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SR Visits: The Donald C. & Elizabeth M. Dickinson Research Center at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum

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at the
National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum**

Introduction

In many ways, the American West is more mythology than history. Yes, there were days when cowboys and ranchers rode everything west of the Mississippi--- claiming, branding, and driving cattle to auction. Yes, new settlers and Native inhabitants clashed as the American colonies spread toward the Pacific. Whether the phrase “Old West” conjures image of steers and spurs or saloons and shootouts, the period of time often associated with this conceptualization of the West is the latter half of the 19th century. Over a span of less than 50 years, a chapter of American culture was written, and since, has been retold, revised, and rehistoricized.

The American West and the era of the cowboy are often associated with Texas and Colorado, but Oklahoma has a prominent place in the history of western expansion. Oklahoma was Indian Territory---an area where Native Americans of many tribes from various parts of the country were relocated in the 1830s. Then in 1907, it became the Sooner State, so named for people who claimed land before the official opening of the territory to settlement by farmers and ranchers. It may seem strange to some that a state has so closely align itself with people who broke the rules, while others may feel that it was this very attitude that defined the pioneer spirit.

In 1995, Oklahoma became known for much more than its place in the history of the West or its tempestuous spring weather, when it became the site of the worst act of terrorism in the United States before 9/11. The destruction of life and landmarks would be overshadowed by the response of its citizens to the tragedy, and Oklahoma City became a symbol of heartland

America. While Oklahomans have rarely agreed on one label to define their state, many would wholeheartedly contend that tragedy and destruction would not be their capitol's hallmark.

Visitors to OKC will find a wealth of opportunities to explore. Dubbed "America's macho central" by the *New York Times*, Oklahoma City boasts the Softball Hall of Fame and a firefighter's museum.¹ Visitors can also see the Oklahoma City National Memorial, the International Photography Hall of Fame, the International Gymnastics Hall of Fame, and the American Banjo Museum. The American Indian Cultural Center and Museum is currently under construction, and the capitol building dome (a dome that took 100 years to build) was finally completed along with art and exhibit space in 2007.

But situated atop Persimmon Hill on Oklahoma City's northeast side, the Cowboy Hall of Fame & Western Heritage Center remains the crown jewel of the city's attractions. More than 10 million visitors have visited the site since its opening, and it is consistently listed as one of the state's "must-see" locations. From the canopy-style architecture of the building's façade, to the large interior pavilion and glass foyers that open up into a botanical garden view, visitors receive an immediate aesthetic sense of "wide open spaces."

History

Unlike many museums and institutions that are fostered by organizations or government agencies, the development and creation of the Cowboy Hall of Fame & Western Heritage Center began with one man's notion. In the early 1950s, Ohio native and Kansas businessman Charles A. Reynolds dreamed of a museum or center that would document and pay homage to the history of the American West. Reynolds set out to promote this idea to numerous national and state entities. Ultimately, seventeen states joined as a coalition to support the development of a

museum to celebrate western history and culture. Of the 46 cities that competed to host the site, Dodge City, Kansas and Colorado Springs were runners-up to the final choice of Oklahoma City.

From 1955 to 1965, architects and contractors completed the building of the hall while curators and historians developed a substantial collection of art and other memorabilia for display. Early in the Center's development, an archive was intended to collect and preserve materials for researchers and others. Originally called the "Research Library of Western Americana,"² this archive would be a prime consideration in development, construction, and collection efforts. After 10 years and numerous issues related to funding and development, the Cowboy Hall of Fame & Western Heritage Center was unveiled in June 1965.

Over the next three decades, curators and Center staffers worked diligently to build and enhance the permanent collections and exhibits. Renamed in 2001, the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum continues to delight researchers, history buffs, and cultural aficionados. Featuring exhibit spaces such as the American Rodeo Gallery, the Art of the American West Gallery, and the Weitzenhoffer Gallery of Fine American Firearms, the art and sculptures of Charles Marion Russell, Frederic Remington, Edward Curtis and others that have been collected for the museum offer a comprehensive vantage point on visual depictions of the American West---both its reality and its mythology.

The Western Performers Gallery features popular exhibits, including artifacts from John Wayne's personal gun collection, Wild West Show memorabilia, and movie posters. "Prosperity Junction", a full-size replica of a western town in 1900, is another popular exhibit. A collection of barbed wire, including some 1300 different patterns used by cattle ranchers to signify territorial boundaries, is another of the museum's highlights.

Each year, the museum inducts new members into three Halls of Fame: the Hall of Great Western Performers, the Hall of Great Westerners, and the Rodeo Hall of Fame. Recent honorees include actors Tom Selleck and Charlton Heston, rancher and photographer Bob Moorhouse, conservationist and author John Muir, and rodeo performers Joe Chase Jr., Marie “Ma” Gibson, and Lane Frost. Awards are also offered in various categories to individuals who have shaped or represented the American West.

The Dickinson Research Center

In contrast to the wide open spaces of the Museum’s exhibit floor, gaining access to the Donald C. & Elizabeth M. Dickinson Research Center requires some stealth---and a guide. After being met at the lobby’s information desk, visitors are guided through exhibit areas, pass-card protected doors, concrete stairwells and hallways, before finally reaching their destination. While it may seem that one has gone “underground” in the process of finding the Research Center, the construction of the building allows for an unobstructed outdoor view. Upon entering the Center’s reading room, visitors may be surprised to find a wealth of natural light and a beautiful view of lawns and trees through the wall-sized picture windows.

The Research Center’s mission is “to preserve, document, and interpret the heritage of the American West for the enrichment of the public by collecting, arranging, describing, making available, and preserving library, photographic, and archival materials related to the West and its social and cultural history.”³ The Center’s catalog currently includes more than 39,000 books and close to 4000 film, video, and audio recordings. In addition, their online image database includes more than 201,000 photographs, tintypes, lobby cards, and more. Finally, the Center’s serials holdings include issues from 1,124 different periodical titles.

Approximately 85 percent of these materials were received as donations. New collections are regularly added to the Center's holdings, and donated materials will often arrive in a variety of formats. Approximately 30% of these donations are declined due to duplication. Since none of the materials received as part of a donated collection are sold, around 10 percent of the items in the archive are not aligned to the Center's collection policy.

Auto-Graphic's Agent Verso product is used to catalog the Center's books, periodicals, and audio-visual items. This catalog is available online at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum web site, and features a number of options for limiting and expanding searches. The Center also places all of its records in OCLC's WorldCat. As with most archival collections, these items are part of the closed-stacks environment in the Center and are not circulated to local or interlibrary loan patrons.

The Center receives and answers approximately 500 to 700 research questions annually by phone, email, and regular post. The most common questions relate to rodeo history and contemporary western art and queries are made by a variety of patrons---from book authors and journalists to filmmakers and others. In addition, questions are also submitted by individuals seeking information on family members and related genealogical data. While the receipt of research questions has remained consistent, the Center has seen fewer in-person visitors since the economic downturn in 2008.

While the Research Center does not publish any periodicals or monographs on a regular basis, museum exhibits are regularly developed by Center staffers. Their website also includes a number of web exhibits created specifically for online visitors. In addition, concise histories of both the National Cowboy & Western Museum and the Dickinson Research Center are available on the web site.

The Serials Collection

The Research Center archives boast a fascinating accumulation of magazines, newspapers, and journals, including a number of rare and notable serials titles such as *Hoofs and Horns*, *Hereford World*, and *Indians at Work* (a Bureau of Indian Affairs publication detailing World War II era works projects designed for Native Americans). As well as acquiring periodicals related to state-focused publications (*Arizona Highways*, *Colorado Magazine*, et al.), reprints of early serials are also collected. When asked about their collection development policy, Books and Serials Librarian Karen Spilman noted, “If it’s about a horse or a cow, we’ve got it.”

Serials are often received as part of a donated collection, and publication runs of each title may be complete, fragmentary, or sporadic. While documentation is maintained to note the run of a particular title as it is associated with each individual collection, incomplete runs from various collections may be organized together to provide a cohesive series. In the case of rare periodical titles, such as *The Breeders Gazette* first published in 1881, two different donated collections included runs of the periodical with differing gaps and varying levels of completion. These issues are then organized together in the archive to facilitate a more accurate view of the Center’s holdings.

While historical and long out-of-print periodicals are an important part of the collection, the Center continues to maintain 59 current subscriptions. New issues of serials such as *Western Art* and *ProRodeo Sports News* are kept on display in the Research Center’s Reading Room. These materials are often used by the curators to develop of exhibits, to keep abreast of current events in their respective areas of expertise, and to suggest additional acquisitions for the Center’s collections.

Current Initiatives

As Spilman and others consider the future of the Dickinson Research Center, some of their concerns are those shared with similar archival collections. Space for new acquisitions will continue to be an issue. Staffers are currently re-housing some collections and reorganizing the stacks area to create additional room for new donations. They are also looking at options for remodeling a portion of the Center's remote storage area to create more space for materials.

The internet is one location where space is not an issue. The Center's online presence will continue to change and grow to meet the needs of new audiences and take advantage of new technologies. Their image database is constantly growing, and Image and Audio-Video Archivist Laura Heller is currently pursuing grant opportunities to fund the digitization of the Center's impressive collection of movie posters, lobby cards, and other film-related objects.

Finally, greater efforts are underway to provide outreach to groups and individuals who may benefit from the Center's collections. Aside from researchers and individual visitors, student groups from local graduate programs in LIS, history, and women's studies visit the archives. For further information or to make an appointment, visit the "Contact" page at the Center's website or write to Karen Spilman at kspilman@nationalcowboymuseum.org.

Notes

¹Karen Winegar, "Sweet on Cowboy Culture," *New York Times*, TR33, January 7, 2001.

²Charles E. Rand, "A Concise History of the Donald C. and Elizabeth M. Dickinson Research Center," *Donald C. & Elizabeth M. Dickinson Research Center*. (National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum). <http://www.nationalcowboymuseum.org/research/cms/About/DRCHistory/tabid/60/Default.aspx> (accessed April 25, 2010).

³ *Donald C. & Elizabeth M. Dickinson Research Center*. (National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum). <http://www.nationalcowboymuseum.org/research> (accessed April 25, 2010).