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BY KARI DECASTRO

H FACED UP

A master of his trade, famed cowboy artist Harold T. Holden gives Finale Champions something money can't buy.



Michael Gaughan, owner of the South Point Hotel and Casino, with cowboy artist Harold T. Holden and his WSTR trophy bronze "Faced Up" in 2008.

It's early October and as a gentle fall breeze sweeps across northwestern Oklahoma, Harold T. Holden is delighted to be tucked away in his home studio finishing pieces for the Cowboy Artists of America Annual Sale & Exhibition that's approaching all too quickly. Affectionately known as "H" to most folks, he is one of America's most coveted and beloved cowboy artists.

Seven hundred miles to the west, ten bronze castings are underway at Art Castings of Colorado in Loveland. The 42-year-old foundry has been turning one of H Holden's timeless sculptures into a one-of-a-kind award that has made the trek to the South Point Hotel and Casino and into the hands of the World Series of Team Roping Finale Champions for the last six years. Including the 2014 trophy bronzes, only 50 castings of the sculpture, titled "Faced Up," have been made—and only the lucky few who have claimed a WSTR Finale win are privileged to own the coveted piece.

A Lifetime of Art

Capturing the West in sculptures and paintings for over 40 years, Holden's work can be found in the Oklahoma State Capitol and on a U.S. Postage Stamp, but it's the 22 public works of art and monument-size sculptures in Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas and Arkansas that have kept him busy the last 20-plus years.

With a knack for painting, Holden first attended Oklahoma State University and the University of Houston where he studied art, but quickly realized he needed someone to teach him how to turn his trade into a profitable enterprise. For the next two years

he attended the Texas Academy of Art in Houston. Upon graduation, Holden worked as a commercial artist for several years. In 1973, after serving an active duty tour with the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam War, he began to concentrate on his fine art full-time.

"There weren't many people making a living painting cowboys, very few," Holden recalled. "So I worked down there (in Houston), until I couldn't do the rat race anymore and I moved home."

Born and raised in Enid, Okla., Holden credits his father, who was a horseman, for his love of the West. Although Holden was the first professional fine artist in the

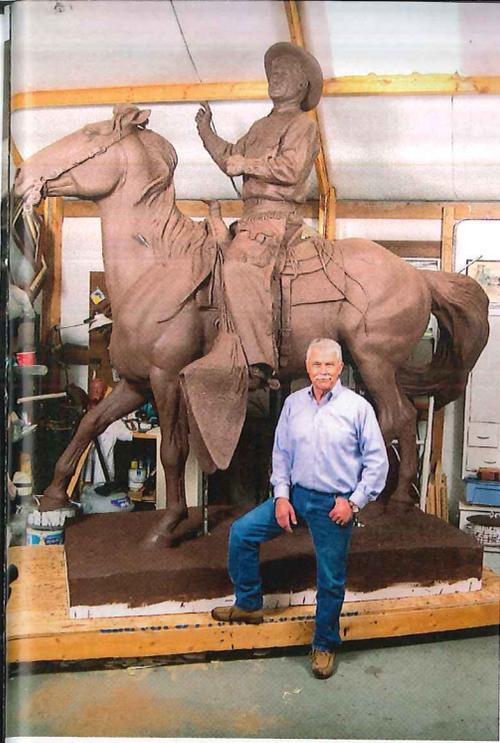
Knowing the cowboy artist was nationally distinguished, WSTR founder Denny Gentry had purchased one of Holden's bronzes from the Santa Fe, N.M., fine art gallery of long-time friend Michael Henington. The piece, called "Altitude and Attitude," is somewhat foretelling of a greater story. Prior to that, as Gentry observed the pristine piece, a novel thought occurred.

"The more I looked at it, the more I liked it, so I called to see if he wanted to do a yearly award," Gentry explained. "Since he is also a team roper he jumped on it. I have seen a lot of bronzes given away over the years, but nothing of this type of quality."

Holden began sketching ideas and in the summer of 2008, the first set of "Faced Up" trophy bronzes went into production. A short year later, after roping at the 2008 WSTR Finale himself, Holden would be taking what very literally could have been his final breaths.

family, he comes from a line of creative and talented inventors and engineers. In 1915, his great-grandfather George Failing invented the machine that creates the bottle cap that is still used on beverages today. His grandfather, oil pioneer George E. Failing, invented the first portable drilling rig, as well as numerous drilling bits still used in the industry.

"All I ever wanted to do was cowboy art," Holden explained. In fact, it began as early as his childhood school days where he sketched cowboys and horses into his notebooks. "I had horses growing up and that was kind of why I became an artist."



That's always been my subject matter. I've done historical work also, but the bulk of my work is cowboy, that's what I know."

Holden's artistic inspiration has always been the historical and contemporary West. He's spent time working on, observing and photographing some of the nation's most well-known ranches, including the Pitchfork and others. Although his early work concentrated on oil painting, by the 1990s he was focusing primarily on sculpture.

"I was pretty poor there for a while," Holden recalled of the earlier days. "I got one monument done and then I started getting some commission work and some bigger artwork and finally had some money coming in."

While working on a monument one sunny, summer afternoon, some friends

Holden Art & Law, and now at Gungoll, Jackson, Box and Devoll, P. C.

Holden's son Tim, who now does missionary work in Africa, was blessed with his father's artistic talent. Prior to his missionary work Tim would get in to all the big art shows, but knew his calling was elsewhere. When he first started traveling to the most remote parts of Africa he would call on his artistic abilities, drawing pictures of Bible stories as the only effective form of communication.

Alternately, Shannon inherited her father's love of the West. She and her husband, Marty Meyer, run cattle near Enid and have two kids, Payton and Morgan, who have all but stolen Holden's heart. Shannon used to rope and her husband still does; now their oldest has shown interest in it too.

"I LIKED TO ROPE A LOT, BUT I'M NOT BIG ON GOING DOWN THE ROAD. I HAD TOO MUCH GOING ON TO DO THAT."

stopped by the studio and brought with them a young and vivacious attorney who had grown up in a ranching family in southern Oklahoma. That was all he needed to know, and it wasn't long before H married Edna Mae Simmons.

"She'd been on a horse, I liked that. I liked when I thought she might be able to support a starving artist, too! Just joking, just joking," Holden chuckled in his soft-spoken Oklahoma drawl.

Over the years as the couple planted even deeper roots in and around Enid, they spent a lot of their free time in the roping pen, mainly with family or at small, local jackpots. From time to time Holden would enter a USTRC event, but his passion for his work kept him close to home.

"I roped periodically," he said. "I liked to rope a lot, but I'm not big on going down the road. I had too much going on to do that."

The couple raised two kids, a son and a daughter, and as they continued to focus on their respective careers they were whole-heartedly content with the life they had created. They traveled mainly to art shows; otherwise H was at work in the studio and Edna Mae first at the downtown Enid gallery (and her office),

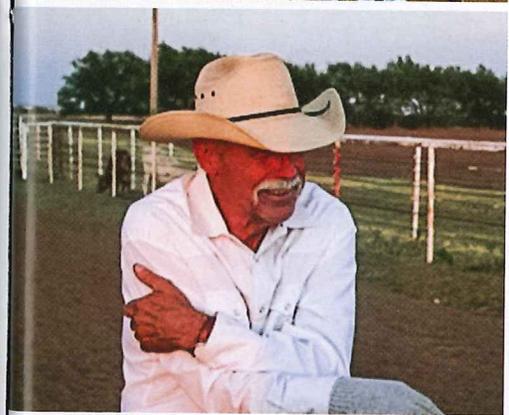
"My grandson just turned 13, and he wants to rope," Holden said. "I've got a pen over here. I just haven't been able to get it back going. Next year we're going to start roping with him. I've been looking forward to doing that."

Second Chances

The first year the WSTR presented "Faced Up" to the Finale Champs (2008) Holden loaded up and roped in Las Vegas, but he was sick then and rapidly getting worse.

In the spring of 2007, still very active, Holden had suddenly started to struggle with shortness of breath. He was soon thereafter diagnosed with Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis (IPF)—a rare, chronic and ultimately fatal disease characterized by a progressive decline in lung function. It has no known cause, no treatment and no cure. Life expectancy is three years from the time of diagnosis and the only plausible solution is a potential lung transplant, which is risky at best.

Most of 2008 Holden was sick, but still mobile enough to get around so when he roped at the Finale he did so with added reserve.



Top: Harold Holden in his Enid, Okla., studio. This life and 1/4 sculpture of Will Rogers on Teddy was dedicated at Will Rogers World Airport in Oklahoma City, Okla., on May 5, 2005. Center: Roping has always been an integral part of Holden's life. His daughter Shannon and wife, Edna Mae have also spent time in the roping pen. Bottom: "Faced Up" bronzes on display at the World Series of Team Roping Finale.

"I CAN DO MOST ANYTHING EXCEPT RUN A MARATHON, BUT I COULDN'T DO THAT BEFORE. I'M JUST LUCKY TO BE HERE."

"I couldn't warm my horse up. I'd make it around once and I'd be out of breath. But I could go down the pen and rope one and turn off and when we would get the flag I'd just let go and walk out of the pen. I'd get out of breath, but I could do that."

Additionally, throughout that same year, Holden was undergoing lengthy testing to see if he was healthy enough to receive a transplant. In January of 2010, the inevitable ensued and Holden's health began a downhill slide. He became completely homebound by March and at that time they put him on the transplant list.

"In his case, he probably wouldn't have lived another two weeks," explained Edna Mae. "Once you're on the list you have to wait for the right donor. The donor has to be the same body size and same blood type, that's really the only requirement on lungs, but a lot of people are sicker than you and so it's a whole system of who gets it first. He was the backup guy to get it twice and he didn't get the lung because someone was in front of him. It was a very difficult time, but we had lots of people praying for us and supporting us and helping us financially and all kinds of ways."

On July 2, 2010 the unexpected happened and Holden was blessed with a matching a donor.

"I was just so very fortunate," Holden said. "God was smiling on me, I guess. He got me a lung. Six days and I was out of the hospital."

It's been more than four years since the transplant.

"It's just been a miracle every day since then," said Edna Mae.

"I can do most anything except run a marathon, but I couldn't do that before," Holden jokes with a light-hearted attitude; one that truly embraces his unending gratefulness and ability to rise far above the unimaginable. "I'm just lucky to be here."

With attitude and altitude on his side, Edna Mae has encouraged Holden to once again rope at the WSTR Finale and for a guy who was horseback seven months after his lung transplant there will be no surprise when he does.

Thank You, Lord

In addition to the obvious visual aesthetic of his artwork, Holden's

numerous accolades are undeniable proof of a God-given talent. Humble and generally reserved, he'll only admit to doing what he loves.

In 2000 Holden received the lifetime achievement award from the Oklahoma Sculpture Society and was inducted into the Mountain Oyster Club as a lifetime member. In 2001 he received the Oklahoma Governor's Art Award from Governor Frank Keating. His commissions have included the likes of the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma State University, the City of OKC - Will Rogers World Airport, the Ranching Heritage Center, Oklahoma Historical Society and many more, in addition to a lengthy list of award achievements.

Holden had two monuments in the studio to finish when he couldn't work anymore.



For the last six years, in addition to the myriad of cash and other prizes, World Series Finale winners have been awarded this one-of-a-kind bronze, entitled "Faced Up" by Harold T. Holden.

Above: 2013 #11 Finale Champion, Tallian Thompson celebrates in the winner's room with his wife, two young kids and a baby (then) on the way. To claim a WSTR Finale Championship is a life-changing experience, the kind that will never be forgotten, and much like memories, the value of the World Series award bronze is one that will only increase in value over time.



H FACED UP

"You know, I had kind of accepted I wasn't going to be around. For some reason it just didn't tear me up, I just accepted it. Our pastor at church would come out once a week and pray with me. I was doing a monument for the church of a cowboy and he had his hat off in prayer. I was already talking to another artist to finish them for me, but I lived and was able to finish them myself."

On August 28, 2011 the 6-foot bronze entitled "Thank You Lord" was placed at Emmanuel Baptist Church in Enid, Okla.

Today, at 74 years young Holden is fairly adamant he'll continue to work.

"I've got a 48-year-old lung in me. I did the calculations one time on how old I would be, I took my actual age and my lung age and I came up with a new age in between," Holden laughed. "I don't feel like 74. Sooner or later I might (retire), I don't want to though."

Long Live Cowboys

"The value of these bronzes is in the eyes of the beholder," Gentry admits. "We know of one of these that was sold for \$7,500, which I think is fair market value today, but ultimately we believe they are all worth an estimated \$10,000."

In the eye of the beholder, H Holden is

a cowboy artist. His ability to capture the West far exceeds average, and the Finale Champions who are crowned with one of his masterpieces understand it's an award money can't buy.

In November Holden was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. His 2014 class including the likes of singer, songwriter Wanda Jackson and today's chart-topping country star Blake Shelton. It's the most significant award one can receive from the state and Harold T. Holden is deserved of every last tip of the hat, from Oklahoma to the World Series of Team Roping and beyond. Thank you, H. **WS**

Left: Harold and Edna Mae Holden at the 2007 Prix de West art show. "Ranch Raised" is an oil painting of Edna Mae riding Bob Moorhouse's horse Tex while branding at the Pitchfork Ranch.

Center: "Thank You Lord" was one of two pieces Holden had in his studio to complete when he became too sick to work. After a lung transplant in 2010 he was able to finish the piece that now sits outside their church in Enid, Okla.

Right: Holden's grandkids, Payton and Morgan, are his pride and joy. And 13-year-old Payton is ready to learn to rope from his grandpa.



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