In 1939, John W. Gill, a student-athlete who went on to become a coach and administrator at the University, won the competition to change the school's nickname from the Hilltoppers to the Broncos. Gill won $10 for his entry and donated it to Waldo Stadium. This Bronco was hand drawn and used in the announcement for the new mascot.
In 1940, just one year after the Hilltoppers had become the Broncos, the second Bronco logo, and first official logo, was adopted. Hand drawn by an artist of the LG. Balfour Company, an official school ring with the same image was adopted in the same year. Inspiration came from Wyoming state license plates; the artist had to secure special permission to use the likeness.
While the WMU mascot had been known as the Bronco since 1939, the school underwent many changes between 1940 and 1980. In 1947, Western joined the Mid-American Conference, and in 1957 officially transitioned from Western Michigan College to Western Michigan University, prompting a new fight song, still in use today.