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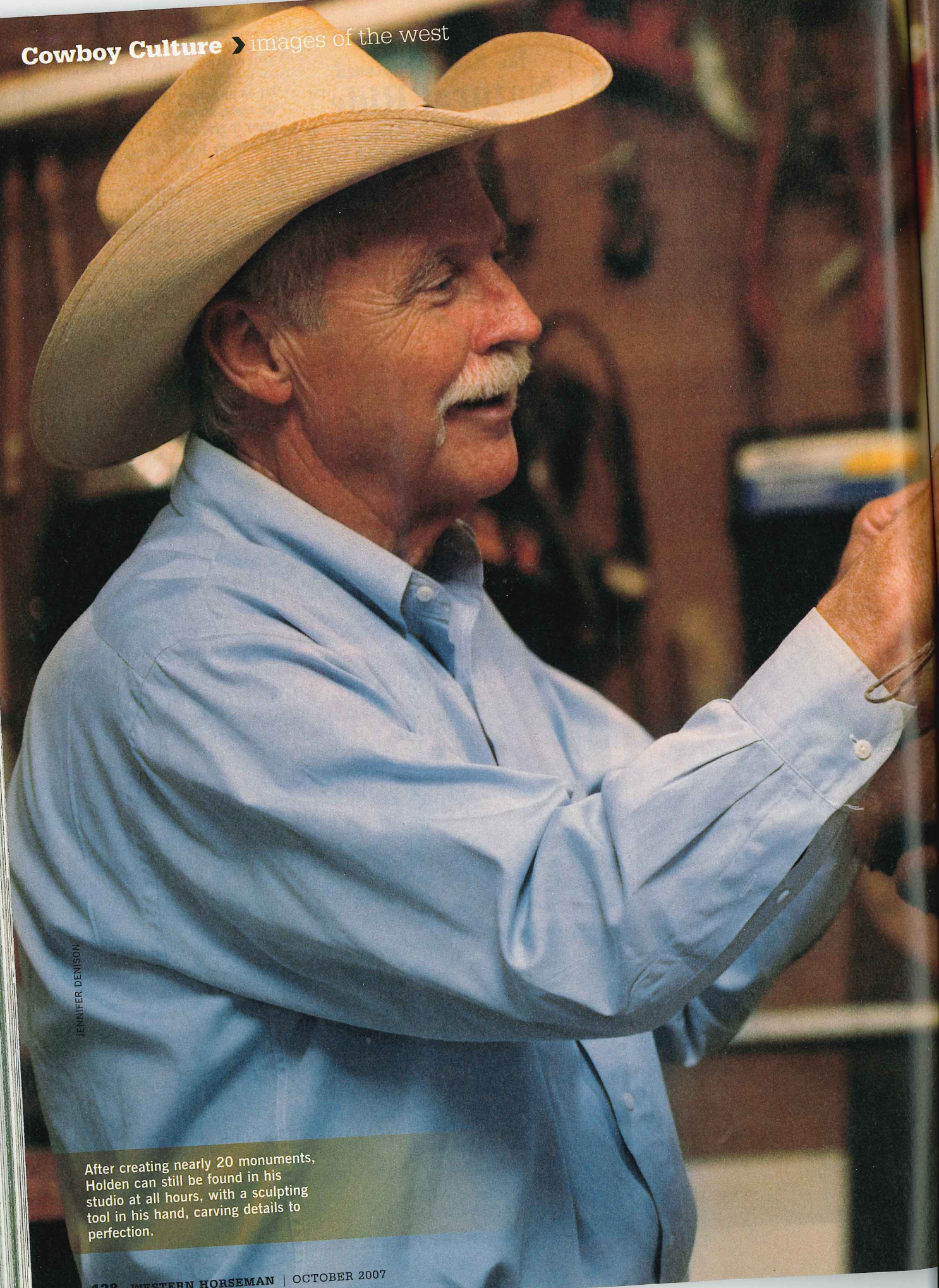
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JENNIFER DENISON

After creating nearly 20 monuments, Holden can still be found in his studio at all hours, with a sculpting tool in his hand, carving details to perfection.

LARGER than LIFE

Western artist Harold T. Holden's monuments commemorate the cowboy and pioneer spirit of his native Oklahoma.

STORY BY JENNIFER DENISON

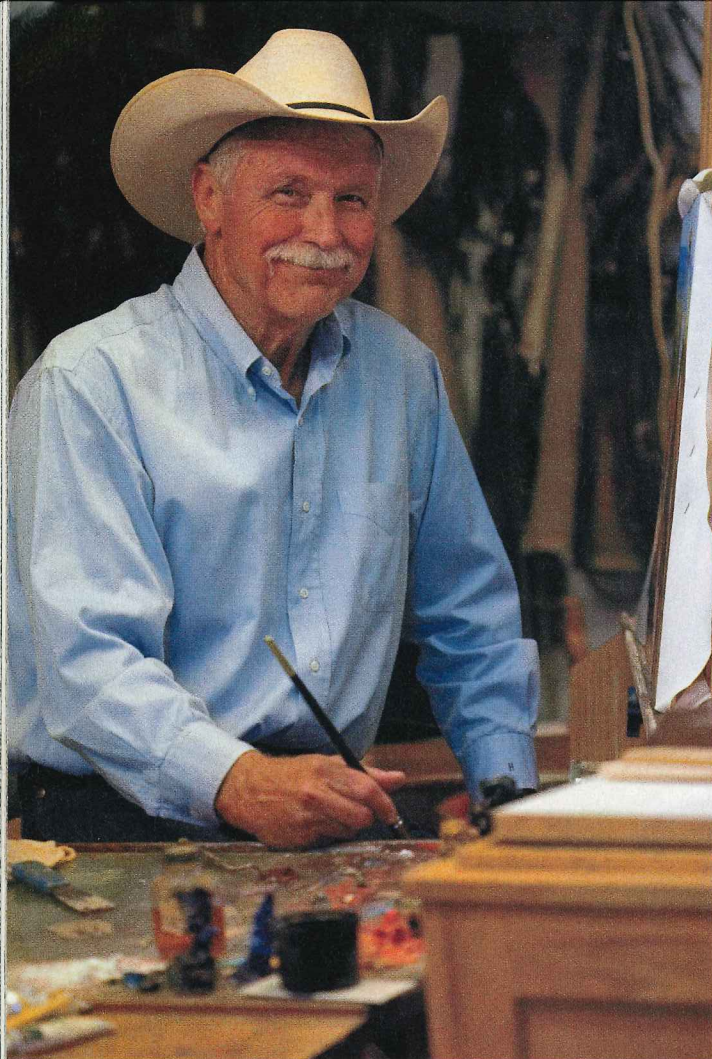
Triumph and tragedy.
Hostility and harmony.
Spirit and serenity.

OKLAHOMA'S 100-YEAR history is filled with such compelling contradictions. Defining moments, including the Cherokee Strip Land Run in 1893, the oil boom of the 1920s, the dust storms of the 1930s and the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in 1995, forever changed the state's landscape, as well as the lives of its inhabitants. But through conflict came peace, through division came unity, and through hardship emerged heroes.

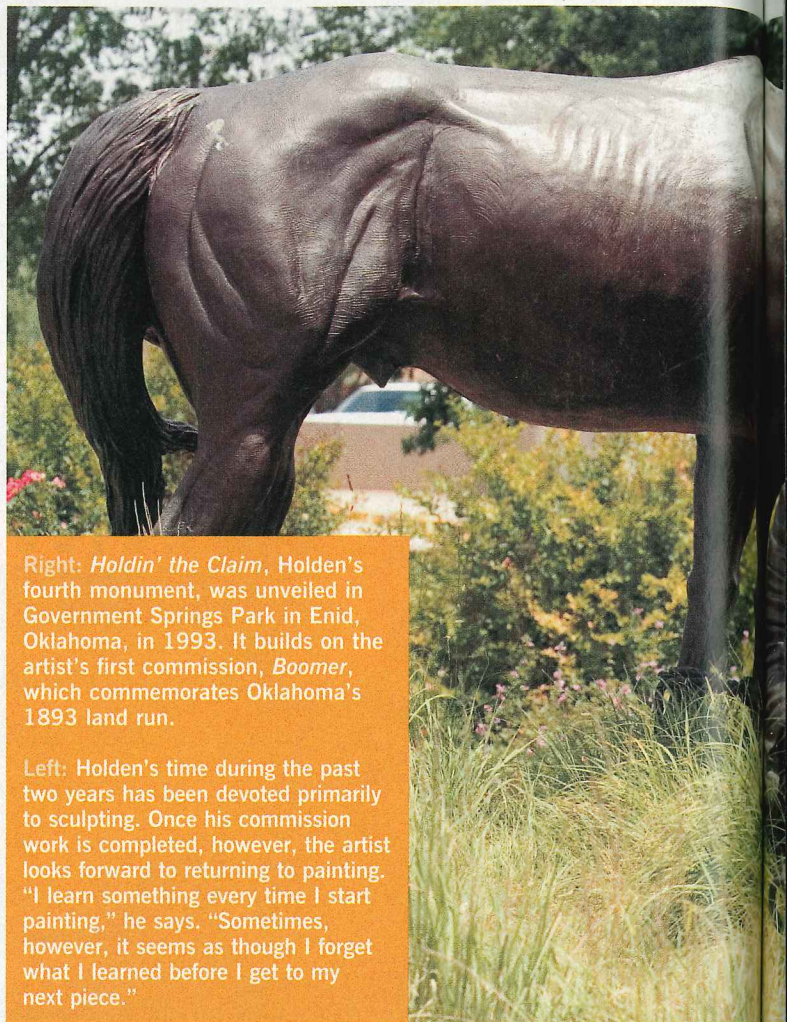
The everlasting stories of those tough people, as well as the romance of the West, are visually told in the paintings and sculptures of Harold Holden, the Prix de West artist and National Sculpture Society member nicknamed "H." His works can be found in galleries, museums and private

collections around the world, as well as in front of major buildings, in parks and on the streets of his native Oklahoma, and in Kansas and Texas.

As the Sooner State celebrates its centennial on November 16 of this year, a Quarter Horse bronze monument by Holden will be dedicated at State Fair Park in Oklahoma City, home of the American Quarter Horse Association World Championship Show since 1974. Placement of the statue there is especially appropriate because Holden is a man who prefers that breed's bloodlines. That so many of his works are seen throughout the state is also appropriate, as the artist himself embodies the strength, determination and moral fabric that make up the attributes on which his state was founded. >>



JENNIFER DENISON



Right: *Holdin' the Claim*, Holden's fourth monument, was unveiled in Government Springs Park in Enid, Oklahoma, in 1993. It builds on the artist's first commission, *Boomer*, which commemorates Oklahoma's 1893 land run.

Left: Holden's time during the past two years has been devoted primarily to sculpting. Once his commission work is completed, however, the artist looks forward to returning to painting. "I learn something every time I start painting," he says. "Sometimes, however, it seems as though I forget what I learned before I get to my next piece."

Cowboy Spirit

A father of two and now a grandfather, 67-year-old Holden epitomizes Oklahoma's values and history in various ways, according to Dr. John Ogle, a friend and civic philanthropist in Enid, the town in which Holden's gallery is located. Holden and his wife of 18 years, Edna Mae, reside outside of town on their ranch, where they have six horses and a small herd of Longhorn cattle.

Harold raised his son, Tim, and daughter, Shannon, with an appreciation for art, horses and the Western way of life. In fact, Shannon, her husband, Marty Meyer, and their two children, Payton, 6, and Morgan, 3, have a ranch outside of Enid, and Tim is an emerging artist living in Waco, Texas.

A third-generation Oklahoman, Holden comes from a line of inventive individuals. His great-grandfather, George Failing, pioneered the machine that is still used to make pop-bottle caps, while his grandfather, also named George Failing, engineered the portable drilling rig.

"They were creative guys," Holden says. "Back then, they had to be; the people were a different breed."

Holden's father, a polo player, was killed in a plane crash when Harold was only 6 years old. Growing up in Enid around his grandfather's farm, Holden's background centered on farming and roping. But young Harold still found time to draw cowboys, horses and Indians, and model them out of clay. And his grandfather supported his artistic ambitions.

After high school, Holden attended Oklahoma State University and later graduated from the Texas Academy of Art in Houston. In those days, few fine artists could make a living through painting or sculpting cowboys, so Holden worked as a commercial artist in Wichita, Kansas. He frequently returned to Enid, however, where he kept his horses at his grandfather's farm.

"One time, I was home and I picked up a copy of *Horseman* magazine," Harold recalls. "I looked at the drawings and thought I could do better, so I sold my

horses, went to Houston, where the magazine was based, and thought I'd walk in there and get a job at the magazine."

Despite his artistic abilities, things didn't go according to plan. The magazine didn't have any immediate openings, so Holden went to work designing feed bags until he landed the art-director position at *Horseman*. By day, Holden worked in publishing, and by night, he focused on painting scenes from cowboy life.

In the late 1960s, during the Vietnam War, Holden put his career and art aspirations aside to serve in the Navy. When he returned to the United States, he headed back to his hometown and pursued making a living as a fine artist.

Grand Commissions

Early in his career, Holden concentrated on painting, but he also dabbled in sculpting. Before long, the artist's three-dimensional work became recognized by Western-art collectors who acclaimed his originality and authenticity. In 1986, Oakwood National Bank, now owned by National



JENNIFER DENSON

Bank of Commerce, commissioned him to create a life-size bronze depicting the Cherokee Strip Land Run for the event's 100th anniversary.

"I hadn't done anything that big before," says Holden, "so I had my friend, Garland Weeks, come down and help me. He said he knew how to sculpt a monument.

"We experimented with different measurement systems, but we couldn't find one that gave us the proportions we needed. After about a month, we scrapped everything and another friend told us what we'd done wrong."

The final product, titled *Boomer*, was dedicated in 1986. The bronze shows a pioneer astride his horse and with a flag stake in his hand, galloping full-throttle during the 1893 land run. The statue was funded through the sale of 93 smaller replicas, and Holden's icon went on to become the official symbol of the Cherokee Strip, and was used on a 1993 U.S. Postal Service commemorative stamp, on Oklahoma officials' uniforms and as a highway marker.

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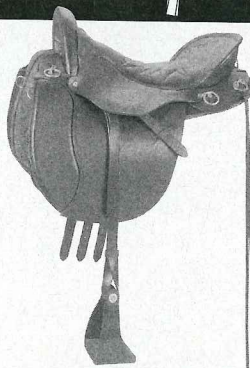
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STRATEGY

Beginning in 1987, Holden was selected to sculpt a series of bronzes to commemorate Oklahoma's heritage. Over the next 20 years, he was commissioned to create 19 life-size or larger monuments for various state and national organizations, including the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma

City, the Oklahoma Centennial Commission and the Ranching Heritage Center in Lubbock, Texas.

One of these commemorative bronzes is *Crossing the Red*, which was dedicated in 1991. This life-size monument stands in front of the county courthouse in Altus, Oklahoma, and pays homage to

the cattle drovers who passed through the area.

"It's one of my favorites," says Ken Fergeson, president of National Bank of Commerce. "People see that cowboy pushing Longhorns across the Red River and can't help but be reminded of Oklahoma's Western heritage."

The life-and-one-quarter-size bronze *Headin' to Market* towers in front of the stockyards in Oklahoma City. Dedicated in 2000, in honor of the stockyards' 90th year of operation, this was the first piece in the Oklahoma Centennial series. To create the massive monument, Holden built scaffolding in his converted-garage studio.

Other monuments include *The Rancher*, which stands at the Ranching Heritage Center in Lubbock, Texas; *We Will Remember*, a memorial at OSU in Stillwater that honors 10 men who died in a 2001 plane crash while returning from a basketball game in Colorado; *The Broncho*, which stands at the University of Central Oklahoma in Edmond; and *The Bison Spirit*, at Oklahoma Baptist University in Shawnee, which will be dedicated in November.

Holden says creating a monument requires more physical labor than cre-

Casting History

Here's a complete list of Harold "H" Holden's monuments, when they were dedicated, and where they stand.

Boomer, 1986, Enid, Oklahoma

The Rancher, 1987, Lubbock, Texas

Crossing the Red, 1991, Altus, Oklahoma

Holding the Claim, 1993, Enid

Keeper of the Plains, 1994, Enid

Vision Seeker, 1996, Altus and Enid

Corporal Noah Ness, 2000, Ness City, Kansas

Headin' to Market, 2000, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

We Will Remember, 2002, Stillwater, Oklahoma

Will Rogers, Oklahoma's Native Son, 2005, Oklahoma City

Monarch at Rest, 2005, Oklahoma City

The Broncho, 2006, Edmond, Oklahoma

Edward Gaylord, 2007, Oklahoma City

Cherokee Kid, 2007, Prix de West in Oklahoma City

The Homesteaders, 2007, Enid

The Bison Spirit, 2007, Shawnee, Oklahoma

The Pioneers, dedication TBA, Enid

World Champion, 2007, Oklahoma City

The Ranger, 2007, Alva, Oklahoma (additional dedications will be held in Enid and Woodward, Oklahoma, in 2008)



Boomer was Holden's first commissioned work, and went on to become the official symbol of Oklahoma's Cherokee Strip, as well as appearing on a commemorative U.S. postage stamp.

COURTESY H.T. HOLDEN

ativity, but it comes easier to him than does painting. He first creates a small model of the sculpture and gets it ready to be measured for enlargement or “pointed up.” After the model is scanned into a computer and the enlargement ratio is determined, the computer instructs a machine to chisel the sculpture’s shape into huge blocks of Styrofoam. From there, some sculptors allow the foundry to complete the project, but being a stickler for accuracy, Holden prefers to have the Styrofoam model delivered in pieces to

his studio for the final touches. The artist makes the undercuts, sands the piece, then sprays or paints a quarter-inch layer of oil-based clay onto the foam. Next, he chisels the details with a sculpting tool until he’s satisfied.

“Some guys let the foundry do all that, but if I had somebody else do some part of the process, I’d want to redo it because it’s not how I would’ve done it,” says Holden.

Such quality-control measures also allow Holden to ensure a horse’s bridle is

on correctly, or that a cowboy is swinging his loop or holding the reins properly, and other details that his cowboy critics would notice. Driven by deadlines, Holden says he knows a piece is finished when he runs out of time.

“I could work on a piece 10 times longer than I’m allowed and get it perfect, but I wouldn’t make any money,” he says. “When I total the time I spent making *Boomer*, I think I made only minimum wage.”

As Holden nears the end of his commitments for monuments, he hopes to transition back into painting, where he can stretch his imagination. Edna Mae notes that while her husband admits that more creativity goes into small pieces and paintings, he derives satisfaction that his grandchildren, and one day their grandchildren, will be able to look at one of his monuments and say, “My granddad, or great-granddad, created that.”

Man of Integrity

When it comes to his art, Holden is humble and never completely satisfied,



Above: In 2005, Holden’s life-and-one-quarter-size monument *Oklahoma’s Native Son*, depicting Will Rogers on Teddy, was dedicated at Will Rogers World Airport in Oklahoma City.

Right: *Headin’ to Market* was the first Oklahoma Centennial monument Holden completed. The life-and-one-quarter-size sculpture sits in the Oklahoma City stockyards.



JENNIFER DENISON

COURTESY H. T. HOLDEN

saying he's a "Jack of both painting and sculpture, but a master of neither." It's hard to drive through Enid without seeing one of Holden's monuments, but the artist says that in retrospect, he can always see things he'd do differently.

"Depending on the light, the time of day or the weather, the pieces can look so differently," Edna Mae says. "I think he'd redo every monument he's ever done, he's so critical, but each one is so unique and tells such a story."

To cowboys and collectors, Holden's work, whether it's a painting or three-dimensional piece, is known for representing detailed accuracy. The fact that he makes a point to know his subject matter well contributes to his authenticity. Described as a strong, silent, cowboy type, Holden is content roping, branding and helping other Oklahoma ranchers when he's not working in his studio. He also runs each piece by a personal panel of experts, which includes

his wife, who grew up ranching in Oklahoma.

"I think what sets his work apart from that of other artists is that he is trying to tell a story with each piece," Edna Mae says. "He doesn't try to do something because it's in vogue, but rather to capture a moment in a bronze or painting because it says something about the person or place depicted. And, normally, as subject matter he uses folks that he admires and knows."

Other qualities that friends, family and patrons admire in Holden are his generosity and honesty. According to Fergeson, sales for replicas of Holden's monuments have raised around \$300,000 for non-profit organizations.

An honorary lifetime member of the Mountain Oyster Club (an Arizona organization that hosts a respected contemporary Western art show in November), Holden has received numerous awards and honors in his 35-year career, including the Oklahoma's Governors Art Award in 2001, a lifetime achievement award from the Oklahoma Sculpture Society in 1997 and a Distinguished OSU Alumni Award in 2005. His work has been exhibited at such prestigious events as the Cheyenne Frontier Days Western Art Show & Sale in Cheyenne, Wyoming; the C.M. Russell Show in Great Falls, Montana; Masters of the American West in Los Angeles, California; the Peppertree Ranch Art Show in Santa Ynez, California; Prix de West Invitational in Oklahoma City; and Trap-pings of the American West in Flagstaff, Arizona.

"Every Holden bronze, be it a desktop or life size, tells a story about Oklahoma history," says Ogle. "From the chosen name to the art piece itself, the story comes to life. By reputation alone, H is in demand for the quality of his work by those who treasure the unique history of Oklahoma and want to see it preserved in an artistic manner. The fact that H and his family are native Oklahomans adds something special for those who collect his work." 🐾

Jennifer Denison is a Western Horseman senior editor. For more information on Holden, visit hholden.com. Send comments on this story to edit@westernhorseman.com.

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