RANCH RODEOS

by
Jim Hoy

Starting in 1904 Garden City, Kansas, held an annual frontier celebration called the Cattlemen's Carnival that featured as its major attraction a professional rodeo that at one time ranked behind only the Pendleton Roundup and the Cheyenne Frontier Days as the largest in the country. A spectator attending a single performance of that rodeo could have seen up to a dozen contest events, while over the twenty-plus years of its initial run the Cattlemen's Carnival rodeo featured some twenty different contest events, many of them having separate sections for both men and women competitors. Six of the seven standard events at a modern rodeo–saddle bronc riding, bareback bronc riding, bulldogging, calf roping, steer riding, and steer roping–were held at Garden City, and there were, in addition, several contests that are sometimes found as specialty events at a modern rodeo–wild cow milking, a wild horse race, and a chuckwagon race. Then there were a number of racing events that today would most likely be found at a saddle club playday or a showdeo–a hat race, a pick-up race, a rope-horse race, and relay races of varying types. Finally, Garden City had some events not current today–a potato race, a wild mule race, and a calf-branding contest. Events such as trick roping, trick riding, and Roman riding, now featured strictly as exhibitions, were contest events at Garden City, as they were at many other professional rodeos throughout the country at that time. In fact, it was not uncommon to find a dozen or more contest events at rodeos during the first part of the twentieth century.

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As rodeo became more standardized, however, with official world championships being awarded beginning in 1929 and with the organization of the rodeo cowboy's union, the Cowboy's Turtle Association, in 1936, several changes occurred to streamline the contests and thus pave the way for the development of rodeo as a sport rather than as an exhibition of cowboy folk games. Many of the race events were dropped from the standard program, leaving behind primarily the six events noted above along with team roping, which are today the seven events in which world championships are awarded. By the early 1940s, thanks to the major influence of Gene Autry in rodeo production (as shown by Mary Lou LeCompte), women's competition in rough-stock riding, roping, and bulldogging was eliminated, to be replaced after the war with today's cloverleaf barrel race, which also recognizes a world champion. Along with this streamlining and standardization came a concomitant emphasis on rodeo as a sport and an attempt to elevate it beyond its earlier connections with carnivals and circus side shows.

This attempt has been, in large part, successful, and although rodeo still does not have the national media attention and acceptance of such mainstream sports as football or basketball or golf (nor does it provide the financial rewards of those sports, although six-figure annual winnings are no longer unheard of for rodeo competitors), it does, nevertheless, now rank as one of the leading spectator and participant sports in America. Along the way, however, rodeo has de-emphasized its connection to actual ranch work, so much so that today many successful rodeo cowboys, including some world champions, have not only been city raised but have never had any ranch experience at all prior to taking up rodeo as a sport. The price rodeo has paid for this increased mainstream acceptance and popularity is a loss of its authenticity as ranch-country folk game. As city dwellers have become more interested in rodeo as sport rather than as novelty and spectacle, many rural dwellers have at the same time become disenchanted with its slickness and its remoteness from the working skills from which it originated. Moreover, many working cowboys, even some who are rodeo veterans, have felt that rodeo has moved too far from its roots, that the skills they are using in their

daily work are, at best, barely recognizable in a rodeo arena. As the late Wilber Countryman, who for thirty years produced an open-to-the-world rodeo on his ranch near Cassoday, Kansas, told me a few years ago: "In the old days a [rodeo] cowboy was just a cowboy, but nowadays he's an athlete on a racehorse."

From this sense of alienation sprang ranch rodeo, a new form of cowboy competition, one that has returned rodeo to its folk roots as ranch-country sport. The movement seems to have begun in Texas, with the first ranch rodeo there (according to Lawrence Clayton in *Ranch Rodeos in West Texas*) being held at Wichita Falls in 1980. Significantly, this rodeo was called the Texas Ranch Roundup, just as many early-day professional rodeos, such as the one at Pendleton, Oregon, were called roundups, thus stressing their link to ranch work. By the mid-1980s ranch rodeos were being held at Abilene, Breckenridge, Anson, and Albany, Texas, each of them featuring events more closely related to daily working skills than could be found in professional rodeo.

Whether or not these early ranch rodeos were influenced by the annual Texas Cowboy Reunion at Stamford, Texas, is not clear, but the amateur rodeo (one of the largest in the country) held for many years in conjunction with that event shared a major philosophical characteristic with ranch rodeo: only working ranch cowboys were allowed to enter. The original events at the first Stamford rodeo back in 1930 also mirror ranch rodeo in their derivation from ranch work: bronc riding, calf roping, steer roping, and wild cow milking. Broncs were snubbed to a saddle horn for saddling and mounting in an open arena, while steers were not only given a hundred foot head start but had to remain tied for ten minutes.

By the mid to late 1980s ranch rodeos, like the cattle drives of a century earlier, were working their way north through the plains. Oklahoma held its first state-wide ranch rodeo competition in 1985 at Guthrie, while by 1989 there were so many ranch rodeos being held in Kansas that the citizens of Medicine Lodge, site of the triennial Peace Treaty Pageant, organized the first Kansas Championship Ranch Rodeo. During the mid-1990s ranch rodeos began to be held in the northern

plains, partly spread by the Great American Cattle Drive of 1995. As part of the auxiliary events of that trek, in which three hundred longhorn steers were overlanded from Fort Worth, Texas, to Miles City, Montana, over a six-month period, driven by four cowboys from eaeh of the six states traversed (Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Wyoming, and Montana), ranch rodeos were held in each state, with a championship of all of the state winners held on Labor Day at the end of the trail. For the three northern states, this was the first ranch rodeo to be held there. At about this same time, ranch rodeos, termed there "ranch hand rodeos," made their first appearance in the buckaroo country of northern Nevada, southeastern Oregon, and southwestern Idaho. Today ranch rodeos are found throughout the ranching west, but their region of greatest popularity remains the central and southern plains.

Perhaps the biggest single difference between a ranch rodeo and a regular rodeo is that contestants in the former compete as teams (a typical ranch rodeo team is composed of four members and one or two alternates), just as ranch cowboys work together to perform their daily tasks, whereas professional rodeo emphasizes individual effort. In a professional rodeo, only steer wrestlers and team ropers work together. The former require a hazer to keep the steer running straight, while in team roping a header first catches a steer by the horns, then the heeler catches its heels. In ranch rodeo, however, only the bronc riding event features individual competition. In most of the other events (all at some ranch rodeos) all four members play a role, although some roles (the brander in a calf branding contest, for instance) are subordinate. There are no age or gender restrictions on ranch rodeo teams, at least in some locales, with contestants having ranged in age from eight to their seventies.

A few of the events in ranch rodeo are outwardly similar to those of professional rodeo, particularly bronc riding and team roping, but with significant permutations that make them more like ranch skills. Bronc riding in a ranch rodeo, as in a regular rodeo, is for eight seconds, but it must be done in a regular saddle, not an association saddle, and the rider is allowed to hold on with his free hand, much as a cowboy taking the

buek out of a ranch horse will be more concerned with staying on the horse (and thus not "spoiling" him by being thrown) rather than with perfect form. Also, where a rodeo cowboy would be disqualified for grabbing his hat during the ride or for touching the horse with his free hand, a ranch rodeo bronc rider will often add to the spectacle of his ride by whipping off his hat and fanning the horse. Or he might earry a quirt or a coiled lariat rope with which to hit the bronc. Some have even been known to leave the chute with a loop already built in their rope, then swing it during the ride, thus replicating the not uncommon situation where a green horse might suddenly break in two as a cowboy is attempting to catch a steer in a pasture. Several roping events in ranch rodeo require heading and heeling in a manner similar to that of a regular rodeo, but usually with an added task, sueh as having the header, or another member of the ranch team, mark the roped animal to simulate doctoring in a pasture.

Most ranch rodeo events are similar (if not identical) to those raneh-skill-related events of early-day rodeos, not the slick contests of a contemporary professional rodeo. Also, as in early-day rodeo, there is, in addition to a core of standard events (usually including bronc riding, cattle penning, wild cow milking, a team roping event of some sort, and calf branding), a wide variety of supplemental events at different rodeos (feed-saek racing, trailer loading, calf roping, cattle cutting and sorting, wild horse racing) as well as significant variation from raneh rodeo to ranch rodeo in the way in which all these events are conducted. Significantly, from the perspective of raneh rodeo as a manifestation of oecupational folklore, thesc variations, both in events and in methodology, generally reflect the particular values and work methods of the area in which the rodeo is being held.

At the Flint Hills Ranch Rodeo, held annually sinee the early1990s at Strong City, Kansas, for example, one of the initial events was a trailer loading contest, an event not found in the Texas ranch rodeos documented by Lawrencc Clayton. These southwestern rodeos are held in what is primarily mother-cow country and ranches tend to be large with pastures spread out far from ranch headquarters. The Flint Hills, on the other

hand, is steer country, with most pastures ranging from a section to a couple of thousand acres in size. Keeping steers in the right pasture is essential to the pastureman, who must pay for any livestock missing from his care at the end of the summer grazing season, so it is a common occurrence for him to rope and load stray steers to haul back to their proper pasture. The feed sack race of some Texas ranch rodeos, on the other hand, relates more directly to the need for ranch hands on the southern plains to carry a sack of protein pellets to cows in a winter pasture; likewise, the calf roping contest of some buckaroo ranch hand rodeos, in which the roper must catch and "doctor" a calf, but must dally with his seventy-foot riata instead of being tied on hard and fast with a thirty-five foot nylon. In another buckaroo ranch hand rodeo contest, a rider runs to the far side of the arena where a man on the ground hands him the end of a riata fastened to a green steer hide. The rider dallies up while the ground man jumps on the hide and is pulled back across the finish line. This event derives from the practice in the high desert country of rolling a sick cow onto a greenhide and pulling her across the snow to headquarters, where she can be more easily cared for.

The basic events of a ranch rodeo, however, are equally basic to ranch work throughout the West and are therefore found in most ranch rodeos. These events usually include bronc riding (as described above), penning, calf branding, wild cow milking, wild horse race, and some form of team roping (such as cattle doctoring or double mugging). Often, however, these events will show occasional variation in methodology of competition, reflecting local conditions and traditional work methods. In calf branding, for instance, ranch rodeos on the plains usually feature one roper, two ground men (to hold the calf), and a brander (who applies a cold-iron brand), each member of the crew retaining his position while two calves are roped and branded. Whether the calf is headed or heeled often depends on the proclivity of the roper and the usual method used at calf brandings in his area. In buckaroo country, however, the calves at ranch hand rodeos are often larger than those used in ranch rodeos in cowboy country and two ropers are sent into the herd to head and heel two calves for the two men on the ground to brand. Then the ropers

dismount and become the ground crew while the other two men get on their horses to rope two more calves.

Another event that operates under varying rules is the penning contest. Sometimes it is conducted like a regular team penning, with three riders cutting out three numbered cattle from a herd at one end of the arena, then driving them to the other end and into a square pen made of portable panels. Other times all four members of the team compete. One variation that shows the abilities of the cow horses to best advantage has one team member riding into the herd to cut out one numbered steer while two of his teammates hold the herd. He then drives the lone steer across the length of the arena and through a small gate at the far end, while the fourth team member acts as a gate keeper to prevent the steers from rejoining the main herd. When the first man has put his steer into the pen, then the gatekeeper joins the main herd while a second member rides in and cuts out a steer, repeating the pattern set by the first rider. This process continues until all four contestants have penned their steer, or until the time limit, usually three or four minutes, has elapsed.

Briefly, the double mugging contest requires a steer or heifer to be headed and heeled, then pulled to the ground by another team member, while the fourth ties its legs. Team doctoring also requires heading and heeling, with the ground crew marking the forehead of the animal with chalk, as sick animals are often marked after vaccinations in a pasture. In wild cow milking one cowboy ropes the cow while two men on the ground attempt to hold it while the fourth man strips a few drops of milk into a pop bottle, just enough for the judge to pour out. He then runs to the finish line while the other team members remove the rope from the cow. In the wild horse race a mounted man dallies a halter rope attached to a horse in a bucking chute. When the horse is released, a man on the ground attempts to ear him down while the third member of the team saddles and rides him across a score line. All events, by the way, have time limits, so that if the prescribed activity isn't completed within that limit, the team must take a no-time.

In 1995 the Working Ranch Cowboys Association was formed, holding its first world championship ranch rodeo at Amarillo, Texas, in

the fall of 1996 with thirteen ranches entered representing eight states (Idaho, Kansas, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas, and Wyoming) and one Canadian province (Manitoba). Ten ranches competed in the 1997 rodeo, with representation from Montana added and that of Idaho and Wyoming dropped. The WRCA sanctions regional rodeos, the winners of which qualify for the world championship eontest. It mandatcs a team with a minimum of five members and alternates and a maximum of eight. Although there ean be some variation at the qualifying rodeos, the six events found at the Amarillo finals includc ranch bronc riding, wild cow milking, team doetoring, team branding, team penning, and wild horsc race. The Kansas Championship Raneh Rodco held at Medicine Lodge, for instanee, substitutes ranch cutting and doublc mugging for team penning and the wild horse race.

Thc WRCA also mandates strict qualifications for contcstants: thcy must make a living by owning or being employed by a "working ranch," defined as one running at lcast three hundred mother cows or pasturing five hundrcd head of ycarlings for a minimum of six months of the year. Competing cowboys must earn at least 90% of their income from ranching, or, if day workers, must earn at least $3500 from the ranch they are competing for. The apparent purpose of thesc rules was to insure that only genuine working cowboys would be eligible for competition, and that a wealthy rancher could not go out and hire a rodeo bronc rider or roper as a ringer. The actual effect, however, has been to disqualify many good cowboys. Thc Flint Hills grazing region of Kansas, for instance, is steer country, not cow country, with the major ranching enterprise being the pasturing of yearlings. But the practice of double stocking with its three-month grazing season, as well as the practice of "neighboring" prevalcnt throughout this area (i.e., sharing work rather than hiring help), has meant that local teams that once competed in the Flint Hill Ranch Rodeo at Strong City (one of the WRCA's qualifying events) are no longer eligible to enter. Moreover, the Flint Hills Ranch Rodeo has adopted thc six events featured at Amarillo, dropping the double mugging and trailer loading events and adding a wild horse race. Moreover, the rules in place for WRCA roping events mitigate against the typical

pattern of roping in buckaroo country, where the emphasis is on style, not speed. Also, some of the early Texas ranch rodeos used a calf eradle in the branding contest rather than roping and dragging.

In other words, the WRCA seems to be having the effect of standardizing ranch rodeo, in the process forcing some regional rodeos to drop events that are actually more representative of work in their particular areas than are the WRCA events. As a result ranch rodeo is in danger of losing some of its folk flavor, of becoming homogenized out of its regional differences. While this standardization has its benefits, it also runs the great danger of turning ranch rodeo into a slicker, more fan-friendly entertainment that will become estranged from its roots, like the very professional rodeo against which it originally rebelled. One hopes not.

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