

# History of NIRA

By BARNEY NELSON

*When the country boys from little Sul Ross arrived in San Francisco for the first intercollegiate rodeo finals, they were met with streets winding up, around, and down hills. Just finding the Cow Palace was a major accomplishment.*



• Members of the first Sul Ross championship team at the invitational finals in 1949 at the Cow Palace, holding their team trophy. From left are Buster Lindley, Harley May, the first NIRA all-around winner, Hank Finger, and Everett Turner, team sponsor.



• Former Sul Ross cowboys as they appear today—the photo was taken at the Dubble E Day Reunion in 1976. From left are Clay Cade, Gene Newman, Buster Lindley, Ross May, Harley May, James Dyer, and Don Smith.

"HEY, Chief, who was Hank Finger?"

"Who? What are you doing?" Everett E. Turner, Chairman of the Range Animal Science Department at Sul Ross State University in Alpine, Tex., was up from his chair and hovering over his secretary's shoulder.

"I'm trying to clean out all this old junk in the rodeo office. These boot boxes and sacks full of papers have been kicking around for years and I think it's time to either file it all or throw it out."

Everett Turner picked up some of the papers and leafed through them. The RAS department had first moved during Turner's 30-year tenure from one room in the basement of the Education Building to two rooms in the basement of the Science Building, and then moved again and again and finally into the new multi-million dollar agriculture complex it boasts today. Somehow, the old boxes and sacks had moved too.

The letters were dated 1947, '48 and '50. "They probably don't mean anything to anybody but me," said Turner, "but these letters were written by the boys who started college rodeo. Here is the original charter when the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association came into being, here is the first rodeo program from Texas A & M, and here is a letter from Hank Finger to Charlie Rankin asking if they might run Harley May for NIRA president."

Everett Turner began to talk and the letters and records in the old boot boxes came alive. In the fall of 1948, Sul Ross College held an invitational rodeo, as was the custom with schools who had enough cowboys to do the work. At this rodeo Hank Finger, a Sul Ross student, asked Turner if he could use one of the ag classrooms for a meeting with the cowboys from the various schools. Permission was granted and Hank, along with representatives from twelve colleges throughout Texas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Colorado talked about the need for some sort of organization for college rodeo cowboys.

It was the consensus of the group that they wanted a year-long point-award system, standardized rules, leadership, and responsibility on the part of its

members. Hank Finger was appointed constitutional committee chairman to draw up some ideas and plans into votable form. They would meet again at Dallas in two months to discuss the constitution. Hank Finger got busy.

A press release was sent to the *Bi-Weekly Rodeo News*, which ran a front page story on December 18, 1948, with the headline: "Colleges May Organize." Possibly through the clipping, Carl Garrison, manager of the San Francisco Cow Palace, heard of the college cowboys' plans for organization. He came to the meeting in Dallas and offered an invitational championship rodeo to start the new year with purpose. The rodeo would be held in conjunction with his Grand National Junior Livestock Exposition and would include any college with enough cowboys to field a six-man team.

With a newly adopted constitution and a national invitational finals coming up, the organization was off to a good start. Schools scrambled to find a team to send to San Francisco and for the transportation to get them there. During those post-war years, few students drove cars and many college professors didn't have a vehicle that could make the long trip to the coast of California and back home.

Hank Finger returned to little Sul Ross College and Turner called a special meeting to elect a team for the finals. Ralph Hines was nominated because he owned the best horse in the country; he knew it and declined, but offered to send his horse with the team. Bud Hawkins also declined and offered instead to loan his car. Hank Finger, Gene Newman, Bub Hull, Charles Hall, Buster Lindley, and Carrol Brumley would represent Sul Ross, with Turner tagging along as official sponsor.

One other cowboy who would figure heavily in the history didn't go to the meeting. He was a new student, virtually unknown to the other cowboys. However, Harley May had secretly hoped he would somehow be chosen to go with the team. When he found out he wasn't, he decided to quit college. Just before time to leave, one of the team members, Carrol Brumley, told Turner he couldn't go.

No time for another meeting,

and always being one to hang onto every student, Turner asked Harley May to take Brumley's place. Resentment flared within the Sul Ross rodeo club, and both Turner and May were met with icy stares and cold shoulders. What could a tall, skinny Army Air Corps veteran contribute to their team?

When the country boys arrived in San Francisco they were met with streets winding up, around, and down hills. Just finding the Cow Palace was a major accomplishment. Other schools fared no better; some arrived in jeeps and over-the-hill pickup trucks. The only team "in their element" was the sophisticated west-coast team of Cal Poly, led by highly touted Cotton Rosser. It seemed certain that they would walk away with the finals.

Harley May had drawn an impossible horse out of the Harry Rowell string. Rowell kept Sceneshifter blanketed and in his own stall, feeding him extra rations of oats for his always outstanding performance. He had flattened the best of the R.C.A. cowboys and these college boys would be easy pickin's. Poor unknown Harley May. First, nobody wanted him to be there, and now he'd drawn the top horse that was bound to plant him in the tanbark. Harley's only hope was to place a little in the steer wrestling since Slim Pickins, a friend of his who was clowning at the rodeo, had of-

fered to loan him his 'dogging team.

Everett Turner, in the meantime, had climbed to the top row of the huge coliseum with a book to read and was trying to look as inconspicuous as possible in his tweed suit and brogan shoes. He and the rest of the team were all tired of people asking them where in the world was Sul Ross? After all, they were competing against much larger schools that had hundreds of eligible cowboys to choose from. Some of those boys were competing on RCA cards, and some even had their own horses.

However, when the whistle blew and Harley May was somehow still sitting on top of old Sceneshifter, Everett Turner came bounding down the coliseum steps to a front row seat. By the time it was over and little Sul Ross had won the team trophy with 345 points, Turner was right down behind the chutes with the team. The little professor never again wore anything but cowboy boots.

Harley May ended up all-around cowboy, winning the bareback riding, bull riding, and placing in the wild cow milking and saddle bronc riding for 225 points. Ironically, he didn't come close in the steer wrestling, but the home troops forgave Turner for putting Harley on the team.

Cal Poly was a strong second at the first finals with 300 points, 165 scored by Cotton Rosser; third



• Charlie Rankin (left) accepts a commemorative award from NIRA Executive Secretary Sonny Sikes, recognizing Charlie's contributions to the association. Charlie was the first NIRA president, and first NIRA executive secretary.

place went to the University of Wyoming with 235 points, 155 of which were scored during some outstanding bronc rides turned in by Dale Stiles. Event winners included: Harley May (SR), bull riding and bareback riding; Dale Stiles (U. of Wyo.), saddle bronc riding; Eldon Dudley (Okla. A & M), calf roping; Tom Hadley (N. M. A & M), steer wrestling; and Bob Suake (Montana State) wild cow milking (see *The Western Horseman* — June 1949).

After the finals, the representatives from each school traveled to Denver for final plans and election of officers for the new NIRA. Hank Finger was due to graduate, and he recommended Charlie Rankin for president since Charlie had worked diligently to help form the NIRA constitution and lay the initial ground work. Charlie was elected, and the Texas A & M bareback rider took the reins of the new organization.

Other officers elected included: Joe Forney (Colorado A & M) vice-president; Mrs. Paul Kramer (College Station, Tex.) secretary-treasurer; and Evelyn Bruce (Sul Ross) national publicity director. The NIRA hadn't yet formed regions, but J.H. Foss of Washington State, Perry Clay of the University of Wyoming, and Dick Kelley of New Mexico A & M were elected to represent their respective areas of the Pacific northwest, Rocky Mountain states, and the south.

Hank Finger became a graduate assistant teacher at Sul Ross, and co-sponsored the rodeo club with Turner. Hank was also chosen as the Alpine Chamber of Commerce director. Correspondence flowed heavily between he and Charlie Rankin regarding progress and changes in the NIRA. The R.C.A. sanctioned NIRA membership of their members as long as NIRA members did not try to belong to both the R.C.A. and amateur associations. The point awards were set up by Rankin and schools passed rigid controls before being approved for a rodeo.

When the first successful year ended, Hank Finger and Charlie Rankin were wringing their hands for a replacement for Rankin. He would be graduating and there was no young recruit standing in the wings to take over the big responsibility of the fledgling NIRA.



• The historical display case at the NIRA Cowboy Hall of Fame includes photos, early copies of the *Riggin'* newsletter, and the original charter of the NIRA.

As election time drew near, they finally settled on the Sul Ross cowboy who was dominating college rodeo, Harley May. With the support of Rankin and Finger, May was a shoo-in as second president of the NIRA. At the same meeting, Rankin was hired as executive director and moved his office and files to the Holland Hotel in Alpine with Harley and Hank.

Harley needed to do little more than put his feet up and listen



• Jo Gregory with the saddle she won as the NIRA's first all-around cowgirl at the college finals in Fort Worth in 1951. Today Jo is a part-time school teacher at Midland, Texas.

Photo by James Cathey

carefully to experienced Finger and Rankin. But being dissatisfied with time on his hands, Harley got together with another Sul Ross student (who today sponsors the NMSU rodeo team), Jack "Red" Ruttle, and put together a NIRA news magazine called *The Riggin'*. This was published every six months, giving information on the NIRA, standings, rodeo results, and advertising for businesses who supported the college cowboys.

Representatives in each member college sold the magazine for a cut of the profit and soon the fame of the NIRA was spreading nationally. An article appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* and various other national publications and the base became stronger.

About the time the home office in Alpine was running smoothly, Hank Finger was killed in a car accident. Before Charlie Rankin and Harley May could divide Hank's duties, the office received word that Charlie had been recalled to active duty and would be shipped out to Korea. Harley May never again had time to put his feet up, and the progress made by the NIRA during the rest of his term showed the skeptical college cowboys that the NIRA was bigger than any one man, or any two. It would survive and flourish.

Bill Guest from Hardin-Simmons was elected to serve as the next NIRA president, and the office was moved to Abilene, Texas. Harley May was graduating, and the year's business, along with Hank's files and Charlie's files, were quietly dumped into sacks and boot boxes. Harley May would go on to three world championship steer wrestling titles in the R.C.A., several near misses as the R.C.A. all-around cowboy, and serve as a director, then president of that organization. His success gave the college association a much needed image boost with the professionals.

Yes, the boot boxes had a story to tell. During the next months the boxes and sacks were sorted and given their own shining file cabinets. Photographs were put into plastic sleeves to avoid further deterioration, and the word was spread. Sonny Sikes, current NIRA executive director,

said the NIRA thought the early records of the association were either destroyed or lost, and some of the records they did have, even concerning world champion teams, were incomplete.

During these same months, Everett Turner suffered a heart attack and prepared for retirement. Unwilling to let the passing of a Sul Ross cornerstone go unnoticed, his secretary again dug into the old files and pulled out names and addresses of the early rodeo team members who Turner coached to three national championships in a row. A surprise reunion was set for the summer of 1976 (see WH, February 1977) and with most of the original Sul Ross team members in attendance, Sul Ross President Bob Richardson announced his intention to ask the NIRA board for permission to establish a NIRA Cowboy Hall of Fame at Sul Ross.

Permission was granted during the winter board meeting in December, and by January, displays were already under construction. Sul Ross students furnished labor, and museum curator Ken Perry furnished expertise. The second Sul Ross cowboy reunion was set for July 21, 1977, and that date was set aside for preliminary display of some of the old materials. Sonny Sikes would come, as well as those first members of the Sul Ross rodeo team. Tee Knox would be there, who represented New Mexico A & M at the original meeting with Hank Finger. He later married Jo Gregory, a Sul Ross cowgirl who became the NIRA's first all-around cowgirl. But whatever happened to Charlie Rankin?

Letters were mailed to all last known addresses, all returned with various sterile comments by the U.S. Post Office. Miraculously, one day the phone rang in the RAS office at Sul Ross and a man's voice said calmly, "Hello, I'm Charlie Rankin, I hear you're looking for me?" Of course he wouldn't miss it for the world, and he would ship off a footlocker full of stuff for the Hall of Fame that very week.

Today the Hall of Fame houses a large United States map sawed out of several thicknesses of wood and painted into regions with each member school's name lettered in place. Suspended from it are

scenes depicting the progress of rodeo. Another case depicts the history of the NIRA with a mannequin reading the headlines on that December 1948 newspaper. The mannequin wears a Dobbs 20 hat bought by Charlie Rankin at the first national finals in San Francisco. Scattered throughout the case are other artifacts of the historical beginning.

The girl's event case features a large barrel painted red, white, and blue, breakaway rope, quirt, bat, and Jo Gregory Knox's 1951 NIRA all-around cowgirl belt buckle. Photos in the display show the cowgirl's view of rodeo. In the early beginnings, girls' events varied from rodeo to rodeo, but usually they included wild cow milking, goat-tying, pole bending, or some form of barrel racing. Modern barrel racers would be upset to find the barrels set in a line for figure-eight barrel racing one week and cloverleaf the next, a common practice during the early '50s.

The men's timed-event case was completed with the donation of Sonny Sikes' 1953 world champion college calf roping saddle. Charlie Rankin's adhesive tape-wrapped bareback rigging, spurs, and rigging bag, as well as old Tony Lama boots used by Harley May are included in the rough stock case. This display has an oil painted arena scene background with "chutes" about to open across the front.

Four large trophy plaques line one wall which were donated by the SR Rodeo Club. Each plaque contains 50 brass plates engraved to date with the national champions. The plaques were presented in June 1977 at the College National Finals Rodeo, and will be engraved each year with the names of the winning men's and women's team, and all-around champs.

Several pieces of rodeo art have been donated, and large photographs of the NIRA's first all-around winners, Harley May and Jo Gregory, also hang in the hall. Displays are currently being housed in the RAS complex, with the ultimate goal being a new building and staff for the NIRA Cowboy Hall of Fame.

The old boot boxes have come a long way in two years. 🐾