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Cathey Family Donates 68,000-Image Rodeo Photography Archive to the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum

Historic “Golden Age of Rodeo” Collection Now Partially Online for Public Access

OKLAHOMA CITY, December 4, 2025 — The National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum announces the addition of the James Cathey Rodeo Photography Collection, a transformative gift of more than 68,000 negatives documenting rodeos, livestock shows and American Quarter Horse Association (AQHA) conformation photography from 1947 through the 1960s. The donation, given in full by the Cathey family, strengthens the Museum’s distinction as the steward of the world’s largest and most significant rodeo photography archive.

Selections from the collection are viewable online at:

<https://images.nationalcowboymuseum.org/collections-a-z/james-cathey-quarter-horse-and-rodeo-photographs>. Additional images will be made available as digitization continues.

(Select high-resolution images with cutline information are available here:

https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/bqgqo9skr72rcc8txmbyj/AISbfCUMNBYw_BWnf0FXI-E/Cathey_Top_Pics?rlkey=aw1fp72bbboqd5lzoilwqncm&subfolder_nav_tracking=1&st=0holsbg1&dl=0)

Cathey’s photographs capture the explosive growth of rodeo and Western sports following World War II, chronicling champions, arenas, livestock bloodlines and the evolution of Western performance culture during a pivotal era. His work stands alongside the Museum’s premier archives, including the Bern Gregory, DeVere Helfrich, and Ralph R. Doubleday rodeo photograph collections.

“James Cathey was an outstanding photojournalist, as well as a visual historian of rodeo and Western performance,” said David Davis, Chief Curatorial Officer at the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. “His images document working animals, emerging stars and the transformation of the rodeo industry. It’s an important addition to our archives.”

James Cathey was inducted into the Museum's National Rodeo Hall of Fame in 2018, recognized for his documentary contributions to the world of rodeo. His archive offers critical context for researchers, breeders and historians of both rodeo and the American Quarter Horse industry.

"We are honored that the Cathey family chose the Museum as the permanent home for this extraordinary legacy," said Pat Fitzgerald, President & CEO of the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum. "Digitizing this material and making it accessible to the public ensures that future generations—scholars, rodeo athletes and families—can experience a remarkable visual history of American rodeo and Western culture."

The Cathey collection will continue to undergo a multi-year cataloging and conservation as Museum staff continue to digitize, research and prepare selections for exhibition.

"Placing our father's life's work with the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum was an easy decision," said Craig Cathey, one of James Cathey's four sons. "Dad loved The Cowboy, and the Museum has an unmatched commitment to preserving rodeo history and major photographic archives. We knew the collection would be protected and shared in a way that honors the scale and importance of his contribution to rodeo."

About James Cathey

James Cathey was born in February 1917 in Childress County, Texas. His rodeo career began in 1947 after his return from WWII service as a highly decorated airman in a B-17 Flying Fortress.

Cathey, as he was known to his friends, was the "official" photographer of many events, including the Santa Rosa Roundup, the Southwestern Exposition and Fat Stock Show (better known as the Fort Worth Stock Show), the Texas State Fair, the Wyoming State Fair, the Houston Stock Show and Rodeo, and the Laramie Steer Roping, among many others.

A prolific photographer of rodeos and livestock, Cathey's work was widely commissioned throughout the West and played a key role in documenting AQHA horses, bloodlines and performance champions. He was directly involved in the organization, promotion and growth of several levels of American rodeo. He worked with top RCA rodeos (the predecessor to the Pro Rodeo Cowboy Association, or PRCA) and tirelessly supported the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association (NIRA). As director of publicity for both the Girls Rodeo Association (GRA) and the National High School Rodeo Association (NHSRA), he helped launch both from regional to now international scope.

A prolific rodeo journalist, Cathey published Powder Puff & Spurs, the monthly magazine of the GRA, and he was the associate editor for rodeo at Back in the Saddle magazine and a

contributing editor of rodeo articles and news for Western Horseman, Hoofs & Horns and American Quarter Horse Journal.

In 1951, a Cathey rodeo photograph was selected to hang as one of the 100 Greatest News Photos of All Time in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

Cathey died June 2, 1978, at age 61.

About the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum

The National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City is America's premier institution of Western history, art, and culture. The Museum collects, preserves, and interprets an internationally renowned collection of Western art, artifacts, and archives, and serves as a center for scholarship and education. Learn more at nationalcowboymuseum.org.