines passing through what he suddenly saw as a serene, almost heavenly scene. Momentarily entranced by the ironic beauty, he lost all awareness of roaring engines and the bone-freezing cold. An avid amateur photographer, he nearly reached for his camera, but new sounds of aerial explosions from anti-aircraft defenses jerked him back to reality.

The eldest of seven children, James was born in 1917 on a rural plot of land near Tell, a small speck of a town, just west of Childress, in the southeast corner of the Texas Panhandle. There, on the farm and cattle ranch established by his great-grandfather in the 1880s, James grew up in a large extended family of uncles, aunts and cousins.

Whether at their frequent gatherings or on group driving trips to natural wonders like Palo Duro Canyon or the mountains of Colorado, someone was always carrying

a camera and creating photo memories for the family. For James, sharing photographs was a natural part of life.

A rural West Texas boy, James loved being outdoors, working with animals and crops. Upon graduating from Childress High School in 1935, he joined the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), building roads and park facilities in New Mexico. Later, he attended Colorado A&M in Fort Collins, studying mechanical engineering and forest management. He envisioned a career as an outdoorsman rooted somewhere on the slopes of the Rocky Mountains.

In early 1943, James put that career plan on hold. He had married his best friend's sister, Margie Eleese Johnson, a pretty North Texas farm girl, was soon to become a father, and had enlisted in the Army Air Corps. Everything was changing for him.

Cathey volunteered for bomber duty because that's where the action was, and that's where he always wanted to be: in the center of it all. As his crew's flight engineer and top gunner with the Eighth Air Force's 306th Bombardment Group, known as "The Reich Wreckers," he certainly had been at the center of the action in 1944. Now it was February of 1945, and James was on his thirty-fifth and final combat mission.

Although he missed getting a picture of that surreal view on his last mission, because war abruptly got in the way, James had been developing his photographic skills during his tour of duty. Having taken pictures most of his life, he packed his old familiar Kodak camera when he shipped to England, and his talent for capturing impressive images became known around the air base. His crew members and other airmen often requested prints to send home to their families, and James realized he was quite good at the art. He enjoyed the special attention it brought and began to think seriously about changing directions to pursue a career in something artistic that really caught his imagination.

Awarded the Air Medal, for “heroism or meritorious achievement,” with five oak leaf clusters, signifying receipt of the same high honor six times during his thirty-five missions, Cathey returned home in April, 1945, a highly-decorated airman, seeking a new beginning. He rejoined his young family and moved to Fort Worth, where there were ample career opportunities.

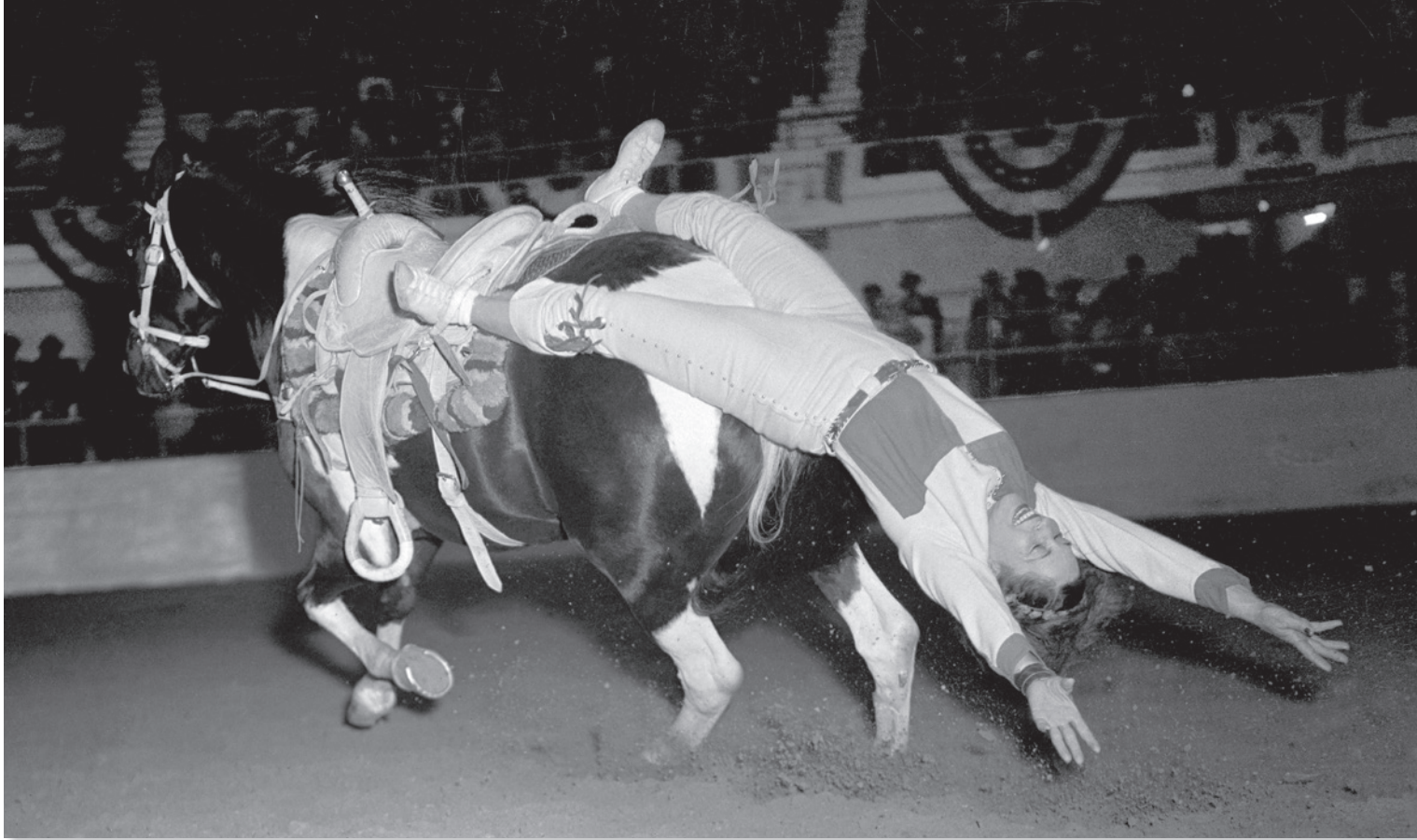
Fully determined to become a professional photographer, he made a significant commitment to the future with the purchase of a Graflex Speed Graphic 4x5 camera, even before finding a job. The Speed Graphic was the camera of choice for most professional news photographers of that day, and he wanted to be well-equipped for stepping into his new career.

James went straight to the major newspapers and applied for a job as a news photographer—with no news experience. All he took to the interviews were his considerable raw talent, a can-do attitude and a professional’s camera.

The *Fort Worth Press* opened the door for him, but only as a freelance contractor, paid for photos used. Early on, his new editor told him to make sure every picture tells a story, adding, “If I can’t see the story, I can’t run with it,” a challenge and a guideline that James never forgot.

Being self-taught and lacking professional training might have seemed an obstacle, but it was a special advantage for James. He had learned to see life from a different perspective, rather than the perspective of most other professional photographers.

His talent for capturing action, married with good camera work, would eventually take him to places beyond the reach of most of his contemporaries.



James Cathey photo--2015.006.233

only a camera and maybe a press pass, the Fort Worth Rodeo was inside the Will Rogers Memorial Coliseum, with only a single arena photographer, who supplied the rodeo committee with all the news release images they needed. Not only was this contract a significant rodeo credential for boosting his new career, but it gave James exclusive arena access, right down front with the bucking stock, his favorite place, where he could capture the action and tell the stories from up close.

James didn't yet know that the 1948 Fort Worth Rodeo would be where he captured one of the most outstanding action shots ever made of the famous "First Lady of Rodeo," Tad Lucas, in her signature "Back Drag" trick ride. There, with her head just inches from the flying rear hooves of her favorite paint horse, was the enthusiastic and energetic the 45-year-old rodeo queen.

This widely acclaimed James Cathey action photo captures the famous First Lady of Rodeo, Tad Lucas, on Candy Lamb, in her signature "Back Drag" at the 1948 Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo. A large print of this image now hangs in the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame in Fort Worth.

Equipped with a Graflex Speed Graphic camera, loaded with a single 4x5 negative to grant only one chance at any shot, Cathey captured this and other up-close rodeo action photos with disposable flash bulbs and without the aid of a telephoto lens.

CHAPTER 4 — 1947 TRI-STATE ALL GIRL RODEO



In 1947, Amarillo's Tri-State Fair suddenly had no rodeo. The Will Rogers Range Riders, producers of a fall rodeo for the past four years, had moved their rodeo to mid-summer. This would be the first fair held since it had been mothballed in 1941, and large crowds were expected.

Two West Texas ranch girls stepped in to fill the void. Nancy Binford of Wildorado and Thena Mae Farr of Seymour saw a perfect opportunity to produce an all-girl rodeo and grabbed the chance that fell into their laps. Then they made a run into the history books of women's rodeo.

Founded in 1923, the Tri-State Fair attracted participants from all over West Texas, Oklahoma, and New Mexico. Amarillo businessmen had always been enthusiastic promoters of this annual fall event that brought tens of thousands of attendees to the area while also generating favorable publicity and considerable revenue for the city.

Nancy, the Will Rogers Range Riders' Sweetheart, and her close friend Thena Mae, Miss Seymour, were experienced rodeo "sponsor girls." Sponsor girls were young ladies who were chosen to represent ranches, businesses or Chambers of Commerce in rodeo events, competing for prizes based

Women's rodeo history was redirected in 1947 by these two West Texas ranch girls,

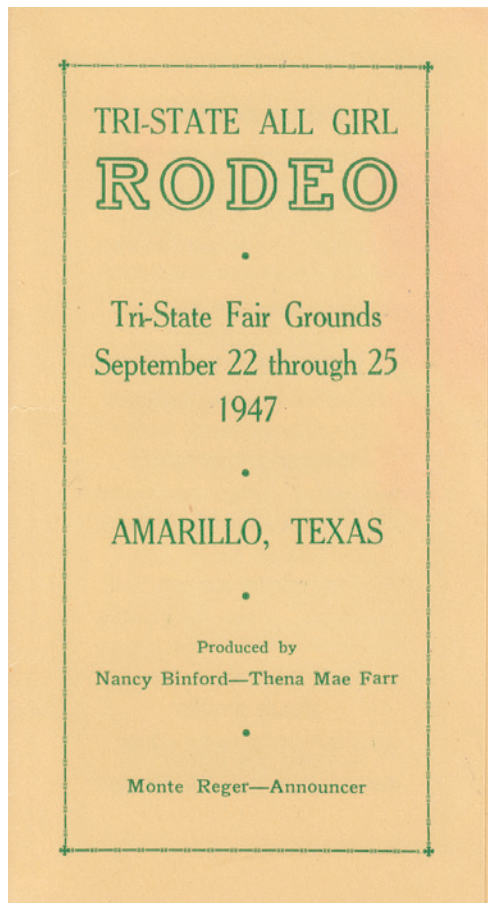


James Cathey photo-2015.006.Binford



James Cathey photo-2015.006.Farr

Nancy Binford (l.) and Thena Mae Farr (r.), when they sold the idea of an all-girl rodeo, produced and managed by themselves, to the committee of Amarillo's Tri-State Fair.



Historic document image courtesy of the National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas

The call went out, and cowgirls from several states enthusiastically answered, eager for the chance to compete in a rodeo of their own.

primarily upon subjective evaluations of their mounts, riding costumes and equestrian skills.

Nancy and Thena Mae were good at promoting their sponsors. They had become public relations experts, presiding over teas and luncheons, and participating in sponsor dances. They acquired sophistication from competing and winning while observing and learning what constituted a well-organized and well-run rodeo. They also met many important people who taught them how to manage the various components of a rodeo. These two ranch women had attended college, honing their leadership skills in physical education departments still segregated by gender so that women managed the activities and led the organizations. During their extensive experience as sponsor girls they had also met and formed friendships with many other ranch girls, creating the community from which they would draw the competitors for their Tri-State All Girl Rodeo. They were well prepared.

Nancy and Thena Mae presented their idea to the Amarillo Chamber of Commerce. The Chamber, at first somewhat skeptical, approved their request, and the Texas State Fair Board signed on to help advertise and promote the upcoming rodeo.⁶ The girls signed the contract on August 21 and immediately put 100 percent of their energy into creating a roaring success for the fair and opening new opportunities for rodeo cowgirls.

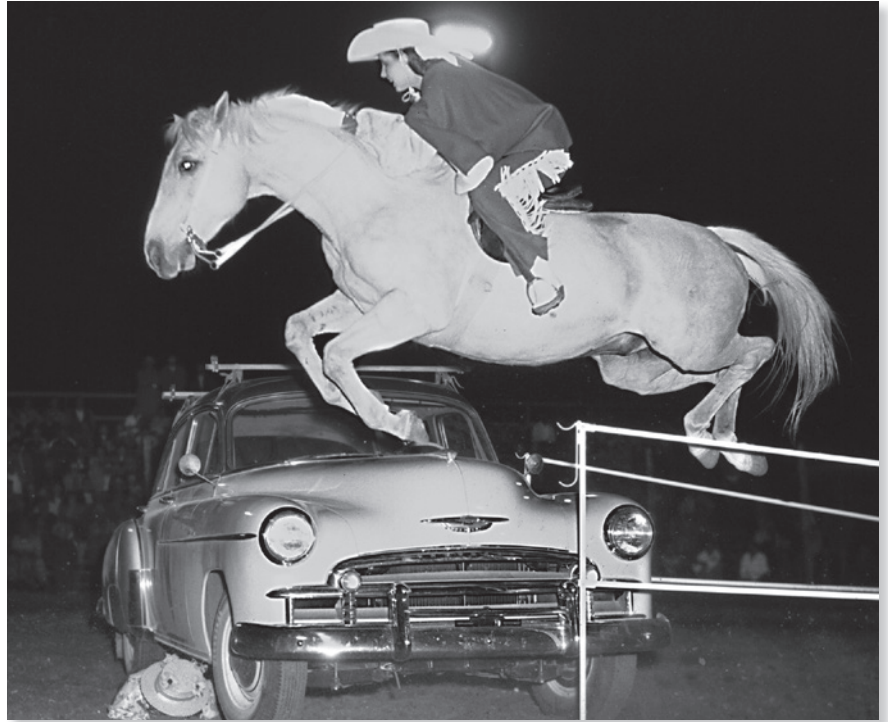
Up and down Polk Street strode the producers, soliciting prizes and donations for the rodeo. Interview here. Interview there. Photo ops and publicity in the local newspapers. Interviews with dignitaries. Smiles for everyone. Invitations to send sponsor girls—yes, but this time the sponsor girl contest would be decided by timing alone. No more best costume or prettiest hairdo or richest dad, just their equestrian skills!

⁶ Renée M. Laegreid, "Ranch Women and Rodeo Performers in Post—World War II West Texas," in *Texas Women: Their Histories, Their Lives* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 341–42.

Cowgirls from Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma and as far away as California supported the rodeo. They jumped at the chance to compete in a full range of events: bull and bareback bronc riding, saddle bronc, calf roping, team roping, cutting, ribbon racing, and barrel racing. Entries poured in.

This would be the first competitive all-girl rodeo: the first rodeo produced and staffed by women with all female contestants. With the exception of renowned announcer Monte Reger and a couple of pick-up men, girls handled everything. Even the clown, Dixie Reger, was from their list of all-girl contestants. In addition to competing in several events, Dixie and her sister Virginia entertained as trick riders and ropers, with Virginia thrilling the crowd as she sailed over a car on her mount. Nancy later remarked that they couldn't have put on the rodeo without the Reger family.

Nancy and Thena Mae planned their rodeo to appeal to a broad audience and to attract the paying spectators that were needed to be successful. They promoted the rodeo by recruiting athletic cowhands and trick riders, and by hiring a professional manager to manage the event. The rodeo was a success, and the Reger family's reputation as rodeo promoters was solidified.



James Cathey photo-2015.006.4.7.0.28

Virginia Reger, seen here at the 1950 Belton, Texas, All Girl Rodeo, performed this same signature feat to the amazement of the fans at the 1947 Tri-State All Girl Rodeo.



James Cathey photo—2015.006.4.6.0.3

Margaret Owens Montgomery, the first president of the Girls Rodeo Association, at the 1950 Belton All Girl Rodeo.

While the GRA adopted RCA rules to govern most of their events, one rule that they wrote for themselves was that a rider need not keep a free hand in the competitive bucking events of bareback bronc riding and bull riding. A cowgirl could hold on with two hands. The free hand rule was kept for the GRA's saddle bronc riders.



Fort Worth, Texas, was rodeo central for the western and central plains in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Not only was Fort Worth James Cathey's new hometown, it was national rodeo headquarters for all of North America. The city's rodeo history had begun in 1896 at the site of the stockyards in North Fort Worth. The famous indoor rodeos at the North Side Coliseum began in 1908 and the nation's first indoor professional rodeo was held there in 1918.

The Will Rogers Memorial Coliseum, with its huge indoor rodeo arena, became home to the Fort Worth Rodeo beginning in 1944.

The Cowboys' Turtle Association, which had formed in 1936 as a union representing professional rodeo cowboys, held a restructuring meeting in Fort Worth in 1945. There they developed a new set of rules and regulations governing the sport, changed the name of the organization to Rodeo Cowboys Association, elected Toots Mansfield of Bandera, Texas, as president, and established a new headquarters in the Sinclair Building downtown.

It would be the Livestock Exchange Building, in the Stockyards area, adjacent to the North Side Coliseum, that would become the rodeo command center, and the center of action for Cathey. In January 1949, following a very promising year of photographing rodeos, he opened his first real office and photo studio on the ground floor of the Livestock Exchange, right off the main lobby. Once again,



Photo from Typhoonski, iStock ID 539342128

Fort Worth Livestock Exchange, is located in the Fort Worth Stockyards district. Erected in 1902, the historic building still houses offices. In the 1940s and early '50s it was at the very heart of rodeo central, and it was the home office of James Cathey and of the Girls Rodeo Association.

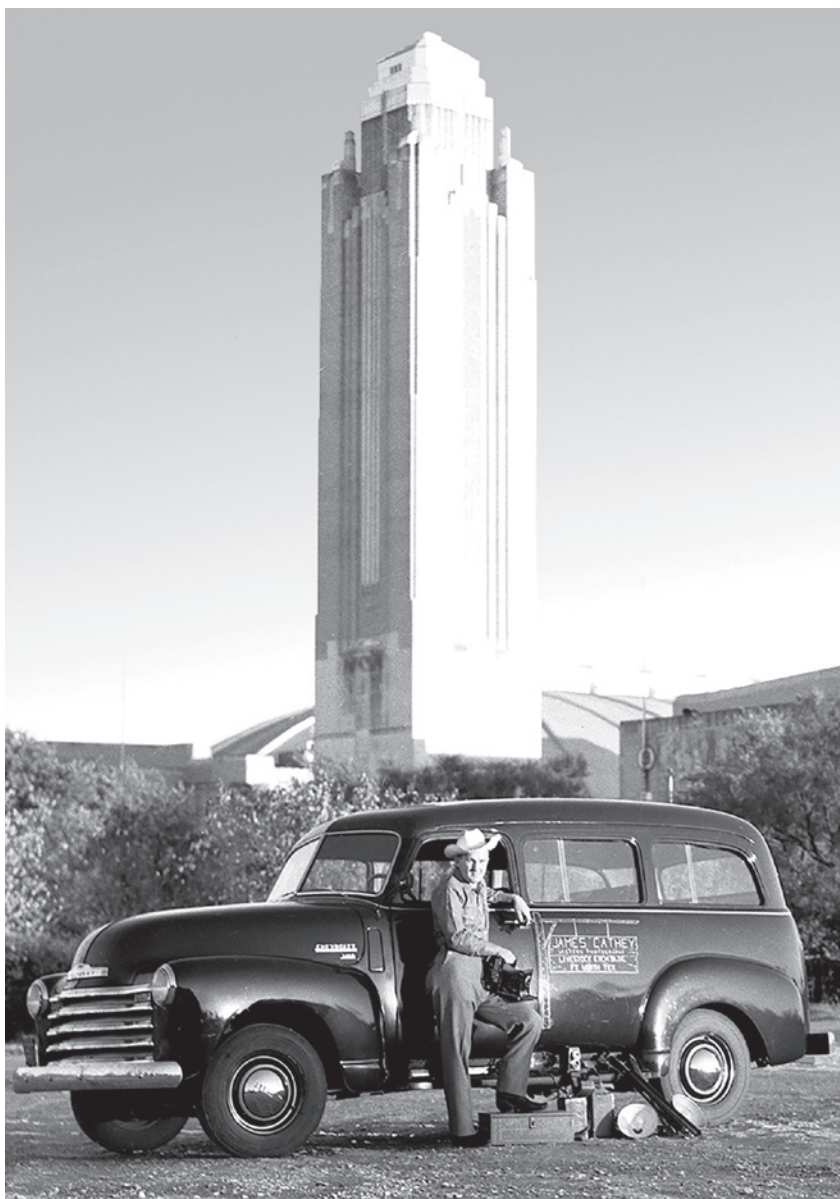


Photo by Margie Cathey, from the Cathey family's collection, circa 1949

Cathey shows that he has camera, will travel, as he poses for his own promotional photo in front of Fort Worth's iconic Will Rogers Memorial Center, home of the Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo, where Cathey got his first big-league break in his rapidly-rising rodeo career.

his knack for finding the core of a story would come into play, propelling him into photographic history.

Throughout 1948 and 1949, Cathey's business was growing rapidly and he was growing closer to the GRA.

The success of the 1947 Tri-State All Girl Rodeo had encouraged the girls to organize, establish a set of rules and formally charter the GRA in February of 1948. They spent most of the rest of the year seeking opportunities to get GRA-approved events included in existing RCA rodeos that were already scheduled and being produced by non-GRA producers. That first year, they had seventy-four paying members and they needed to find rodeos where those girls could compete in events which were in keeping with their newly adopted rules.

Hard work and excellent PR efforts paid off as GRA members participated in a total of sixty events in 1948, made possible in part by the group's two new all-girl rodeos: San Angelo in early summer and Amarillo in October.

Many of the GRA stars began showing up as contestants in events at RCA rodeos which Cathey was photographing. He had become friends with fellow Fort Worth resident Tad Lucas, and she encouraged him to take more pictures of the girls when they performed. She said things like, "We don't

even have enough good photographs to promote an all-girl rodeo,” or “These girls are excellent athletes and really fine horsewomen who just want a chance to compete, but they need some support, their entry fees just don’t cut it. They need to be able to attract more sponsors so that the prize money will at least cover their expenses.”

James got his first opportunity to see a significant number of the GRA stars in action when they showed up, some twenty-strong, to compete at the Santa Rosa Round-Up at Vernon, Texas, in May of 1949. As the newly designated “official photographer” of the Round-Up, he was solidly impressed with the girls’ athletic skills and professionalism, and thoroughly documented their performances. A group shot of most of the ladies at that rodeo appears on the back cover of this book. Tad convinced James to help photograph the event, but his booming business demanded that he only attend the major rodeos like Fort Worth and Houston. He was able to score a few photos of the



James Cathey photo—2015.006.5.2.25

Nancy Binford at the 1949 Santa Rosa Round-Up, Vernon, Texas.



James Cathey photo—2015.006.6.17.0.12

LaTonne Sewalt on Little Joe leaves the third barrel of the cloverleaf for the homeward dash at the 1950 Jacksboro All Girl Rodeo.

Barrel racing was already a “ladies’ event” in a few rodeos, judged mainly on style and reining skills—sometimes even on the appearance of the Sponsor Girls’ clothing—before the GRA set standard distances for their three-barrel course and began judging the event based solely on time for completion of the cloverleaf pattern.

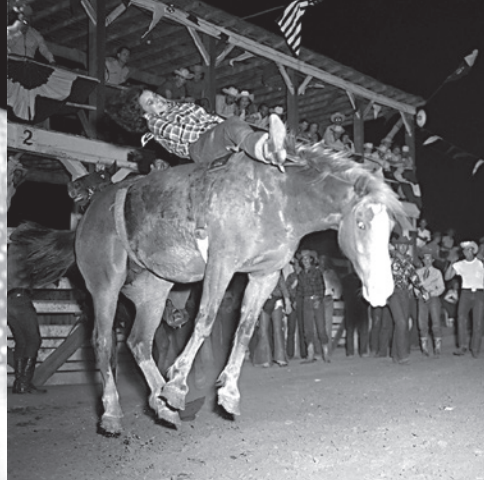
Riding ability became even more important for barrel racers as the speeds got faster and the skills of both riders and horses became more finely tuned. The modern, crowd-pleasing sport of barrel racing has changed little since the GRA set the standards and established it as one of their favorite events.



James Cathey photo-2015.006.9.28.1.24



James Cathey photo-2015.006.9.23.9.9



James Cathey photo-2015.006.7.22.0.6

They called themselves "girls."

They were daughters of the West,

Right: Rose Garrett at the 1950 Jacksboro All Girl Rodeo. Other cowgirls on this page are unidentified.



James Cathey photo-2015.006.6.17.0.9



James Cathey photo-2015.006.9.29.1.36



James Cathey photo—2015.006.5.14.0.3

Marie Morris at the 1950 Fort Stockton All Girl Rodeo.

*lovers of challenge,
and mothers of
women's competitive
role in the modern
sport of rodeo.*



James Cathey photo—2015.006.9.4.9.26

Jackie Worthington at the 1949 Woodward, Okla. Rodeo.



James Cathey photo—2015.006.6.17.0.15

Pee Wee knows what to do when Janelle McGilvray speaks into his ear at the 1950 Jacksboro All Girl Rodeo.



James Cathey photo—2015.006.5.28.0.17

Blanche Altizer Smith throwing her famous tight loop at the 1950 Coleman All Girl Rodeo.



James Cathey photo—2015.006.10.21.0.7

Tommie Green at the 1950 Tulsa All Girl Rodeo.



James Cathey photo—2015.006.9.22.9.4

Vivian White riding saddle bronc at the 1949 Fort Smith All Girl Rodeo.



James Cathey photo-2015.006.5.12.0.2

Elaine Bell at the 1950 Fort Stockton All Girl Rodeo.



James Cathey photo-2015.006.4.7.0.29

Dixie Toalson, 1950 Belton All Girl Rodeo.



James Cathey photo-2015.006.11.8.1.23

A few of the GRA stars at the 1951 Tulsa All Girl Rodeo. Down front, left to right, Jackie Worthington, Billye Burk Gamblin. Standing, left to right, Rae Beach, Sally Taylor, Tad Lucas, Margaret Owens Montgomery, Nancy Bragg, unidentified, Judy Hays, Rose Garrett.



James Cathey photo—2015.006.C2.5.59.28

Yes, they were tough contenders in the rodeo arena, but they were also women of style. This iconic James Cathey photo is of six GRA leaders taking part in the GRA Fashion Show at the Western Hills Hotel in conjunction with the 1959 Fort Worth Southwestern Exposition Stock Show and Rodeo. From left to right: Sherry Combs Johnson, Billie McBride, Berva Dawn Taylor, Manuelita Mitchell-Woodward, Florence Youree and Wanda Kinkeade, champions and beauties, all.



James Cathey photo—2015.006.11.11.1.8

WORLD CHAMPION COWGIRLS, 1951: (left to right) Lucyle Cowey, saddle bronc; Rae Beach, bareback; Ruby Gobble, team tying; Rose Garrett Brown, bull riding; Jackie Worthington, all-around and cutting horse; Wanda Harper Bush, calf roping and ribbon roping; Margaret Owens Montgomery, barrel racing; Sally Taylor, sportsmanship.

APPENDIX

GRA Founding Members

February 28, 1948

St. Angelus Hotel, San Angelo TX

Mrs. Russell Allen
Sissy Allen
Mrs. Curtis Barron
Helen Barron Green
Dude Barton
Nancy Binford
Nancy Bragg
Iris Dorsett
Betty Barron Dusek
Thena Mae Farr
Frances Gist
Bebe Green
Mary Green
Sally Hardin
Marlene Harlan
Fay Ann Horton
Tad Lucas
Manuelita Mitchell
Jesse Myers
Margaret Owens Montgomery
Sug Owens Bloxom
Mrs. Katherine Pearson
Mrs. Ted Powers
June Probst
Virginia Probst
Ora Altizer Quigg
Doris Reed
Dixie Reger
Mitzi Lucas Riley
Mary Ellen Sellers
Blanche Altizer Smith
Sally Taylor
Frances Weeg
Vivian White
Josephine Willis
Jackie Worthington
Ann Young
Izora Young

GRA Presidents (past)

1948 – 49	Margaret Owens Montgomery
1950	Nancy Binford
1951	Thena Mae Farr
1952 – 53	Billye Burk Gamblin
1954 – 56	Jackie Worthington
1957 – 59	Billie McBride
1960 – 64	Florence Youree
1965 – 71	Mildred Farris
1972 – 74	Margaret Clemons
1975	Sammie Fancher Thurman
1976 – 77	Kay Vamvoras
1978 – 93	Jimmie Gibbs Munroe*

*GRA name changed to Women's Professional Rodeo Association (WPRA) in 1981