

Introducing 2012 Montana Cowboy Hall of Fame Inductee...

Johnny France

Since Johnny France was a young boy, he has been part of our Montana ranching heritage. From his formative years in the 1940s and 50s, he has lived a life that symbolizes the values that are so important to our traditional way of life in this western state. From time he was a young boy, Johnny pursued his western life on ranches and in the rodeo arena to excel in ranching activities and this rodeo world that we all hold so dear. When time and injuries slowed him down, he moved on to pursue a career in law enforcement as a well-known sheriff who championed right over wrong while showcasing a respect for the law. Ever since he was a young cowboy, he has served as an example of what is great about agricultural and ranching way of life. Winning Montana Rodeo Association titles and being honored in 2010 as the grand marshal of the Ennis Rodeo and parade are just a few of the accomplishments that have been recognized as are part of his exciting and rewarding life. He is a living legacy that testifies to the solid character and hard work of our ranching world. The public television documentaries and printed stories about Johnny only support this outstanding legacy that serves as an example for future generations.

A Short History written by Johnny: After my mother died and I was orphaned at five, I came to Montana from Fort Land, Oregon to live with my uncle Joe France in 1945. I was five years old, and at that point, I was exposed to true Montana ranch life. I went to school in the one-room school at Cherry Creek. You had to ford the Madison River each day to get to school. My uncle, a bucking horse rider, put me on a bareback horse at age 12. By the time I was 17, I was a contestant at weekend rodeos throughout Montana, Wyoming and Idaho. By the time I was 12, I began working for a large cattle company where I ran wild horses, worked cattle and broke horses to ride. Each winter, I lived with Betsy and Forrest Shirley on their ranch near Norris. By then, they had become my foster parents.

While living there, I attended and graduated from Harrison High School. When I was 17 and junior in high school, I was offered new job wrangling dudes for the Elkhorn Guest Ranch on the Gallatin River. While there I met a fellow employee - a girl named Sue who has been the love of my life. In 1959, she married me. Sue and I have been married for 51 years and have three children named, Kathy, JT and Todd. That winter, I turned to breaking horses and punching cows for Madison County ranchers. Those outfits included the CA and the Flying D as well as other well known ranches. My weekends were devoted to riding bucking horses. Rodeos were my focus on weekends .

While living in Dillon with my wife and daughter, Kathy where I broke and trained race horses for Chuck Nichols. I became interested in continuing my education and attended Western Montana College where I competed on the college rodeo team. In 1963, I became a city police officer in Dillon. Besides college rodeos, I frequently entered other rodeos in Montana. I was runner up in the Montana Rodeo Association bareback riding competition in 1963 and 1964. In 1964, I felt a need to travel to more rodeos so I became a pilot, purchased my own plane and became a flying rodeo cowboy. I started a new event, steer wrestling, which made me a four event man. Those events included bareback and broncs, bull riding and steer wrestling. This schedule helped me to win the all-around championships in 1965 and 1966. In 1967 I was the bareback riding champion. An injury sidelined me for a year and I moved to Ennis in 1971 as a deputy sheriff for Madison county. I quit competing but I entered the Ennis rodeo 1973 where I won the all around champion buckle.

I was elected sheriff in 1980. In 1985, I captured the mountain men and wrote a book about the experience titled "Incident at Big Sky." This has become required reading in a number of schools all over the country. I retired from law enforcement work in 1986, but I always have had some horse of my own. As a matter of fact, I can't remember when I didn't have a horse, a dog or a wife. In my travels, I have encountered the popularity of cowboy poetry. I have been become involved in some public performances. I was injured in a horse accident 2002 when a saddle horse and I didn't agree. An important honor for me was to be named as the Grand Marshal of the 2010 Fourth of July Rodeo in Ennis. Now I enjoy a more subtle life with fishing, golfing and acting my age but horses are still a big part of my life whatever I do.