

Helena Trail Riders (Est. 1939)
2014 Legacy Inductee District 8
Montana Cowboy Hall of Fame & Western Heritage Center

The Helena Trail Riders Saddle Club celebrated their 75th anniversary. As part of its diamond celebration, the organization held an Open House at the HTR Clubhouse at the Lewis and Clark Fairgrounds, where several of the old-time past presidents joined the group and reminisced about their trail riding days. Following is a brief historical account of the beginnings of the Helena Trail Riders and the sport of O-Mok-See, and a few team highlights.

“A lot of people around here like riding” – They still do, and HTR holds several trail rides yearly.

Considered the oldest saddle club in the state, the HTR was first organized in 1939. One of its founders was renowned Montana Highway Department artist Irvin “Shorty” Shope, who served as the club’s first president for three terms, from 1939-41.

Initially, it was an exclusive “membership by invitation only” organization, consisting of 25 members. But in 1940, the club opened up membership to the public. Eventually, the outfit grew from 25 to a high of 250 members. The club is a family oriented saddle club, open to everyone, with riders from 3 to 80 plus taking part in all club events.

The first HTR scrapbook, dated 1939-1954, states, “A few horse lovers had been riding in the foothills near Helena for some time, but...the first time they rode as a group was during Helena’s (1939) Diamond Jubilee Celebration. “Several riders were riding up and down Last Chance Gulch during the festivities (when) Mr. (George) Heinecke suggested the group take to the hills for a picnic.” The scrapbook noted this ride as the first of many get-togethers, before they started meeting in each others homes for other activities.

A 1940 entry in the scrapbook notes, “The Helena Trail Riders association...came into being because there are a lot of people around here who like riding. There aren’t any by-laws and the membership fee is \$1 per year. (We don’t know whether the treasurer buys the liniment for new members.)”

The club’s longest journey of the year was a 40-mile ride into the McClellan Creek country.

In 1941, several local members took part in the Great Falls Saddle Club’s 100-mile ride from Ft. Logan to Great Falls. Prizes were awarded to riders “whose horses finished in the best condition,” with HTR members Joe Gable and Mrs. E.J. DeSchamps both placing fourth in their respective divisions.

Bob Pennington, HTR president (1968), who also served as president of American Federal Bank, was an active trail ride member for about 15 years. “I enjoyed lots of trail rides with the club, but I think probably my highlight came in 1978, when I placed third in the National O-Mok-See meet in the cowhide race,” Pennington recalled. “Most folks laid down on their stomachs in that race, but I always stood up to ride the cowhide.”

Roy Pace, HTR president (1972-74) was an active member of HTR for over 25 years, and said his favorite memories were the annual Blackfoot City rides. “We made the 15 mile ride on the old stagecoach road to Blackfoot City 17 years in a row, from 1976-92,” related Pace, whose day job for 28 years was sports editor of the Independent Record. “It was an old mining town, and we always camped at the old town site. “The terrace gardens the Chinese built were still there, and we’d bring in a small western band and have dances around the campfire at night.”

Alex Swaney was one of the club’s most colorful presidents (1945-46). Raised on a ranch, he was a lifelong horseman, a U.S. Cavalry veteran and an experienced stockman. Swaney served with General Wainwright’s cavalry on the Mexican border in 1916, before a stint helping ranchers move cattle as an Army captain during World War I. This was followed by his consular service in China, where Swaney raced Mongolian ponies.

“Mike” Michaelson and “Drill Mistress” Maradel Frasier LaFrance, both 92, are two of HTR’s oldest surviving members.

Birthplace of O-Mok-See

Originally a trail riding club, HTR soon branched out into the field of competitive “pattern horse” racing events. The initial contests were called “Field Days” (or sometimes Gymkhana), with the first competition taking place in 1940 at the State (now Lewis and Clark) Fairgrounds. Two of the more intriguing exhibitions were the trick roping by Ed Lamb, and young Jane Hale standing on her head while riding her steed.

In 1944, the Helena Trail Riders were seeking a Native American name for their annual contests, and requested the help of the Blackfeet Agency in Browning. Alex Grant Swaney (HTR president, 1945-46) received a letter from agency superintendant F.H. McBride and John Ewers, curator of the Plains Indian Museum, suggesting the term “o-mak-see-pass-can.” Translated from the Blackfeet meaning “riding big dance,” it was a storied Indian ceremony riders performed before setting out on a foray. The Helena Trail Riders shortened the term to “O-Mok-See,” which was eventually adopted nation-wide.

Inaugural State O-Mok-See

When the inaugural Montana Saddle Club Association (MSCA) State O-Mok-See was held in 1948, it took place in the Capital City, at the Fairgrounds. The Helena Trail Riders finished runner-up in the 12-team field, with 650 points, behind champion Cut Banks’ 730.

Two-time National Champions

The Helena Trail Riders have captured 17 State O-Mok-See championships, and two National titles. At the very first NSCA meet in 1966, HTR handily outdistanced the Billings Saddle Club by 270 points for the championship, 570-300. The Helena Trail Riders’ second NSCA crown, in 1968, was a much closer affair, edging the Burns Creek Riders of Savage, Mont., by a mere 10 points, 470-460. Capital City Riders garnered three titles at the NSCA meet in 1978 at the Lewis and Clark Fairgrounds. Helena was the site of the national meet in 1998, and hopes to garner the Fiftieth Annual NSCA Championship show in 2015.

Community Service:

The HTR was also responsible for another first, albeit outside of competition, when they organized the area’s initial search and rescue team in Lewis and Clark County.

HTR has been an on-site caretaker of the Lewis and Clark Fairgrounds since August of 1944. Each year the club works with the Fairgrounds staff by providing funding and manpower to improve and maintain the West Arena area and the building that houses both the concession stand and announcer’s booth.

The club has also provided manpower to work with other groups plus the U.S. Forest Service to construct, maintain and improve the Continental Divide Trail plus other area trails in the Lincoln-Helena-Butte-Anaconda area.

In previous years, HTR donated to help finance preliminary work on the 1977 National High School Rodeo held in Helena, donated to the Helena Riding Academy for the handicapped to help them get started and has sponsored several fund-raising rides to help the American Lung Association of Montana and St. Jude Children’s Hospital. HTR has also made several contributions to the Lewis and Clark Fairgrounds for playground equipment and other improvements, including a donation for the new bathroom building.

Resources: www.helenatrailriders.org

Independent Record - Reporter Curt Synness

Helena Trail Riders History Brochure – Roy Pace