

88 | SUNDAY, MARCH 10, 2024 | THE DESERT SUN

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

From Hollywood to the desert, Montie Montana roped 'em in

Tracy Conrad
Special to The Desert Sun | USA TODAY NETWORK

The announcer at the Buck Jones Wild West show in 1929 couldn't remember Owen Harlan Mickel's name, so he called him "Montie the Montana Kid." The appellation stuck. • Montana learned roping and riding on his parents' ranch. He "was raised on it and rode in the roundups," appearing in his first rodeo at age 15. He tried out for the Wild West show on Jones' 10-acre ranch in the San Fernando Valley where Vanowen and Lankershim are now. He was accepted as a trick roper.

In the 1930s there was an abiding fascination with the history of the west and all things cowboy, especially riding and roping. Hollywood was recruiting for western movies from the ranks of real cowboys. Writing in 1975 upon the celebration in his namesake state of his accomplishments Nancy Anderson noted, "It was almost inevitable that a good-looking kid like Montie who could perform flashy rope tricks would become a film star."

Montana recalled: "Those early cowboy stars were not only real cowboys, in some cases they were rodeo champions. Hoot Gibson was world champion bronc rider in 1924 before he came to Hollywood and got to be a star. And Ken Maynard was a trick rider with the Ringling Circus. Leo Carillo was an expert rider, too. Roy Rogers wasn't a cowboy, but he learned to ride ... some actors never do learn to ride right, though ... when you are watching Joel McCrea or John Wayne in a movie, notice how they handle their horses. They treat them easily, gently without jerking, and they are two of the best horsemen in pictures."

Montana's first starring movie was called "Circle of Death." Yakima Canutt, who taught John Wayne to do stunts, played the second lead. "They had a double for me," Montana remembered, "but we let the double watch while Yak and I did the stunts."

Besides Hollywood, he was a regular on the traveling rodeo circuit. It's hard to imagine now how ubiquitous western shows were and the degree of fascination the entire country had with cowboys and the west.

Montana was the real thing, a bona fide cowboy. His skills on a horse and with a rope earned him many uncredited roles doing stunts and tricks in the early days of Hollywood. Working with Will Rogers, Hopalong Cassidy, Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, Joel McCrea and John Wayne, he appeared in some 60 movies and TV shows during his long career.

According to Anderson, when his namesake state honored Montana in 1975, "it was not only for the longevity of his career but because of his unique contribution to western-style showmanship." The state issued a special silver half-dollar engraved with his profile for the occasion.

Montana met cowboy Frank Bogert in 1927 at a Lancaster Rodeo. Montana was roping and doing trick riding and Bogert was doing a whip act and riding bulls. They struck up a close friendship.

Montana often joked: "There's nothing I wouldn't do for Frank, and there's nothing he wouldn't do for me. So, after (70) years we have done nothing for each other." But it wasn't true.

Bogert sized up his friend's amazing career, noting Montana "won so many awards it would be impossible to list them all. He has been inducted to the Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma and the Hall of Fame of Professional Cowboys Association in Colorado. He won the Golden Book Award in Hollywood. ... He was honored by the Sioux Sinaiboine and made a member of their tribe. He was made an honorary member of Rancheros Visitadores and presented with a silver belt buckle for putting on the rodeo for 40 years. He was captain of the Los Angeles Mounted Poise. In 1962, he ran the Sheriff's Rodeo in the Los Angeles Coliseum."

Bogert was the announcer, and with 104,000 people in attendance it was the biggest rodeo ever held. Lucille Ball was the queen of the rodeo and Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin and Sammy Davis Jr. performed.

In the late 1940s, Montana had been hired by the Weber Bread Company. Bogert explained: "He would take his four pinto horses and stage-coach to schools all over Southern California. He entertained over 800,000 children." He was the most famous roper in the country. For decades, schoolchildren remembered those visits.

Montana had a "glittery style that dazzled rodeo and parade watchers across the country," as noted in the Los Angeles Times. He rode in the Pasadena New Year's Day parades for countless years, wearing "a cream-colored shirt with rhinestone-studded roses on the front and red, white and blue sequins forming two American flags on the back." The Times quoted him as saying, "They always told me if I didn't have talent, I should wear a fancy shirt and ride a fast horse."

But Montana did have exceptional talent. He worked in every rodeo and parade in Palm Springs for decades. Bogert noted that many Mexican charros might be better ropers, but no one was a better showman than Montana. Los Charros, an organization of riders steeped in tradition originally chartered in Mexico, visited Palm Springs in 1951 and were entertained and hosted by Montana and Bogert, who led the ride from Rogers Stables to Thunderbird Country Club for lunch. Together the two friends would ride further afield in Mexico, Hawaii and on the Navajo Indian Reservation.

The Desert Sun in June 1998 wrote: "When Montie Montana rode into the sunset for the last time, Bogert lost his best friend of 71 years. Bogert, 88, delivered the eulogy at Montana's services. ... The two young cowpokes first met as teenagers working a rodeo in Lancaster. In their early 20s, both worked in various Palm Springs stables. Montana went on to become the roping cowboy star of Saturday matinees. Bogert went on to become Mr. Palm Springs, with the town in his reins as twice-mayor."

Famous cowboy Gene Autry said, "I was proud to call Montie Montana my friend. He was a fine cowboy, a good man and undoubtedly the greatest trick roper of his time."

By then Montana had been part of American consciousness for most of the 20th century. To the chagrin of the Secret Service, in 1953 he lassoed President Eisenhower at his inauguration. The moment was broadcast all over the world. Montana joked: "I was lucky the Secret Service didn't ventilate me." Eisenhower laughed and enjoyed the silliness. It made for a great show.

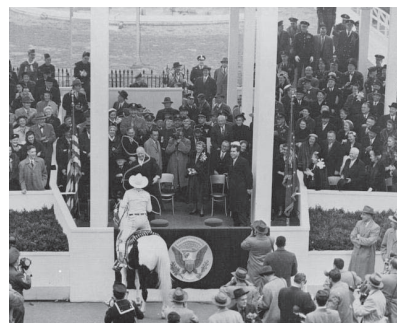
Tracy Conrad is president of the Palm Springs Historical Society. The Thanks for the Memories column appears Sundays in The Desert Sun. Write to her at pshstracy@gmail.com.



Montie Montana rides his horse into the El Mirador Hotel in Palm Springs. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Montana jumps through a hoop on horseback.



Montana lassos President Eisenhower during the inauguration in 1953.