

Norma Ashby at her third Russell Auction, wearing her first auction cowboy hat in 1971 and, at right, her third hat before the 38th auction.



The Russell Auction is born

The March Face of Montana is the living, walking, talking, interactive history lesson, founding mother, archivist and chief promoter of the C.M. Russell Auction.

She's Norma Ashby and she wears the auction like a museum. Literally.

Why the scribbled-on hat?
It's signed by celebrities and artists from the auction. There's Country Charley Pride. That's Bob Scriber. It's got all the pins on it from the days when we did a different auction pin every year. I have three hats.

And the drawn-on vest?
All the honored artists have drawn something on this vest. Here's Bev Doolittle. She did a Quick Draw painting that sold for \$20,000 in 1993.

That's a work of art, isn't it?
Sure is. Someday I'm going to donate the vest and hats to the Russell Museum. And the scrapbooks.

Scrapbooks?
I've kept one for every year of the auction.
All 38 auctions. Ashby is a very recognizable face of Montana, a celeb in her own right as the long-time host

of the "Today in Montana" television show in which she interviewed celebrities of all stripes from Audie Murphy to Bob Hope to Chet Huntley to Zimmerman, Dan, a Montana rancher.

What's this little book?
That's the first program from the first auction in 1969. It had eight pages for the 77 pieces of art in the auction. It went for a dollar. Today's program is more than 200 pages in full color with more than 300 pieces of art. It sells for \$50.

What about that first auction?
It almost didn't happen. The Ad Club used to run a raffle as a fund-raiser with a new Cadillac as the prize. But Montana's attorney general outlawed the raffle. So we needed a new project.

Why an auction?
I went to an estate auction in Geraldine and it was thrilling, just an electric atmosphere. I thought it'd be great for Ad Club.

How'd the board react?
Like I was nuts. They said, "Who wants to honor a western artist?"

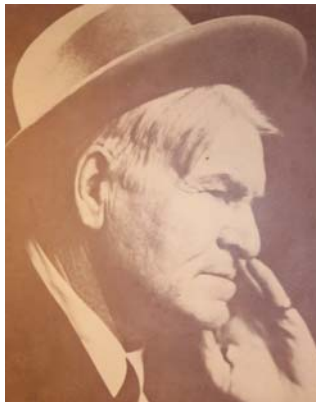
I pitched it a second time as an auction featuring both Russell and emerging west-

ern artists. The second time, they said yes, they'd try it just once.

So the auction was born.
Well, it was approved, but then we had to do it, and I had no clue how to put an auction together.

So what was your first step?
Well, we knew we first needed an auctioneer. The best one around was Jack Raty who did farm and ranch auctions. We met him at a restaurant and asked him to demonstrate what he could do. We pushed the sugar bowl to him and told him, "Sell us this sugar bowl." He went into his auctioneer's chant and did more than sell the sugar bowl — he earned a job as the Russell auctioneer for 17 years.

And now 38 years later?
We are still doing the auction and still looking for new artists. We have helped many get their art careers underway.



The first C.M. Russell Auction program was eight pages and a cover.



A detail of Norma Ashby's third auction hat.



The Bev Doolittle drawing and signature on Norma's vest from the 1993 auction.