

LET 'ER BUCK: GENDER AND ANIMAL HISTORY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY
AMERICAN RODEO

by

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Dedication

To Ryann.

I didn't know it when I started, but I wrote this for you.

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Abstract

“Let ‘er Buck” explores the entwined history of gender and human-animal relationships within twentieth-century mainstream American rodeo. It presents six stories from rodeo’s past: three that foreground questions of gender norms across three generations of cowgirl contestants, and three that focus more centrally on the role of human-animal relationships in rodeo across three distinct scales – organizational, social, and evolutionary. All six stories decenter the cowboy figure to interrogate the dominant narrative of rodeo as the realm of masculine men and their manly struggle with animals in the arena. Individually and collectively, the stories presented in “Let ‘er Buck” demonstrate the multiple ways in which women have historically contested the normative masculinity of rodeo, how rodeo relies on human-animal cooperation as much if not more than human-animal conflict, and the interconnections between gender norms and relations between humans and nonhuman animals. In doing so, this dissertation offers a different way to remember rodeo’s past, to know about its present, and to envision its future.

Introduction

The rodeo would survive. It would survive by becoming a ritual in which, on the obvious level, the last frontiersman, the cowboy, or, more accurately, a man in ceremonial garb representing him, re-enacts the conquest of the West, and on a deeper level symbolizes man's conquest of nature.

— Mody C. Boatright, “The American Rodeo”

In many ways the Bennington, Kansas, rodeo is representative of the typical small town American rodeo. The Bennington rodeo grounds, situated on the northwest edge of the small, dusty town of about 600 people, are humble yet immaculate. The white pipe fence and bright red bucking chutes that encircle the deep dirt arena all appear freshly painted. Three sets of modest aluminum bleachers sit on either side of the arena, ready for spectators to cringe and crane as they cheer on riders and ropers. Every year on the first weekend in June, the arena fills with bucking broncs and bulls, speeding calves and steers, and Quarter Horses hurtling around barrels.

Located just north of the twisting Solomon River and over a hundred miles from the nearest city, Bennington is surrounded by a cornucopia of sprawling wheat and hay fields, cattle ranches, and dairy farms. Plains Indians, who called this region home for centuries, were gradually and violently displaced after white settlers began building homes, raising livestock, and growing crops in the area in the 1850s. By the 1870s, these newly-arrived pioneers founded the town of Bennington, and shortly thereafter the Solomon Valley Railroad, a branch of the Kansas Pacific Railroad, reached the town.¹ Cattle, wheat, and other commodities flowed through the town from west to east, and more aspiring settlers flowed from east to west. If one

¹ Theo A. Scheffer, “Geographical Names in Ottawa County,” *The Kansas Historical Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (August 1934): 227-245; “Railroads in Kansas,” Kansas Historical Society, <https://www.kshs.org/kansapedia/railroads-in-kansas/15120> (accessed November 20, 2020).

town's history could narrate the story of the American West that the institution of rodeo largely embraces and romanticizes, Bennington's would be a prime selection. In less than half a century, white American settlers seemingly succeeded in taming the frontier's rugged natural landscape and in bringing civilization to this land of abundant possibilities.

At its core, most of mainstream American rodeo of the last 125 years – including the Bennington rodeo – serves as a celebratory performance of this Turnerian story of the American West.² The western United States is, as historian Richard White put it, “the most strongly *imagined* section of the United States,” and rodeos have historically served (and certainly continue to serve) as a site for that imagining to take place.³ Rodeo is particularly useful for this purpose, given its malleable qualities. As myths of the West took on different forms throughout the twentieth century, rodeo evolved along with them. From the visceral violence of Buffalo Bill's wild west shows, to the flamboyant glamour of Hollywood westerns, to the commercialization of western lifestyle and cowboy culture, rodeo performances can and have shifted to fit the image of a bygone West desired by each audience.⁴

² By “Turnerian story of the American West,” I am referring to Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis from his well-known essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” delivered at the 1893 meeting of the American Historical Association in Chicago, published in *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* (1893): 197-227. Specifically, here I am referring to Turner's view that the process of settling the western frontier by American pioneers, including the process of undertaking, mastering, and transforming the wilderness, defined the distinctive characteristics of American culture and democracy. See also Richard White, “Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill,” in *The Frontier in American Culture*, edited by James Grossman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

³ Richard White, *It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own: A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 613. See also, among many, many crucial works on the development of the imagined or mythic West: Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Robert Athearn, *The Mythic West in Twentieth-Century America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986); Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (United States: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992).

⁴ See Kristine Fredriksson, *American Rodeo: From Buffalo Bill to Big Business* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985); Jim Ryan, *The Rodeo and Hollywood: Rodeo Cowboys on Screen and Western Actors in the Arena* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2006); Leisl Carr Childers, “The National Finals Rodeo: The Evolution of

Regardless of its form, rodeo's western authenticity is firmly grounded in a specific gendered performances of contestants and in their specific relationships with livestock inside the arena. Masculine cowboys compete against each other in events that grew out of and roughly reproduce the gendered labor of the frontier: roughstock riders cling to their rigging or reins on the backs of sunfishing broncs, ropers work to immobilize bawling calves and fugitive steers as quickly as possible. Those who produce rodeos have reinforced the connection between this manly struggle with animals in the arena and the mythic frontier throughout the last century. At his rodeos during the 1920s, famed producer Tex Austin informed spectators that "the rodeo...has come out of the west, the land of cattle, expert horsemen and bucking bronchos."⁵ At the 1950 Madison Square Garden rodeo, Gene Autry's production company tried to appeal to New Yorkers by claiming "that's the essential struggle and thrill of rodeo – man versus beast – and while the west has changed, the ornery critters which roam its vast reaches haven't changed their attitude towards humans."⁶ In 1975, an advertisement from the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association loudly declared that rodeo is "the sport that pits man against beast, push against shove, will against won't."⁷

an Urban Entertainment Phenomenon," *Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (Winter, 2008): 267-291; Lisa Penaloza, "Consuming the American West: Animating Cultural Meaning and Memory at a Stock Show and Rodeo," *The Journal of Consumer Research* 28, no. 3 (December 2001): 369-398. On the imagined West of Buffalo Bill's show that many early twentieth-century rodeos reflected, see Louis Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); Paul Reddin, *Wild West Shows* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000). On the genre of western films that many mid-century rodeos reflected, see Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*; Christine Bold, *Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860-1960* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁵ Chicago Rodeo Program, 1926, Box 13, Folder 1, Collection of Rodeo Programs and Ephemera, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

⁶ Madison Square Garden rodeo program, 1950, Box 22, Folder 3, Collection of Rodeo Programs and Ephemera, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

⁷ Winston's Pro Rodeo Booklet, 1975, Box 13, Folder 3, Rodeo Historical Society Records, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

The efforts of mainstream American rodeo producers to promote a masculine myth of the West in which cowboys struggle with nature have effectively rendered the masculine, male cowboy as the normative participant in rodeo performances, and their combative relationships with animals as the normative action within those performances. In the traditional portrayal of mainstream rodeo, women (and anyone other than a masculine white man) and cooperative relationships with animals operate within the periphery, as nothing more than complementary aspects of the main performance.

On one hot summer night in Bennington, Kansas, though, a diminutive teenaged girl named Maggie Parker seemed to radically disrupt those norms. On June 2, 2012, Parker climbed on the back of a bull in one of those bright red bucking chutes at the Bennington rodeo. “Well if you’ve ever heard that if anything boys can do, girls can do better, we’re gonna get a chance to watch tonight,” the announcer explained as AC/DC’s “Thunderstruck” boomed over the loudspeaker. Maggie methodically pulled her bull rope tight over her left hand, likely oblivious to the announcer’s commentary: “Here is a young lady who can ride bucking bulls... This little blonde-haired beauty scoots up on the rope, just about ready to tame one of the bad beasts...”⁸ Just then Maggie nodded her head. The white, speckled bull with broad horns exploded out of the gate to the left, then juttet right, turning and kicking with sudden power. Maggie clung tight to her rope and squeezed her legs against the bull’s sides as it bucked across the arena. As the horn sounded to signal the eight second ride was complete, she slid off the right side and landed safely in the arena dirt.

⁸ “Maggie Parker Bennington Rodeo Bull Riding,” Youtube.com, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ct5-isHtbrs> (accessed November 19, 2020).

Maggie Parker's ride at Bennington earned her a 70 point score, a sixth-place check worth \$190, and worldwide media attention. Publications from Montana to the United Kingdom printed stories about her ride.⁹ Vox.com published a 5,000 word story on her turbulent life and her struggle to earn her way into the arena, and daytime talk shows contacted her for interviews.¹⁰ The preponderance of the media coverage, like the announcer's sexist commentary preceding her ride, focused on the uniqueness of a woman operating within the male-dominated world of mainstream professional rodeo. Parker's ride garnered so much interest because it seemed so incomprehensible; it blatantly contradicted the normative gendered performance and essential myth of rodeo.

If we decenter the cowboy figure in an examination of rodeo's past, though, Maggie Parker's ride appears much less peculiar. Rather than a lone teenage girl, we find a long line of cowgirls fighting for a space in the arena, employing numerous strategies of resistance to combat their marginalization. The first of the two main objectives of this dissertation is to challenge the ahistorical assumptions of rodeo's normative masculinity. The entrenched perception of rodeo as the realm of burly cowboys and untamable beasts incorrectly and unjustly perpetuates the idea that the inclusion of someone like Maggie Parker has been, is, and should be the exception. Instead, this dissertation seeks to demonstrate the multiple ways in which women have historically contested the normative masculinity of rodeo.

⁹ *Billings Gazette*, June 6, 2012; Sara Malm, "Hello Cowgirl!," DailyMail.com, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2273734/Hello-cowgirl-Meet-Maggie-Parker-Americas-ONLY-professional-female-bullrider.html> (accessed November 19, 2020).

¹⁰ Steven Leckart, "The Bull Rider," Vox.com, <https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/21354248/rodeo-bull-riding-sports-pcra-pbr-maggie-parker> (accessed November 19, 2020).

The second main objective of this dissertation contends with the animal half of rodeo's dominant man-versus-beast myth. If one were to look closely, there were numerous aspects of the performance that night in Bennington that similarly if more quietly disrupted rodeo's standard narrative than Maggie Parker's ride. The bull that Parker successfully rode, inconspicuously named B-12, was not a wild, untamed beast plucked from the vast western range, but was the result of a carefully planned breeding program designed by stock contractor Jimmy Crowther.¹¹ The feats of ropers and steer wrestlers earlier in the event hinged on a close partnership between rider and horse, not on the hostile human-animal relationship that rodeo promoters like to reinforce. This dissertation seeks to unveil these kinds of interconnected, interdependent, and cooperative interspecies relationships within rodeo. It calls into question the prevailing narrative of rodeo as essentially a performance of man's conquest of nature, to show the multitude of ways in which rodeo relies on human-animal cooperation as much if not more than human-animal conflict.

Beyond simply demonstrating that women and human-animal cooperation are historically vital components of rodeo, this dissertation holds broader significance for the fields of gender, animal, and western U.S. history by exhibiting the entanglements of those three subjects. In rodeo, gender norms, notions of western authenticity, and one's relationships with animals have always – and continue to be – inextricably intertwined. An urban crowd's apprehension toward a woman's participation in a dangerous event like steer wrestling is eased through her public performance of domestic femininity. A roughstock-riding and roping cowgirl simultaneously contributes to the advancement of women's rights through her performance while self-

¹¹ New Frontier Rodeo Company, <http://newfrontierrodeo.com> (accessed April 17, 2021).

identifying as antifeminist. Barrel racers leverage the popularity of their human-horse partnerships to fight misogynist treatment by producers and earn equal pay. Ideas about the proper treatment of livestock are wrapped up in concepts of western and national identity. The broncs of rodeo are selectively bred and carefully designed by humans to reinforce the masculinity of their riders with each buck. The self-identity and authenticity of ropers are defined through their personal connections with their horses. The chapters that follow explore each of these entanglements of gender, westernness, and human-animal relationships, and more.

To accomplish such lofty objectives, this dissertation follows a model exemplified by several historians who have successfully tackled treacherous myths of America's past, most notably Susan Lee Johnson's *Roaring Camp*.¹² In particular, Johnson's use of characters and stories to examine the tensions between memory and history heavily influences the ways in which this dissertation examines similar tensions between the myths and realities of rodeo. Within the popular memory of the California Gold Rush, Johnson says, gender and race relations remain not much more "than a quirky, colorful background to high-spirited portraits of Anglo American men."¹³ Through the careful and skillful unearthing of diverse stories of women, immigrants, people of color, and others commonly left in the background, Johnson works to "turn backgrounds into foregrounds, portraits of individuals into pictures of crowds."¹⁴

Likewise, this dissertation works against the dominant story of American rodeo to tell different stories of gender relations, human-animal bonds, and special contexts. Rather than a

¹² Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000). See also Kristin L. Hoganson, *The Heartland: An American History* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019).

¹³ Johnson, *Roaring Camp*, 343.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 343.

rodeo filled with white men who tame wild bulls and broncs in an exhibition of authentic Western skill, this is a rodeo where women contestants fight for their spot in the arena, where humans and animals form meaningful relationships, and where urban metropolises serve as the setting. By offering six seemingly disparate stories of gender and animals throughout the history of mainstream rodeo, this dissertation brings together fragmented voices from the fringes of rodeo's history to tell complex stories of conflict and negotiation, of people who sought a place within a cultural institution which all too often – according to the dominant narrative – had no room for them.

Part of the value in telling these stories is bound within the common goal of academic history and collective memory, to, as Johnson says, “know ourselves in the present by knowing our past.”¹⁵ Johnson offers her history of the Gold Rush not as an authoritative replacement for popular memory, but as “food for memory,” with the recognition that perhaps through remembering it differently, “we can use that memory to different ends.”¹⁶ A similar desire drives this dissertation. The stories presented here, all of which decenter the normative masculine cowboy icon, serve as different ways to remember rodeo's past and, importantly, as different ways to know about its present and envision its future.

Review of Literature

This dissertation is part of (and owes a great deal to) a recent turn in the historiography of rodeo that is led by several scholars who critically investigate the histories of those marginalized

¹⁵ Ibid, 342.

¹⁶ Ibid, 342-344.

from rodeo. This turn includes the work of Mary-Ellen Kelm, who utilizes masculinity theory and indigenous history to dive deeply into the story of the Canadian rodeo community, and to argue that it is a story of encounter and inclusion among white and Aboriginal communities.¹⁷ Rebecca Scofield presents the stories of four separate groups of marginalized people who have challenged the limited definition of an authentically western identity and reappropriated the cultural power of the cowboy image through their rodeo performances.¹⁸ Elyssa Ford offers a comparative study of different race- and group-specific rodeos and the ways in which they are used to stake a claim to historical significance in the American West.¹⁹ Susan Nance centers the animals of rodeo and delves into their stories to demonstrate their critical role in the construction of rodeo's meaning as a celebration of the mythic West.²⁰ Taken together, these works, as this dissertation seeks to do, illuminate the stories of the people and animals that were excluded from earlier retellings of rodeo's past.²¹

It is also important to note that the works that constitute a new direction for the historiography of rodeo – as well as this dissertation – emerge from several earlier yet similarly

¹⁷ Mary-Ellen Kelm, *Wilder West: Rodeo in Western Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Rebecca Scofield, *Outriders: Rodeo at the Fringes of the American West* (Seattle: University of Nevada Press, 2019).

¹⁹ Elyssa Ford, *Rodeo as Refuge, Rodeo as Rebellion: Gender, Race, and Identity in the American Rodeo* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2020).

²⁰ Susan Nance, *Rodeo: An Animal History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019). Other recent contributions to the field of human-animal relationships in rodeo include Arnold Arluke and Robert Bogdan, "Taming the Wild: Rodeo as a Human-Animal Metaphor," in *Sport, Animals, and Society*, eds. James Gillet and Michelle Gilbert (New York: Routledge, 2014), 15-35.

²¹ Other important contributions to this recent shift in rodeo historiography include Tracey Hanshew, "Cowgirls, Rodeo, and Rural Feminism, 1890-1935" (PhD diss., Oklahoma State University, 2017); Renee Laegreid, *Riding Pretty: Rodeo Royalty in the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006); Tracey Owens Patton and Sally Schedlock, *Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo: Breaking Away from the Ties of Sexism and Racism* (New York: Lexington Press, 2011); Christopher Le Coney and Zoe Trodd, "Reagan's Rainbow Rodeos: Queer Challenges to the Cowboy Dreams of Eighties America," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 39, no. 2 (2009): 163-83; Allison Fuss Mellis, *Riding Buffaloes and Broncos: Rodeo and Native Traditions in the Northern Great Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).

important feminist histories of the role of women in rodeo, particularly Mary Lou LeCompte's seminal and oft-cited study, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*.²² LeCompte's monograph was the first to carefully sift through the details of a century of women's involvement in rodeo. In doing so, she revealed the marginalizing efforts of rodeo producers and organizing associations that rodeo cowgirls have continuously resisted. LeCompte's work, and especially the works of the recent, critical turn in rodeo historiography, are a stark contrast to earlier, more celebratory histories of rodeo that focused nearly exclusively on the accomplishments of white men and took animals for granted as passive participants.²³

Like the recent works of Ford and Scofield, this dissertation similarly demonstrates that rodeo has always been about more than the mythic cowboy and the untamable wild bronc. One important way in which this dissertation differs, though, is in its focus on the mainstream, professional rodeos of the United States.²⁴ Ford and Scofield largely restrict their analyses to marginalized rodeos, where groups who did not fit within the bounds of the stereotypical rodeo contestant have reconstructed and reframed rodeo as a site of inclusion. This is important and crucial work, but it seems to assume that mainstream, professional rodeo has always or mostly

²² Mary Lou LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo: Pioneer Professional Athletes* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993). See also Teresa Jordan, *Cowgirls: Women of the American West* (New York: Anchor, 1982); Joyce Gibson Roach, *The Cowgirls* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1990); Candace Savage, *Cowgirls* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996). Another early, influential work that took a critical eye toward rodeo's cultural significance yet focused primarily on male contestants is Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, *Rodeo: An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

²³ Clifford P. Westermeier, *Man, Beast, Dust: The Story of Rodeo* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1947); Foghorn Clancy, *My Fifty Years in Rodeo: Living with Cowboys, Horses and Danger* (San Antonio, Texas: The Naylor Co., 1952); Mody C. Boatright, "The American Rodeo," *American Quarterly* 16, no. 2 (Summer, 1964): 195-202; Michael Allen, *Rodeo Cowboys in the North American Imagination* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998).

²⁴ By "mainstream" and "professional" rodeos, I am primarily referring to the rodeos organized and operated by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association and its predecessors. These are regularly the largest rodeos in the United States that have the most attendees, the biggest prize pools, and receive the most attention from the public and the media.

always been exclusively the realm of masculine men. In fact, women have not only participated in mainstream rodeo throughout the twentieth century but have resisted marginalization efforts and wielded influence over their roles within the overarching and sexist structures of mainstream rodeo. This dissertation demonstrates that the dominant narrative of rodeo is not only inaccurate because those *outside* mainstream rodeo did not fit within its contours, it is also inaccurate because those *within* mainstream rodeo did not fit within its contours.

Beyond the narrow field of rodeo history, this dissertation seeks to contribute to – and most importantly tie together – larger conversations within the broad fields of western, gender, and animal history. Of course, the historical dynamics between any two of these three subjects has received significant scholarly attention within the last few decades. For example, while the pervasive image of the West as a masculine space has led to a unfortunate tendency to foreground prominent men from the region’s history, it has also led to numerous influential studies of gender in the West – studies that examine the construction of that masculine image as well as studies that uncover the roles of the western women it obscures.²⁵ Historians have also closely examined the gendered reimaginings and nostalgic celebrations of the West in fiction,

²⁵ For more on the tendency within western history to foreground prominent men, see Susan Lee Johnson, “Nail This To Your Door: A Disputation on the Power, Efficacy, and Indulgent Delusion of Western Scholarship That Neglects the Challenge of Gender and Women’s History,” *Pacific Historical Review* 79 (November 2010): 605–17. For perspectives on studying the history of gender in the West, including the construction of a masculine myth of the West and uncovering the role of western women, see especially Susan Lee Johnson, “A Memory Sweet to Soldiers’: The Significance of Gender,” in *A New Significance: Re-Envisioning the History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Katherine Morrissey, “Engendering the West,” in *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past*, ed. William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992); Matthew Basso, Laura McCall, and Dee Garceau, eds., *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Virginia Scharff, *Twenty Thousand Roads: Women, Movement, and the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Elizabeth Jameson and Susan Armitage, eds., *Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women’s West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997); Elizabeth Jameson and Sheila McManus, eds., *One Step Over the Line: Toward a History of Women in the North American Wests* (Edmonton, Canada: University of Alberta Press, 2008).

film, and leisure.²⁶ Studying rodeo's past presents the opportunity to do both: to examine the expression and contestation of gender within the West as a region, as well as within cultural performances of the West as an imagined space. The men and women subjects of this dissertation constantly navigated gendered expectations of their appearance and behavior as people who lived and worked in the West as well as people who represented the West in the arena.

The historiography of human-animal relationships within the American West has, like the greater field of animal history, expanded considerably over the past two decades or so. Of course, there are seemingly innumerable ways to explore the significance of human and animal interactions in the West. Environmental and labor historians specifically have revealed the crucial role of animals in the transformation of the western landscape throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁷ Other historians have explored the close personal bonds and mutually dependent relationships between humans and animals in the West, especially those between Anglo settlers and their livestock.²⁸ These works succeed in accomplishing one of the many lofty goals of this dissertation, in that they decisively disassemble the myth of the expansion of the American frontier as a story of human conquest of nature. Instead, they demonstrate that the

²⁶ Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation*; Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); Adrienne Rose Johnson, "Romancing the Dude Ranch, 1926–1947," *Western Historical Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 437–461.

²⁷ See, for example, Mark Fiege's analysis of the importance of horses in the construction of the transcontinental railroad in *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012), as well as Joshua Specht's demonstration of the role of beef cattle in transforming the ecology of the Great Plains in *Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

²⁸ Diana Ahmad, *Success Depends on the Animals: Emigrants, Livestock, and Wild Animals on the Overland Trails, 1840–1869* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2016); Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 129–135; Elliott West, *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains* (Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1995); John D. Unruh, Jr., *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840–60* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993).

story of the West is not nearly as simple, and that powerful symbols of the conquest of the West like the transcontinental railroad and the Oregon Trail – although they may seem like purely human constructions – are in fact the result of animal labor. In bringing animals to the center of the story and complicating the established, human-centric narratives of the West, these works collectively further what Susan Nance has called the “central task” of animal history: to “recognize and document the degree to which all history is inherently interspecific.”²⁹

The role of human-animal relationships in the construction of human categories of difference such as gender, and the role of gender in defining acceptable human-animal relationships, is a fairly recent subject of historical inquiry. Agricultural historians in particular have explored how both the knowledge of animal care and nostalgia for bygone, traditional methods of animal care are highly gendered in the United States.³⁰ A few European historians have also unraveled the connections between interspecies relationships and notions of gender, including the ties between horsemanship and masculinity.³¹ These works guide the way in which this dissertation looks at the gendering of human-animal relationships in rodeo. Additionally, this dissertation also delves into the role of gender norms and expectations in the human-led shaping

²⁹ Susan Nance, introduction to *The Historical Animal* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 5.

³⁰ Neil Prendergast, “Raising the Thanksgiving Turkey: Agroecology, Gender, and the Knowledge of Nature,” *Environmental History* 16, no. 4 (October 2011): 651-677; Anna Thompson Hajdik, “A ‘Bovine Glamour Girl’: Borden Milk, Elsie the Cow, and the Convergence of Technology, Animals, and Gender at the 1939 New York World’s Fair,” *Agricultural History* 88, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 470-490.

³¹ Monica Mattfeld, *Becoming Centaur: Eighteenth-century Masculinity and English Horsemanship* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017); Kristen Guest and Monica Mattfield, eds., *Equestrian Cultures: Horses, Human Society, and the Discourse of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Juliana Schiesari, *Beasts and Beauties: Animals, Gender, and Domestication in the Italian Renaissance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

of animal bodies and behavior, which fits within the rapidly growing and shifting field of evolutionary history.³²

Overview of Chapters

This dissertation is divided into separate yet interconnected sections, each composed of three chapters. The first triumvirate of chapters traces the twentieth-century history of women in rodeo, foregrounding questions of gender norms across three generations of cowgirl contestants. While each of these chapters introduce the topic of interrelationships between humans and animals, that topic is the central focus of the second section. The final three chapters, while continuing to address gender now and then, focus more centrally on the role of human-animal relationships in rodeo across three distinct scales – organizational, social, and evolutionary.

There are multiple connections between the two sections and among the six chapters. For example, a bronc rider's performance of masculinity through his ride on an unruly bucking horse drives the stock contractor's selective breeding strategy, and the acceptance or rejection of a woman's participation in a dangerous rodeo event is influenced in part by her perceived control of the animals in the event. To ignore the inseparability of norms of gender and human-animal relationships in rodeo would be at odds with the historical evidence, which is in part why this dissertation cannot simply be an examination of one or the other. However, dividing the chapters

³² Edmund Russell is perhaps the most well-known scholar of evolutionary history, with his two most influential works being *Evolutionary History: Uniting History and Biology to Understand Life on Earth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011) and *Greyhound Nation: A Coevolutionary History of England, 1200-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018). See also Margaret Derry, *Masterminding Nature: The Breeding of Animals, 1750-2010* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015); Ann Norton Greene, *Horses at Work: Harnessing Power in Industrial America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Philip Scranton and Susan R. Schrepfer, *Industrializing Organisms: Introducing Evolutionary History* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

into two distinct sections allows for the reader to more easily digest the two complementary yet ultimately separate primary objectives of this dissertation, and to recognize their interconnections.

Chapter one begins the section of gender and women in rodeo by tracing the life of an early twentieth-century bronc rider and bulldogger named Fox Hastings, and especially her efforts to present herself as stereotypically feminine in order to quell concerns about her performances in the arena. The period between the late 1910s and late 1920s when Fox and her contemporaries performed is generally described as a golden era of women's participation in mainstream rodeo.³³ Cowgirls like Fox rode, roped, and performed as major facets of the nation's largest, most prestigious rodeos, but audiences, producers, and male contestants frequently questioned the appropriateness of women performing such dangerous and explicitly masculine tasks. Their inclusion, then, required the constant construction and maintenance of a separate, publicly feminine identity outside of the arena. Fox and her counterparts presented themselves as icons of early twentieth-century womanhood: attractive, loyal wives and mothers who fulfilled all necessary domestic duties. An exploration of Fox's efforts to present a feminine identity offers a glimpse at the complex ways in which the different human-animal interactions of rodeo's events – and who is allowed to perform them – are wrapped up in notions of appropriate gender behavior.

Chapter two follows the life of Fern Sawyer, a cowgirl whose involvement in rodeo spanned from the 1930s through the 1980s, as a window into the complex relationship between

³³ See, for example, LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*; Roach, *The Cowgirls*; Michael Allen, "The Rise and Decline of the Early Rodeo Cowgirl: The Career of Mabel Strickland, 1916-1941," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 83 (October 1992): 122-127.

women rodeo contestants and post-World War II feminist movements. Fern, like many rodeo cowgirls of her time, grew up on a ranch, doing work that is traditionally viewed as men's labor. She fulfilled a traditionally feminine role as a sponsor girl at rodeos throughout the 1930s, competed and won against men at the highest level of rodeos during the 1940s, and was heavily involved in the first all-girl rodeo in Amarillo in 1947 and the subsequent formation of the Girls Rodeo Association. Fern and her contemporaries made clear contributions to efforts to expand women's rights following World War II, yet she also publicly criticized the ambitions of feminist activists and denounced the Women's Liberation Movement as a whole, sentiments that were commonly echoed by other women contestants. This chapter grapples with – and explores the nuances of – that contradiction, ultimately arguing that the fight by cowgirls for a space in the postwar arena demonstrates the need for broader conceptions of postwar feminism.

The third (and final chapter for section one) recounts the turbulent story of barrel racers and their fight for pay equality at professional rodeos during the 1980s. Barrel racing, an event in which women race their horse around three barrels in a cloverleaf pattern, originated from an effort by producers to create a more gentle, feminine, and marginal role for women in rodeo during the 1930s. Initially an event judged subjectively based largely on the physical appearance of the woman and her horse, barrel racers quickly and successfully demanded that the event change to a purely timed event. In the decades following World War II, barrel racing grew in popularity, yet barrel racers regularly earned less than half of that of their male peers. Throughout the 1980s, barrel racers leveraged their popularity and collectively organized to force rodeos to offer equal prize pools for both men and women. This story is crucial to understanding the complete role of women in rodeo throughout its history, yet, in large part

because it does not feature cowgirls who compete against men in the traditional riding and roping events, it is a story that has mostly been ignored.

The second section on human-animal relationships in rodeo begins with the fourth chapter, tells the story of two ambitious and ultimately ill-fated rodeo productions in London, England, in 1924 and 1934. Specifically, it looks into the controversy over treatment of the rodeo livestock, the backlash the producers faced from British anti-cruelty activists, and the subsequent court cases each year. The stories of these two rodeos demonstrate the extent to which the context and content of human interactions with animals influence our perceptions of the humane or cruel nature of those interactions, and the construction of national and cultural identity based on those perceptions.

The fifth chapter examines the history of timed event contestants and their horses. Specifically, it considers the historical implications of the culturally constructed representations between horses and riders as well as – and more crucially – the actual social relationships between the living, embodied human and horse participants. Rodeo contestants defined themselves and made sense of their world not only through their interactions with other humans, but also through their relationships with their horses, and through their horses' relationships with them. Just as cowboys and ranch horses developed close relationships from their long days on the range, timed event contestants inevitably and necessarily bonded with their horses through the hundreds of rodeos they competed at together. As professional rodeo grew in popularity nationally through the first two decades of the century, and as automobile and horse trailer technology advanced at the same time, contestants spent nearly every day with their horse no further than a trailer length away, continuously eating and sleeping and competing with each

other. The two literally relied on each other for survival – horses depended on contestants for food and shelter, and contestants needed consistent horses to earn a steady living. That mutual reliance, along with the immense amount of time contestants and horses spent together, unavoidably forged a strong relationship between the two.

Chapter six employs a lens of evolutionary history to examine the ways in which rodeo stock contractors have selectively bred horses to buck as broncs. Since the earliest days of organized professional rodeo at the turn of the twentieth century, stock contractors understood the cultural appeal of the man-versus-nature aspect of bronc riding. They recognized the desire by producers and spectators for the wildest bucking horses possible, and they have sought to fulfill that desire through carefully designed breeding programs. Consequently, the physical attributes and personalities of today's bucking horses are the results of decades of selective breeding at the hands of rodeo stock contractors. Closely considering the role of broncs in the construction and maintenance of rodeo as symbolic of a masculine, mythic West, and the ways in which humans have shaped the bodies and behaviors of broncs to fill that role, can help us appreciate how nature and culture are intricately intertwined.

Before opening the chute and releasing the chapters that follow, it is important to note that the analysis of this dissertation largely focuses on the white, straight men and women of mainstream rodeos. Of course, race and sexuality are – and have historically been – wrapped up in notions of gender, western authenticity, and human-animal relationships within rodeo.³⁴ This

³⁴ For the ways in which race and sexuality are intertwined with ideas about gender and western authenticity in rodeo specifically, see Scofield, *Outriders*; Ford, *Rodeo as Refuge, Rodeo as Rebellion*; Patton and Schedlock, *Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo*; Le Coney and Trodd, "Reagan's Rainbow Rodeos." Beyond rodeo, see Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral*

dissertation recognizes this fact and remains cognizant of it throughout, and it touches briefly on the issues of sexuality and race at critical points. However, it does not attempt to offer a comprehensive analysis of these issues.

Finally, it is important to note that Maggie Parker's ride in Bennington was not the watershed moment it was portrayed as in the subsequent press coverage. It did not portend an influx of women contestants at mainstream professional rodeos. It did not radically alter the popular perception that clinging to the back of a bucking animal is a fundamentally masculine act, embedded deeply within notions of western authenticity. Cowgirls who aim to ride bulls or broncs, or to wrestle steers, or to compete in any of the traditionally masculine events of rodeo, still face misogyny, doubts, and resistance today.

That is not to say that women have not made significant recent progress, or that human-animal relationships within rodeo are the same today as they have been for decades. Legendary rodeos such as Cheyenne and Fort Worth included women's breakaway roping and women's bronc riding in their 2019 program of events. The PRCA featured several rounds of breakaway roping at the 2020 National Finals Rodeo. For the first time in almost a century, women have fought for and gained the opportunity to demonstrate their skills on a bronc and with a rope and to earn equal money to the men at some of the largest and richest rodeos in the country. This fight and these newly earned opportunities have a history like a lariat, with long, interwoven strands that reach back to the experiences of cowgirls during the golden age of women in rodeo, to their resistance against marginalization, and to complicated connections with western identity,

Authority in the American West, 1874-1939 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Elizabeth Jameson, "Toward a Multicultural History of Women in the Western United States," *Signs* 13 (Summer 1988): 761-791.

human-animal relationships, and feminist movements and ideologies. This dissertation seeks to do justice for the women like Maggie Parker, the women of today who continue to fight for a space in the rodeo arena. Like with any study of a marginalized group, seeking this justice is important, because these women are part of an unfinished struggle.

Chapter 1

The Bulldogging Housewife: Fox Hastings and Creating a Feminine Space in the Rodeo Arena

On a sunny and mild February afternoon in 1925, Eloise “Fox” Hastings sat astride a bronc aptly named Wild Jack amid the dusty Santa Catalina polo grounds in Tucson, Arizona. The eyes of five thousand “thrilled” spectators focused on the stout, freckle-faced cowgirl as they jockeyed for prime vantage points in the grandstands and along the arena fence.³⁵ This was the inaugural performance of the Tucson Rodeo, and journalists on hand reported how the locals and winter visitors of the growing southwestern city were “brimful of interest” as they “thronged to the polo grounds” to witness the roping and riding acumen of contestants such as Hastings.³⁶ Businesses and government offices across town closed their doors, schools cancelled classes, and private clubs postponed regular meetings, all to focus on the rodeo.³⁷ The crowd of spectators that appeared at the grounds was so enormous that organizers were forced to turn away thousands.³⁸

Hastings’s left leg felt weak and ached from a knee sprain she had suffered two months earlier, as well as a compound fracture in the same leg six months before that necessitated an overnight stay in the hospital.³⁹ She was likely exhausted after driving from Ft. Worth, Texas, the day prior in a bright red roadster with a horse trailer in tow, and from a whirlwind rodeo

³⁵ *Arizona Daily Star*, February 22, 1925.

³⁶ *Tucson Citizen*, February 22, 1925.

³⁷ *Tucson Citizen*, February 23, 1925; *Arizona Daily Star*, February 22, 1925.

³⁸ *Tucson Citizen*, February 23, 1925; *Arizona Daily Star*, February 24, 1925.

³⁹ *Daily Deadwood Pioneer Times* (Deadwood, South Dakota), July 2, 1924; *The Kansas City Times*, December 10, 1924.

schedule that included numerous stops in every corner of the country in less than half a year.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the resilient cowgirl nodded her head, lifted the reins in her left hand, and “spurred” the “plunging cayuse.”⁴¹ Her auburn hair whipping through the dry wind underneath a massive black beaver hide hat, she raised her right hand high, waving to the fans as Wild Jack bucked across the arena. After gathering control of the horse, she leaped to the dirt and wafted in the “loud applause” from the crowd.⁴²

A decade later, on February 22, 1935, Fox (now with the surname Wilson) again darted across the Tucson arena, this time on an expertly trained Quarter Horse toward a speeding half-ton steer. While trying to ignore the rib she had broken just a few days earlier, she gracefully slid off the side of her horse toward the massive bovine, grasping its horns between her arms. She pulled her boots from the stirrups and stuck them into the dirt, bringing the steer to a quick halt. In one smooth motion, she lifted the right horn and slid her left elbow under the steer’s nose, twisting its head upward. Utilizing leverage, strength, and her own scant bodyweight, she leaned and fell to the ground, bringing her hulking animal opponent down with her.⁴³ Just as ten years earlier, the “huge crowd” in the “overflowing” grandstands was reported “thrilled” by the sight of a woman skillfully completing such a “dangerous game” that several men had failed to accomplish just minutes earlier.⁴⁴

Between 1925 and 1935, several women riders and ropers displayed their skills at La Fiesta de los Vaqueros – otherwise known as the Tucson Rodeo – in events that have historically

⁴⁰ *Arizona Daily Star*, February 21, 1925.

⁴¹ *Tucson Citizen*, February 24, 1925.

⁴² *Tucson Citizen*, February 22, 1925.

⁴³ *Arizona Daily Star*, February 23, 1935; *Hoof & Horns*, March 1935.

⁴⁴ *Arizona Daily Star*, February 23, 1935; *Arizona Daily Star*, February 24, 1935.

been (and continue to be) dominated by men. Leighton Kramer, a wealthy businessman from Philadelphia, founded the annual rodeo to attract more winter visitors to the town and to “re-establish the typical cowboy and ranch atmosphere in the minds of people.”⁴⁵ Kramer’s significant financial backing succeeded in immediately attracting many of the top rodeo contestants, both men and women, to Tucson. As contestants and specialty contract acts, cowgirls rode broncs and performed death-defying trick riding acts in the desert arena each of the first eleven years of its existence. Among them, Fox Hastings became arguably the most consistently popular in Tucson. She rode broncs or wrestled steers nearly every year during the first decade of the rodeo, and her feats were frequently met with adulation from the crowds of the rapidly urbanizing southwestern town.

Hastings’s exploits inside the Tucson rodeo arena serve as a notable case study of the complex gender dynamics at work at rodeos in Arizona and across the United States during the 1920s and 1930s. The roots of those complex dynamics extend through to the women who regularly trained horses, gathered cattle, and branded calves alongside their fathers and brothers on western cattle ranches throughout the nineteenth century and beyond.⁴⁶ At the same time,

⁴⁵ *Tucson Citizen*, November 21, 1924.

⁴⁶ The gender roles and divisions of labor on western cattle ranches during the nineteenth century varied by region, class, race, ethnicity, and individual circumstance. In general, though, realities of rural life frequently required and allowed women to assume many of the same responsibilities and tasks as men. For more specifically on the work of women with horses and cattle in the nineteenth-century West, see Dee Garceau, “Group Partnership and Cowboy Myth: The Gendering of Ranch Work,” in *The Important Things of Life: Women, Work, and Family in Sweetwater County, Wyoming, 1880-1929* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 89-111; Sandra L. Myres, “If All We Did Was To Weep at Home: Women as Frontier Entrepreneurs,” in *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 238-270; Dee Garceau, “Nomads, Bunkies, Cross-Dressers, and Family Men: Cowboy Identity and the Gendering of Ranch Work,” in *Across the Great Divide: Cultures of Manhood in the American West*, eds. Matthew Basso, Laura McCall, and Dee Garceau, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 150. For more on the connections between women’s labor on western ranches and the women of early twentieth-century rodeo, see Joyce Gibson Roach, *The Cowgirls* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1977); Teresa Jordan, *Cowgirls: Women of the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992); Tracey Hanshaw, “Cowgirls, Rodeo, and Rural Feminism, 1890-1935” (PhD diss., Oklahoma State University, 2017).

dime novel authors and Wild West show producers popularized the “cowgirl” character. A mythic figure based on the realities of life for women on western ranches, the cowgirl represented a specific, idealized form of white American womanhood. A variety of cowgirl riders and sharp shooters performed in Wild West shows through the turn of the twentieth century, and audiences nationwide venerated them as a strong, sturdy salve for the scourge of urbanization and over-civilization that seemingly threatened an increasingly concerning number of the nation’s women.⁴⁷

As competitive rodeos slowly overtook scripted Wild West shows in popularity in the 1910s and 1920s, many women riders and performers severed their contracts with Wild West shows and sought a living on the rodeo trail. Their inclusion in mainstream rodeos, though, was never guaranteed nor easily maintained. Despite their general popularity among audiences, those within and outside the rodeo community raised concerns throughout the early twentieth century over the appropriateness and ability of women to perform such dangerous and explicitly masculine acts as riding a bronc or wrestling a steer. Most crucially, growing social concerns over sexual deviancy and gender inversion among women who participated in physically strenuous and traditionally male-dominated endeavors acted like a rope continuously tugging cowgirls out of the arena.⁴⁸ By World War II, women were nearly entirely absent from

⁴⁷ Unsurprisingly, the majority of scrutiny from historians on the role of gender and the cowgirl character in Wild West shows has been directed toward the most famous Wild West show cowgirl: Annie Oakley. For more on this, see essays by Monica Rico and Jennifer R. Henneman in *The Popular Frontier: Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Transnational Mass Culture*, ed. Frank Christianson, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017); Louis Warren, *Buffalo Bill’s America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); Glenda Riley, *The Life and Legacy of Annie Oakley* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994).

⁴⁸ For more on social concerns over sexual deviancy and gender inversion among active women who participated in male fields, see Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930* (London: Pandora Press, 1985); Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women’s Sport*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

mainstream rodeo events, as producers ultimately refused to allow female contestants to exhibit the same riding and roping skills as male contestants.

Their expulsion from rodeo would have come much sooner, though, if cowgirls such as Fox Hastings had not employed carefully designed strategies to alleviate public concerns over their behavior, their sexuality, and their bodies. Among these strategies was the constant maintenance of a separate, uniquely feminine identity outside the arena. In interviews with the press, Hastings regularly characterized herself as an icon of early twentieth-century womanhood – a thin, attractive, subdued and polite lady who enjoyed makeup, wore colorful dresses, and diligently assumed all the domestic duties of a respectful housewife. In reality she was boisterous, physically intimidating, and when at home she was more likely to be caught working horseback with tobacco juice on her chin than in the kitchen with makeup on her cheeks. By constructing a publicly feminine identity, though, she was able to justify an act that was otherwise seen as excessively dangerous and masculine.⁴⁹

The Real Fox Hastings

The specific details of Fox Hastings's youth are sparse and unclear, clouded by the almost tall tale-like character she grew into as an adult. Born as Eloise Fox, likely in 1898 in

⁴⁹ This chapter owes a great deal to the insights offered by Rebecca Scofield in *Outriders: Rodeo at the Fringes of the American West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019) and especially in "Riding Bareback: Rodeo Communities and the Construction of American Gender, Sexuality, and Race in the Twentieth Century" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2015). Scofield argues that the perceived authenticity of rodeo cowgirls as natives of a rugged western frontier not only shielded their performances from criticism and concerns over their sexuality, but helped popularize them as exemplars of a white, antimodern, and specifically western womanhood that the American public craved at a time of concern over immigration, rural degeneracy, and over-civilization. Other historians have similarly noted the efforts of cowgirls to emphasize their feminine traits, especially through their physical appearance. See Mary Lou LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo: Pioneer Professional Athletes* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1993), 34-35; Candace Savage, *Cowgirls* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 73-76.

either Galt, California, or Galveston, Texas, she was a child of the West but certainly not of the rugged frontier. Although she did not grow up on a cattle ranch, she developed an early affinity for life on the back of a horse. She spoke fondly of childhood memories of her father, Wesley Fox, who she claimed raised and trained warmblood horses in Galveston, and of learning to ride around the Gulf Coast town at a young age. As an adolescent her family moved from Texas to San Francisco, where her parents enrolled her in the Convent of the Sacred Heart boarding school in Menlo Park.⁵⁰

Despite moving to urban California, Hastings's love of riding persisted. In September of 1912, at 14 years old, she was already earning a reputation as a skilled horsewoman, winning third in the women's quarter mile horse race at the California State Fair in Sacramento.⁵¹ Around the same time, according to her own recollection, a friend from boarding school took her to the Pendleton Round-up in Oregon and introduced her to a talented young bulldogger and bronc rider named Mike Hastings.⁵² The raucous rodeo crowd at Pendleton was likely strikingly foreign yet tantalizing to a young teenage girl living in bustling San Francisco and attending school in an upscale suburb. Soon after their meeting in Pendleton, she dropped out of school to join Mike Hastings and sign on with the Irwin Wild West Show. During a stop in Nebraska in 1914, they married.⁵³ Later Fox Hastings would explain that "the principal reason I am in the

⁵⁰ *Arizona Daily Star*, February 11, 1931.

⁵¹ *The Sacramento Bee*, September 20, 1912.

⁵² Estelle Gilbert Papers, Box 1, Folder 13, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

⁵³ Paul Hastings and Eloise Fox marriage certificate, October 16, 1914; Kimball, Nebraska, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln; FHL microfilm 2079152.

game” of rodeo was that she “married a cow-puncher. Going around with Mike, I got to riding. I liked it, and here I am.”⁵⁴

Initially, Fox Hastings made her name as a member of the Irwin Wild West Show and at competitive rodeos as a tough bronc rider and fearless trick rider. Soon after they eloped, though, Mike Hastings taught his new wife the intricacies of steer wrestling.⁵⁵ Mike Hastings was known to be a technically skilled steer wrestler, employing a strategy that relied less on pure strength and instead utilized leverage and his own bodyweight to bring the steer down.⁵⁶ After sliding down the side of his racing horse, Mike Hastings grabbed the steer by the horns, lifted the head up and twisted it, all while remaining on his feet. When the steer was fully slowed, turned, and under his control, he would fall to the ground, bringing the steer’s head and body quickly with him.⁵⁷ Learning this technique from her husband allowed Fox Hastings to throw steers to the ground as fast as or faster than many of her male peers.

Exactly when Fox Hastings first attempted to wrestle a steer is unknown. Some reports claimed that she first brought a steer to the ground in public at the Cattleman’s Convention Rodeo in Houston, Texas, in March of 1924, but later in her life she would claim that she was bulldogging as early as 1914.⁵⁸ Sometime during the early 1920s, her unique skills as a bulldogger caught the attention of legendary rodeo announcer and promoter Foghorn Clancy. By

⁵⁴ *Brooklyn Times Union*, August 25, 1923.

⁵⁵ Reba Perry Blakely, *Rodeo News*, September 1977, 21-34.

⁵⁶ The history of steer wrestling as a rodeo event is a long, complex story that reveals a great deal about the legacy of black cowboys within the myth of the American West and the role of race in the popularization of Wild West shows and rodeos. The man often credited as the originator of bulldogging is Bill Pickett, a famous African-American cowboy who toured with several Wild West shows in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. For more on Pickett and the origins of steer wrestling, see Cecil Johnson, *Guts: Legendary Black Rodeo Cowboy Bill Pickett* (Fort Worth: The Summit Group, 1994).

⁵⁷ *Hoof & Horns*, January 1940.

⁵⁸ *Hoof & Horns*, March 1940; *Arizona Daily Star*, February 11, 1931.

the spring of 1924, Clancy began working with her to get her contracted to wrestle steers as a specialty act at rodeos across the country.⁵⁹ Her popularity and the demand for her talent quickly soared, as she transformed from one cowgirl bronc and trick rider among many to the only cowgirl bulldogger on the circuit.

Although Hastings was larger than most of her fellow female contestants (most contemporaries recalled that she stood approximately five feet, eight inches tall and anywhere from 135 to 160 pounds), she was shockingly small for an event dominated by large male bodies. Most bulldoggers towered over six feet tall, and their broad-shouldered frames commonly weighed over 200 pounds. Hall of Fame steer wrestler Homer Pettigrew, who was generally considered small for the event, stood 5 feet, 11 inches tall and weighed 190 pounds.⁶⁰ What she lacked in sheer size, Hastings made up for with strength. The size of her biceps was near legendary among the rodeo community, as one male contemporary recalled, she had “arm muscles like a man.”⁶¹

In addition to her brawny physique, Hastings was known to be a rowdy, overwhelming presence away from the gaze of spectators. Bronc rider Don Bell recalled how he “knew that hussy and she was the meanest Dame ever. She chewed tobacco ya know, and the tobacco juice was on her chin just the same as her hubby.”⁶² She was also an avid partygoer who knew what she wanted from the men in her life, and often got it. She was known to throw “large and husky

⁵⁹ *Billboard*, April 19, 1924.

⁶⁰ Larry Pointer, “Steer Wrestling History,” Articles on Rodeo, Box 5, Folder 5, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

⁶¹ Larry Pointer, “The Cowgirls,” Articles on Rodeo, Box 8, Folder 8, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

⁶² Don Bell, unpublished account of Fox and Mike Hastings, August 14, 1993, Don Bell Collection, Box 2, Folder 5, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

cowboys” around the dance floor with as much ease, skill, and frequency as she threw steers in the arena dirt.⁶³ Rodeo producer Tex Sherman recalled one instance in which he was “stuck on a swell gal” at a party when Hastings suddenly approached and bellowed at the woman to get away from her man. According to Tex, the gal was so terrified by the sight of Hastings that she took off running in fear.⁶⁴ In October of 1929, after fifteen years of marriage, she filed for divorce from Mike Hastings.⁶⁵ Just eight days later she married Chuck Wilson, another bronc rider on the rodeo circuit.⁶⁶

In addition to her raucous personality, Hastings was known as a gritty and persistent cowgirl who could withstand countless gruesome injuries. Pain was a nearly constant aspect of her life as soon as she began riding broncs and performing trick riding. Accidents such as the one she suffered at the 1921 Chicago rodeo, when she was knocked unconscious, broke her shoulder, and sustained “probable internal injuries” after being thrown from her horse during a trick riding performance, were all too common for her.⁶⁷ When she began wrestling steers at rodeos in 1924, her injuries became more frequent and severe. As she explained it herself, “during the first 18 months of bulldogging I broke three legs...Some way, I always reckon time by my broken bones. I find myself saying 'Why that was just a month after I broke my leg in Tulsa,' or, 'Oh yes, I remember when that happened, it was the same summer I broke my ribs at Pendleton...And about that time in Pendleton I fell there in 1924 and broke three ribs at the first performance.’”⁶⁸

⁶³ *The Miami News-Metropolis*, August 23, 1923.

⁶⁴ *Hoof & Horns*, July 1935.

⁶⁵ *Ft. Worth Record-Telegram*, October 15, 1929.

⁶⁶ Charles Wilson and Eloise Fox marriage certificate, October 23, 1929; Manhattan, New York, New York, New York City Municipal Archives, New York; FHL microfilm 1653968.

⁶⁷ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 21, 1921.

⁶⁸ *Hoof & Horns*, December 1934.

Hastings regularly fought through the injuries and pain, garnering a reputation among her cohort as a resilient cowgirl who rarely surrendered her time in the arena. Legends of her perseverance circulated among the rodeo community, such as the time when she broke her ankle while jumping from her horse to the steer, continued to successfully throw the steer in twelve seconds despite the pain, and then spent the night in a hospital.⁶⁹ There was also the time when, at the 1929 Madison Square Garden rodeo, she was knocked unconscious during a bronc ride when her saddle came loose and rolled underneath the horse's belly, resulting in several kicks to her head. Following a night in the hospital, she disregarded the orders of her doctors and returned to Madison Square Garden, "demanding a different saddle and the same bronk."⁷⁰ Doctors recommended that she pull out of contracted performances at Tucson in both 1925 and 1930 due to wounds she had suffered earlier those years. She ultimately did cancel those bulldogging performances but went ahead with riding broncs instead. In perhaps her most legendary display of toughness through injury, at the age of 37, she suffered a broken rib the day prior to her final appearance at the Tucson rodeo in 1935. Rather than withdraw, she successfully bulldogged tough "rubber neck" steers with "wooden legs" each of the three days of the rodeo, "even though it took a shot of cocaine to put her through the performance."⁷¹

Hastings understood and accepted the danger inherent in her performances as simply part of the job, stating that she "may be trampled to death one of these days, and again, death may come quickly on one of those rapier like horns. But it's thrilling. I wouldn't give up my job for anything in the world. And then, you know, one has to make a living some way, and this is my

⁶⁹ *Casper Star Tribune*, July 29, 1925; *Variety*, July 22, 1925.

⁷⁰ *Billboard*, November 2, 1929; *The Courier Express*, November 1, 1929.

⁷¹ *Hoof & Horns*, March 1935; *Arizona Daily Star*, February 23, 1935.

profession.”⁷² In another interview, she argued the numerous injuries were worth it, proclaiming she “wouldn’t give this up for any other life. I like the thrill when I match my 135 pounds against a half ton of brute force. I like the feeling of triumph which surges through me when the animal falls to the ground.”⁷³ She admitted that she experienced fear of injuries, stating that “when I see that ole steer come charging down the track, I almost shudder with fright. But in a moment it is over, as I leap from my horse and make a catch for the steer’s horns.”⁷⁴ That toughness and resilience, combined with the muscular physical stature and unruly personality that would be seen as virtues for her male counterparts, served to threaten her access to the arena. In order to defend her place in mainstream rodeo, she, like so many other cowgirls of her time, worked to conceal the masculine aspects of her body and personality through the construction and emphasis of unmistakably feminine traits.

Constructing a Feminine Fox Hastings

The decade between 1919 and 1929 was unquestionably the peak of access and popularity for women in mainstream American rodeo. Well over two hundred women competed in “ladies” events or performed as contract acts at the largest and most prestigious rodeos, including Cheyenne, Calgary, Madison Square Garden, and Tucson.⁷⁵ Many, like Fox Hastings, garnered immense fame and drew thousands of spectators to stadiums for their performances. Their inclusion in rodeo, though, was strictly limited and neither easily attained nor preserved.

⁷² *The Times-Picayune*, May 6, 1934.

⁷³ *San Mateo Times*, April 18, 1936.

⁷⁴ Estelle Gilbert Papers, Box 1, Folder 13, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

⁷⁵ Scofield, “Riding Bareback,” 16.

While some rodeo producers recognized the value of including separate “ladies” events in their programs, and some even offered equal prize money and contract pay to men and women, cowgirls were firmly prohibited from competing alongside men for the same prestigious awards. This fact was made clear at the 1924 Pendleton Round-up in Oregon, when Hastings and several other cowgirls appealed to the board of directors to allow women the opportunity to enter the men’s events and challenge for the World Champion title, only for the board to swiftly deny their request.⁷⁶

Even the most inclusive producers made access to rodeos difficult for cowgirls when they frequently defined rodeo events as tasks purely for virulent, western men in promotional materials. An advance advertisement for a 1927 rodeo in Illinois described “riding, roping, and wrestling” cattle as “a ‘He Man’s’ Job, as it means a continuous battle between man and beast from the start to finish.”⁷⁷ The souvenir program for the 1930 Madison Square Garden rodeo, which included a cowgirl bronc riding event, explained that “it takes a he-man to stand the work of the Rodeo, to stick to the saddle while the pounding jar of the outlaw’s hoof as he hits the ground is like the hammering of a pile driver on the rider’s spine.”⁷⁸ These types of depictions of rodeo events as both physically demanding and directly descended from the work of masculine cowboys of the frontier appeared on the programs and posters that littered countless rodeo grounds throughout the 1920s.

Newspaper reporters, editors, and columnists also frequently framed the presence of Hastings and other cowgirls in the rodeo arena along gendered lines - as female trespassers

⁷⁶ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, November 2, 1924.

⁷⁷ *Freeport Journal-Standard*, June 4, 1927.

⁷⁸ Madison Square Garden rodeo program, 1930, Box 20, Folder 11, Collection of Rodeo Programs and Ephemera, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

within a male space. Following the 1927 Los Angeles rodeo, the *Los Angeles Times* published a large standalone photo of Hastings struggling to bring down her steer below a prominent headline that read “Another Invader of Man’s Domain.”⁷⁹ The *Arizona Daily Star* similarly published a large photo of Hastings aboard a bucking bronc below a bold headline that declared “It’s a Man’s Job, But She Does It!”⁸⁰ Characterizations such as these reflected a concern on the part of rodeo observers that women riders, ropers, and bulldoggers were not only invading a male space, but also threatening their own femininity in the process.

The arena represented a deeply mythologized space, and the work done inside of it represented a deeply mythologized act – one that was intricately intertwined with popular notions of a distinctly white, western masculinity. Riding, roping, and wrestling the untamed animals of rodeo explicitly served to recall a myth of Anglo male dominance of the rugged nature of the American West. Through risking their bodies performing dangerous feats reminiscent of an idealized frontier, these women also risked violating the normative roles of their gender within that myth, roles that included tending to themselves, their family, and their homes rather than tending to horses and cattle. In an effort to preserve their place in the masculine rodeo arena, cowgirls such as Hastings purposefully constructed and emphasized exaggerated feminine identities outside the arena. Cowgirls accentuated the feminine aspects of both their physical bodies and their personalities in front of reporters and onlookers, highlighting their attractive features, make-up trends, colorful attire, and, most crucially, their gendered role as homemaker.

⁷⁹ *Los Angeles Times*, May 23, 1927.

⁸⁰ *Arizona Daily Star*, February 16, 1933.

Fox Hastings and her cohort understood that the public's concern over their potential over-masculinization through their travails in the arena could be assuaged through assurances of the physically alluring and feminine aspects of the cowgirls' bodies, and the press was often eager to provide those assurances. One particular article published in *Billboard* following the 1927 Madison Square Garden rodeo succinctly demonstrates the ways in which cowgirls strategically represented themselves to journalists, and the ways those journalists interpreted and amplified those representations to readers. The article's author begins by declaring that "beauty was well represented by the cowgirls who startled New York" with their impressive rodeo performances. Supposedly the author overheard spectators assuming that, even though the cowgirls "look pretty," they "must be 'hard boiled' to work like that." The author then presents a brief review of interviews with nine individual cowgirls, and an assurance that each is indeed representative of "beauty and refinement" despite their actions in the arena. For example, the author describes Tad Lucas as a "wisp of femininity" and "soft-voiced and demure, she doesn't suggest the hardness that enabled her to ride a steer before she learned to ride a snorting, kicking bronk." Readers learn that Grace Runyon is "a picturesque figure as she rides a bronk, her golden curls flung to the breeze. As pretty as a magazine cover girl and typically American." Descriptions such as these, of the maintenance of physically attractive and feminine features by cowgirls even as they accomplished masculine tasks, calmed public concern over the participation of women in rodeo.

Numerous publications across the country similarly worked with cowgirls throughout the 1920s to emphasize their physical beauty and feminine characteristics for a public audience. The caption for a posed photo with Hastings and six other cowgirls in the *Washington Post* read "here

is a genuine round-up of prairie beauties.”⁸¹ A similar photo in *Billboard* in advance of the Madison Square Garden rodeo was accompanied by a description of the cowgirls as “intellectual and attractive young women.” The caption writer claimed that “no nicer looking group of young women could be chosen from any Broadway musical production.”⁸² Rural, western journalists similarly described the cowgirls as “slim and easy on the eyes” as well as “slender, wiry girls, immaculate and picturesque.”⁸³ One Texas reporter described the cowgirls in Hastings’s cohort as “pretty” with “soft skin.”⁸⁴ The following year, the same reporter described them as “real, natural girls” who “even powder their noses before entering the arena.”⁸⁵ In Los Angeles, one especially intrepid reporter clarified that “to see them risking life and limb breaking satanic mounts or subduing wild steers, such a supposition would seem almost ridiculous. But an inspection before the girls enter the arena discloses the fact that they are marcelled and manicured.”⁸⁶ For spectators attending the rodeo, concern over the absurdity of women performing such plainly masculine acts with rodeo animals could be at least partly quelled with the knowledge that the women at least complied to cultural norms of feminine beauty.

The feminine features of their bodies reassured audiences of the appropriateness of the cowgirls’ presence in rodeos, but the physical danger inherent in their performances posed a risk to their bodies and their gender. To ease this worry, cowgirls, and Hastings specifically, utilized the numerous photographers present at mainstream rodeos and the images they widely distributed to the public. Hastings frequently posed for the camera after successfully downing

⁸¹ *The Washington Post*, November 16, 1922.

⁸² *Billboard*, October 8, 1924.

⁸³ *Morning Oregonian*, September 19, 1924.

⁸⁴ *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, November 26, 1920.

⁸⁵ *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, March 9, 1921.

⁸⁶ *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 1926.

each steer, flashing a wide smile while seemingly holding the massive steer to the ground with ease. This pose, publicized multiple times in newspapers and magazines across the country, served a dual purpose. It simultaneously attracted attention and popularity to her unique performance and quelled any concerns by an otherwise worried public that the task was too strenuous or dangerous for a woman such as her.



Fox Hastings posing for the camera while under control of a downed steer, 1930. From Photographic Study Collection, Box PC1, Folder 211, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Fashion and cosmetics were also important mediums through which Hastings and other cowgirls could signal both their Western authenticity as well as their femininity. She often emphasized her use of make-up, explaining to one New York journalist that her “favorite powder puff” was “just right to fix up with after a hard battle with a fractious bronc.”⁸⁷ Like many

⁸⁷ Estelle Gilbert Papers, Box 1, Folder 13, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

cowgirls, she was also known to wear bright shirts and scarves with “rainbow colors” and a large, black cowboy hat.⁸⁸ Reporters eagerly noted the fashion trends of cowgirls and sought to convey to readers the keen attention cowgirls paid to their appearance. One reporter noted in 1921 that the cowgirls “make much ado about their hats” and frequently complement each other on their “good looking new boots.”⁸⁹ When Hastings wore a “fancy braided and beaded buckskin dress with a riding skirt” at the 1929 Fort Worth rodeo, the local newspaper reported it excitedly as “a glimpse of the old West” before cowgirls began wearing “breeches and chaps.”⁹⁰ Even the unseen clothing of the cowgirls was of interest to readers. A Texas newspaper noted that “they wear, yes they do – lace hose. Under the heavy cowgirl boots are the sheerest and daintiest silk hose.”⁹¹

While looking and dressing feminine were important factors in the cowgirls’ objective of maintaining their role in mainstream rodeo, conforming to societal expectations of feminine behavior and household roles was equally if not more important. Hastings and other cowgirls actively participated in the construction and demonstration of their femininity by claiming the role of housekeeper outside the arena. In spite of the fact that she largely lived out of her roadster and hotel rooms, crisscrossing the country throughout the year, Hastings repeatedly and enthusiastically emphasized in interviews with press that she fulfilled the role of homemaker for her husbands. Shortly following her appearance at the first Tucson rodeo in 1925, the *Fort Worth Record-Telegram* ran a front page story, the headline of which declared “Woman Bulldogger Is Homebody When Away From Rodeo Corrals: Champion Housekeeper, Mate’s Claim.” The

⁸⁸ *The Times-Picayune*, May 6, 1934.

⁸⁹ *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, March 9, 1921.

⁹⁰ *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, March 11, 1929.

⁹¹ *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, March 9, 1921

reporter described Hastings as almost having two personalities: “Fox, the cowgirl, was left at the corral where she threw the steer,” but “after the threshold of her home was crossed it was ‘Mrs. Hastings’ who talked.” The story described Hastings as “a good cook and a tidy housekeeper” who “always prepares the meals” herself.⁹²

In advance of the 1928 Sioux City rodeo, one reporter interviewed Hastings and described her primarily as “good looking, a premier housewife and cook” and secondarily as “champion woman steer wrestler of the world.” The writer assured readers that Hastings had already made “a temporary home for her husband” in the rental apartment in which they stayed during the rodeo, and that she was “acknowledged the best cook of all women of the roundup world and an invitation to dinner at Fox’s home is never turned down by any rodeo star.”⁹³ In advance of the 1931 rodeo, the *Arizona Daily Star* published a long feature on Hastings, the lead of which was not her exploits in the arena but instead her uncharacteristically strong handshake and her skills in the kitchen. The reporter reassured readers that, although Hastings possessed a “bone crushing grip” and excelled in the “he-man sport” of rodeo, she “can think of nothing more intriguing than cooking a wholesome and attractive meal for her bronc-busting husband.”⁹⁴

Later that fall, leading into the 1932 rodeo, the *Arizona Daily Star* again ran a short report on Chuck Wilson and his new wife, Fox, who by this time had legally and publicly changed her surname to Wilson. The reporter emphasized Chuck Wilson’s extensive preparations and practice routine, which clearly contrasted with the domestic characterization of his wife. Rather than getting dirty practicing outside, Fox Wilson claimed that when not on the road at rodeos,

⁹² *Fort Worth Record-Telegram*, March 7, 1925.

⁹³ *Sioux City Journal*, August 22, 1928.

⁹⁴ *Arizona Daily Star*, February 11, 1931.

she “gets a kick” out of “the home and fireside act.” As an example, she stressed that she was currently “more interested in the antics of the oven in which she hopes to roast a Christmas turkey than she is in the weight and speed of the steers which she will meet in the arena later in the season.”⁹⁵

Of course, Fox Wilson was not the only cowgirl who constructed a publicly feminine identity in order to preserve her space in the arena. At the 1922 Madison Square Garden rodeo, a New York City reporter interviewed several women contestants with the expectation “to interview half a dozen young tomboys” but instead found himself “in the presence of six young mistresses of dignified deportment.” The cowgirls insisted they were “feminine in [their] predilections” with hobbies that included designing and sewing their own clothes, caring for their children, and, of course, cooking for the men in their lives.⁹⁶ The effectiveness of this strategy was made clear in an account of steer roper Mabel Strickland’s performance at the 1927 Pendleton Round-up. The local reporter recounted how “Mabel, although she has invaded the cowboy’s territory in the roping event, is charmingly feminine. There is nothing masculine in her appearance and she does not wear manish clothes.” As long as cowgirls comported themselves correctly and constructed an identity that complied with societal expectations of their gender, they could carve a space for themselves in the arena, at least temporarily.

The End of a Career, the End of an Era

⁹⁵ *Arizona Daily Star*, December 18, 1931.

⁹⁶ *Billboard*, November 25, 1922.

Fox Wilson was likely unaware of the significance of her performance at the 1935 Tucson rodeo as she and Chuck arrived at the rodeo grounds on a cool February afternoon. A decade into its existence, in spite of the calamitous challenges of the Great Depression, the rodeo was as popular as ever. Nearly three weeks before events were set to begin, the executive committee ordered the construction of over 2,000 additional seats around the arena, and the Tucson Chamber of Commerce formed a special housing committee to find accommodations for the influx of visitors. Advance reports listed the return of Fox Wilson to the Tucson arena high among the “special attractions” that promised to make the rodeo “the best ever held in the Southwest.”⁹⁷ But after gritting through broken ribs and successfully downing her final steer with the aid of cocaine, 1935 would be her final appearance in the Tucson arena. Her last known bulldogging performance was just a few months later at the Sonoma, California, rodeo in June of 1935.⁹⁸ According to one report, in January of 1936 Fox Wilson was confined to the Clark’s Rest Home in Tucson with a “serious illness.”⁹⁹ A month later, the 1936 Tucson Rodeo program included a special section devoted to her:

For the first time in years La Fiesta de los Vaqueros will not be able to present the best woman bulldogger in the world, Fox Wilson. Since the beginning of the show in 1925 this popular rodeo trouper has put on an exhibition for the Tucson spectators, even though at times her physical condition would hardly permit, and she took it on the chin once too often. Today she is confined to her bed and the physical breakdown calls for a long period of rest. Let’s wish her lots of luck and a speedy recovery.¹⁰⁰

The decline of Fox Wilson’s career and physical health paralleled the decline in opportunities for women in the traditional, dangerous events at mainstream, professional rodeos

⁹⁷ *The Arizona Republic*, February 3, 1935.

⁹⁸ *Napa Journal*, June 22, 1935.

⁹⁹ *Tucson Daily Citizen*, January 29, 1936.

¹⁰⁰ Tucson Rodeo program, 1936, Box 3, Folder 8, Collection of Rodeo Programs and Ephemera, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

both in Tucson and nationally. Her performance in 1935 was the final time a woman rode a bronc, wrestled a steer, or roped as a competitor or as a contract performer at the Tucson Rodeo. Beginning in 1936, the organizing committee reserved those well-known events for solely male participants, and they sponsored separate, less hazardous events such as rodeo queen contests and eventually barrel racing for women participants. The same was true at both large and small rodeos across the country, as organizers gradually eliminated cowgirl events from the late 1920s through World War II. Rodeo historians have put forward several explanations for the marginalization of women in rodeo by male producers. These include the firestorm caused by the violent death of bronc rider Bonnie McCarroll at the 1929 Pendleton Round-Up, the dual effects of the economic devastation wrought by the Great Depression and the rationing requirements of World War II, the unionization of professional rodeo cowboys and the creation of the Cowboy's Turtle Association in 1936, and the professionalization and "Hollywood-ization" of rodeo, especially the introduction of Gene Autry into the rodeo production business.¹⁰¹

An additional, often overlooked yet crucial factor was that although the feminine identities that Fox Wilson and other cowgirls fostered may have appeased fears of their individual over-masculinization, they ultimately made room for criticism that their presence was overly feminizing the masculine space of the rodeo arena. This sentiment came to a head when six men contestants reportedly withdrew from the 1931 rodeo in Murdock, Kansas, after a group of women contestants climbed aboard horses and rode around the rodeo grounds in "beach pajamas." One of the protesting men signaled the worry he and many fellow male contestants

¹⁰¹ For more on the marginalization of women from mainstream rodeo, see LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*; Roach, *The Cowgirls*; Michael Allen, "The Rise and Decline of the Early Rodeo Cowgirl: The Career of Mabel Strickland, 1916-1941," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 83 (October 1992): 122-127.

held concerning the effeminizing effects of women contestants when he declared that “they will have us using lip stick and plucking our eyebrows next.”¹⁰² Along a similar vein, author Peter B. Kyne spoke at the 1932 RAA convention in Tucson and passionately defended rodeo as “the last outpost of masculinity” in a country he claimed was “becoming over feminized” by radicals wielding a “spirit of old womanism.” Kyne was insistent about the urgent need to protect rodeo from feminizing forces, proclaiming that “we have few liberties left, and if we are not careful they will be taken away from us.”¹⁰³ A 1936 editorial in the *Arizona Daily Star* echoed this same attitude, arguing that “it is a grimy, bloody, sweaty business, this rodeo; a joyous recognition of the cruelty and violence that marks man’s death-struggle with nature.”¹⁰⁴ Such an event was clearly no place for an attractive, well-dressed housewife, even if her riding, roping, or bulldogging skills could rival those of any cowboy.

Outside observers were not the only ones who grew increasingly concerned about feminine participants in dangerous rodeo events. Those intimately involved in producing and competing in mainstream rodeos quietly yet clearly indicated their trepidation with the inclusion of cowgirls in those rodeos. In 1936, announcer Carl Tyler confirmed what most organizers rarely stated publicly when he told a reporter that “rodeo is no place for women.” Although he noted that Fox Wilson was “the best lady contestant” he had ever seen, he argued that cowgirls “should not be permitted to take part on bucking stock” because “the hazards are too great and the women too temperamental.”¹⁰⁵ The following year, Ralph Hemphill, the manager of the Oklahoma state fair and rodeo, similarly declared that women contestants would not be included

¹⁰² *The Tipton Daily Tribune*, September 8, 1931.

¹⁰³ *Arizona Daily Star*, February 19, 1932; *Billboard*, March 5, 1932.

¹⁰⁴ *Arizona Daily Star*, February 24, 1936.

¹⁰⁵ *The Lethbridge Herald*, July 25, 1936.

in any of his rodeo's events. "We have built up the rodeo around men's sports," Hemphill stated, "and we want speed and action. These we can't have with women competing."¹⁰⁶

Opinions such as Tyler's and Hemphill's were pervasive and reflected in the way men involved in rodeo productions treated women participants. One spectator of the Pendleton Stampede observed that "the inherent chivalry of not only the public, but the cowboy, makes them shrink from witnessing injury to a woman," quoting bull rider Skeeter Bill Robbins who reportedly quipped "I sure do hate ter see a girl git hurt."¹⁰⁷ At a 1937 rodeo in Saskatchewan, experienced cowgirl Florence Gates recalled how her bronc "did not buck hard." Yet, the two pick-up men charged with aiding riders when their rides were complete moved in to help too quickly. Gates lamented how they "flanked me on each side and lifted me off the horse before I was ready to let him go" solely because they were "afraid that I might get hurt." As Gates remembered, the two cowboys only saw "a little country girl," and underestimated "how tough I was."¹⁰⁸

Unfortunately, Fox Wilson never publicly expressed her thoughts on the rather abrupt marginalization of women from rodeo throughout the second half of the 1930s. In fact, she rarely if ever spoke publicly at all following her illness and retirement from rodeo in 1935. Compared to the popularity and fame of her rodeo career, relatively little is known about the final years of her life, except that it was full of pain and heartache. We do know that Fox and Chuck Wilson grew to love southern Arizona during their numerous trips to Tucson for the rodeo. Prior to her

¹⁰⁶ *The Daily Oklahoman*, August 17, 1937.

¹⁰⁷ Newspaper clipping, n.d., Box 16, Folder 20, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

¹⁰⁸ Thelma Poirier, ed., *Cowgirls: 100 Years of Writing the Range* (Edmonton: Lone Pine Publishing, 1997), 259-260.

retirement, they frequently spent their winters on the Bird Yoas ranch near Amado, helping to gather and tend to cattle while waiting for La Fiesta de los Vaqueros to begin in February.¹⁰⁹ By 1938 they were living fulltime just south of Tucson in Calabasas, and Fox Wilson was still undergoing surgeries for old rodeo injuries.¹¹⁰ During World War II, she worked in a truck station patching inner tubes and mounting truck tires at a Firestone tire store in Tucson.¹¹¹ Near the end of 1945, the Wilsons moved to the Clear Creek ranch south of Phoenix, where Chuck Wilson served as the ranch manager. Less than three years later, on July 30, 1948, he died of a heart attack at 48 years old.¹¹² According to several of her friends, sometime between the end of World War II and her husband's death, Fox Wilson also learned she was in the advanced stages of tuberculosis.¹¹³ Unable to carry on with an ailing body and aching heart, she took her own life on August 14, 1948. She was fifty years old.

In many ways, the trajectory of Fox Hastings/Wilson's life and health mirrors the history of women in mainstream rodeo during the first half of the twentieth century. As a young, healthy, talented horsewoman, she made a name for herself at Wild West shows before transitioning to the rodeo circuit at the peak of national popularity for rodeo cowgirls during the 1920s. As a bronc rider, trick rider, and bulldogger, she simultaneously thrilled and distressed crowds with her dangerous performances that defied traditional gender norms. She and her fellow cowgirls endured constant scrutiny and concerns over the appropriateness of their performances from male contestants, rodeo producers, the press, and rodeo audiences. Yet, she

¹⁰⁹ *Nogales International*, May 13, 1933; *Nogales International*, March 3, 1934.

¹¹⁰ *Nogales International*, September 10, 1938.

¹¹¹ Reba Perry Blakely, *Rodeo News*, September 1977, 21-34; *Tucson Daily Citizen*, December 24, 1943.

¹¹² *The Arizona Republic*, August 1, 1948.

¹¹³ Estelle Gilbert Papers, Box 1, Folder 16, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

and other cowgirls endured, alleviating the public's anxiety through the construction of publicly feminine identities that conformed to early twentieth-century ideals of womanhood, including physical attractiveness, feminine clothing, and the fulfilment of all domestic duties. Just as Wilson's health began to deteriorate in the mid-1930s, though, prospects for women in mainstream rodeo started to disappear as well. Concerns over rodeo's masculinizing effects on cowgirls transformed into concerns over cowgirls' feminizing effects on rodeo. By the time Wilson's body succumbed to her multiple injuries and illnesses, mainstream producers had effectively cut all opportunities for women to compete in the dangerous and traditionally masculine events of rodeo.

Fox Hastings/Wilson and her generation were not the final group of cowgirls to long for the back of bucking bronc or to yearn for a rope in their hands. As they exited the arena, a new generation of cowgirls entered. Utilizing different strategies of resistance, the women that followed Wilson navigated ever-changing and oftentimes delicate gender expectations on the mainstream rodeo circuit. From late 1930s through the rest of the twentieth century, cowgirls never stopped fighting for a space in rodeo. They defiantly persisted through marginalized roles, staking a claim to part of the tale of the American West that rodeo represents.

Chapter 2

“And Without No Women’s Lib”: Fern Sawyer and a New Generation’s Fight for Women’s Place in Rodeo

Late on Sunday night, March 18, 1945, Fern Sawyer strode into the fog of cigarette smoke and dust inside the Will Rogers Memorial Coliseum aboard a “fiery little” bay horse named Belen.¹¹⁴ Dressed in a spotless white felt cowboy hat, white western shirt, and white coat, Sawyer reflected the bright electric lights so strikingly that surely every eye was drawn her direction. The massive coliseum, with its dirt arena encircled by 5,652 sold out seats, was hosting the final performance of the Fort Worth Stock Show and Rodeo. Organizers moved the historic rodeo, which was the first to be performed indoors in 1918, from its original home in the older and smaller Cowtown Coliseum a decade earlier. Now, with more room for zealous north Texas rodeo fans, the rodeo was enjoying unprecedented popularity with all but three of the nineteen performances sold out.¹¹⁵

Along with the traditional rodeo events of bronc and bull riding, steer wrestling, and roping, the Fort Worth rodeo has traditionally included a cutting horse competition. Cutting, an event in which a horse and rider work together to separate a cow from a herd and prevent it from returning, originated from the task of peeling cattle from a herd for branding or doctoring on large western ranches. The event is traditionally judged, with higher scores awarded to riders who successfully demonstrate their horse’s athleticism and ability to anticipate and react to a cow’s sudden movements. Although the event has not consistently remained a part of

¹¹⁴ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, August 1, 1953.

¹¹⁵ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, March 18, 1945.

mainstream rodeos nationwide, cutting has been – and continues to be – an exceedingly popular event in Texas since the early twentieth century.¹¹⁶

At that final Sunday night performance in 1945, Fern Sawyer and Belen entered the arena as one of the remaining three horse and rider pairs in the cutting horse competition. Out of dozens of the most skilled cutting horses and top male riders in the country, this 24-year-old cowgirl and her 11-year-old gelding had qualified for the rodeo’s final round. It was not a fluke, though, and hardly anyone familiar with the rodeo world of west Texas and eastern New Mexico would have been surprised. For the previous five years, Sawyer and Belen had earned a reputation for beating the best men on the cutting scene. In 1942, the pair won at the El Paso rodeo and finished second at the Fort Worth rodeo.¹¹⁷ A year later, they bested legendary cowboy Bob Crosby and his mount in a special 10-head match in Tatum, New Mexico.¹¹⁸ In 1944, they defeated many of the top riders at the world’s oldest rodeo in Pecos, Texas.¹¹⁹ In just a five-year span, Sawyer and Belen won at least a dozen saddles, several pairs of boots, and thousands of dollars in prize money.

According to reports of the finale of the 1945 Fort Worth rodeo, the performance displayed by Fern Sawyer and Belen that night was “the greatest cutting horse exhibition ever seen in the arena at the Will Roger Memorial Coliseum.” Demonstrating his athleticism and cow sense, Belen “reared on his hind feet and pawed in the face” of one of the cows, bringing “the

¹¹⁶ The event of cutting, with its ties to ranching history and the deep human-animal relationship it requires, has received surprisingly little attention from either western or animal historians. For a brief overview of the event’s history and some of the more successful horses and riders, see Paul Laune, *America’s Quarter Horse* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973), 460-465.

¹¹⁷ *El Paso Times*, June 7, 1942; *El Paso Times*, May 24, 1942.

¹¹⁸ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 16, 1943.

¹¹⁹ *The Austin Statesman*, July 6, 1944.

crowd to its feet” with his “sensational display.”¹²⁰ The crowd in attendance undoubtedly would have been in awe of the petite, five-foot three-inch and 112-pound cowgirl masterfully guiding the massive bay Thoroughbred with a stunning white blaze. At the end of the show, judge Jess York handed a blue ribbon to Sawyer, cementing her as the first woman to win one of the most prestigious cutting horse competitions in the world.

Decades later Fern Sawyer would look back on her pathbreaking win at the Fort Worth rodeo and declare that she was “prouder of that than anything” else she had accomplished in her career.¹²¹ Such a declaration held heavy significance, given the monumental accomplishments of Sawyer’s long career as a rancher and rodeo contestant. Unfortunately, there are no direct quotes from the two men matched against her in the finale that night, but according to Sawyer at least one of them was “madder than hell.”¹²² By that time Sawyer was accustomed to beating cowboys and seemed to relish in their displeasure. Looking back on her win over Bob Crosby in their special ten-head match, she fondly recalled with a laugh that “Bob had hated to lose, especially to a skirt.”¹²³ Sawyer’s dominant victories in cutting competitions, and the resentment from her male counterparts due to her gender, illustrate both the efforts to restrict the role of women in rodeo and the capabilities of women contestants when they resisted.

Fern Sawyer lived an incredible life that spanned several distinct periods in the history of women’s participation in rodeo. Raised on ranches along the Texas-New Mexico border during the 1920s and 1930s, Sawyer practically grew up on the back of a horse, performing traditionally masculine tasks like rounding up and branding cattle with regularity. Her love of rodeo led to her

¹²⁰ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, March 19, 1945.

¹²¹ *Albuquerque Journal*, September 10, 1972.

¹²² Sally Harrison, “The Last Great Cow Horse,” *Cutting Horse Chatter*, October 1994.

¹²³ *Albuquerque Journal*, May 27, 1993.

success at competitions in the West, but also as a sponsor girl at local Texas rodeos and large eastern rodeos during the 1940s. Following World War II, Sawyer won champion all-around cowgirl at the groundbreaking 1947 Tri-State All-Girl Rodeo in Amarillo, Texas, and was influential in the subsequent formation of the Girls Rodeo Association. When Sawyer's days as a competitor came to an end and she turned to managing her ranch, she remained a prominent voice in the world of rodeo throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Sawyer frequently and unabashedly shared her opinion on issues related to the opportunities available to women in rodeo, arguing for equal representation in the arena and equal prize money for cowgirl contestants.

Fern Sawyer's life is uniquely useful as a lens through which to examine the experiences of women in rodeo after World War II, largely because her story is so representative of the complex ways postwar cowgirls spoke about, navigated, and negotiated the gender systems in which they lived. Her work on ranches in her youth was typical of the backgrounds of many women contestants. Her appearances as a sponsor girl exemplify the difficult environment a young generation of women faced following the 1930s, one in which mainstream rodeo producers marginalized women and attempted to restrict their performances to more conservative gender roles. Sawyer's involvement in the 1947 Tri-State All-Girls Rodeo, the formation of the GRA, and the rodeo world generally following her retirement also illustrate the diverse strategies of resistance women employed against mainstream rodeo producers.

In many ways, Sawyer and her contemporaries seem to fit within the contours of a basic definition of a twentieth-century feminist. Following historian Nancy Cott's definition of feminism, which entails an opposition to sex hierarchy, a belief that women's condition is not

natural and is thus amenable to change, and an identification with “the group called women,” then Sawyer certainly qualifies as a feminist.¹²⁴ Several historians have convincingly portrayed postwar rodeo cowgirls as feminists through emphasizing the ways cowgirls rejected their marginalized roles in rodeo and worked to improve the equality of genders in the arena.¹²⁵

At the same time, any portrayal of Fern Sawyer and her contemporaries as feminists must grapple with their frequent and emphatic antifeminist statements and their (at least rhetorical) rejection of the objectives of second wave feminism. Throughout the height of the Women’s Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, Sawyer and numerous other rodeo cowgirls publicly criticized the ambitions of feminist activists and denounced the movement as a whole. Historian Renee Laegreid has drawn attention to the fact that the core group of women who organized the 1947 Tri-State rodeo, including Sawyer, “lived outside the gendered boundaries of the era, implying their status as at least profeminists.”¹²⁶ Yet, as Laegreid points out, these women all embraced traditional feminine characteristics and behavior, and, through interviews and oral histories, rejected any kind of association with feminism. Examining that interplay between undertaking feminist actions and expressing antifeminist rhetoric can, as Laegreid says “help broaden one’s understanding of the complex, multifaceted ways in which gender is constructed in [Texas].”¹²⁷ This chapter seeks to further that objective by expanding the analysis

¹²⁴ Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987),

¹²⁵ The either explicit labelling of postwar rodeo cowgirls as feminists or the implicit portrayal of their actions as feminist can be found in Candace Savage, *Cowgirls* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996); Mary Lou LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo: Pioneer Professional Athletes* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Teresa Jordan, *Cowgirls: Women of the American West* (New York: Anchor, 1982); and Joyce Gibson Roach, *The Cowgirls* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1990)

¹²⁶ Renee Laegreid, “Ranch Women and Rodeo Performers in Post–World War II West Texas: A Cowgirl by Any Other Name – Than Feminist,” in *Texas Women: Their Histories, Their Lives*, eds. Elizabeth Hayes Turner, Stephanie Cole, and Rebecca Sharpless (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015), 221.

¹²⁷ Laegreid, “Ranch Women and Rodeo Performers,” 220.

to include the actions and statements of women contestants throughout the Women's Liberation Movement.

Beyond simply examining the ways in which women contestants simultaneously advanced and denounced feminist objectives through their actions and statements, this chapter demonstrates the crucial (at least regional) role cowgirls played in advancing women's rights in the postwar United States. Despite their rhetorical rejection of feminism, the fight by Sawyer and other cowgirls to maintain a space in rodeo deserves to be recognized for its specific contributions to the women's rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, especially among rural women of the western United States. Rodeo cowgirls – and rural western women more generally – have been nearly completely excluded from the historiography of the movement because they do not fit the movement's contours, and because they often self-consciously rejected the movement's values. A limited view of feminism and women's rights that only encompasses urban, middle class women results in an incomplete and misunderstood story. This chapter is a reminder that we need broader conceptions not just of who was a rodeo competitor, but also of feminism and the women's rights movement as a whole.¹²⁸

Additionally, Fern Sawyer's story and the history of the fight by women contestants for space in the postwar rodeo arena offers a useful window into the role of animals and human-

¹²⁸ For an example of the benefits of expanding our conception of feminism beyond urban, middle class women activists to include rural rodeo cowgirls, see Tracey Hanshew, "Cowgirls, Rodeo, and Rural Feminism, 1890-1935" (PhD diss., Oklahoma State University, 2017). Other examples of histories of feminist struggles among groups not traditionally included in the contours of women's rights movements include Nancy Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor Movement: Women and the United Auto Workers, 1935-1975* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and A Little Fire: Women and Working-class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Joan M. Jensen, *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land* (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1981); Jenny Barker Devine, *On Behalf of the Family Farm: Iowa Farm Women's Activism Since 1945* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013).

animal relationships in the construction of gender, especially within rodeo. Producers, announcers, journalists, and regular spectators all commonly defended the exclusion of women from mainstream rodeo by arguing that female bodies simply could not withstand the physical toll exerted by rodeo livestock. Cowgirls recognized and often even agreed with the assessment, yet they frequently argued that their ability to ride the comparatively tamer (though still dangerous) livestock of the women's circuit allowed them to maintain a feminine identity while putting on a comparable and worthwhile show. Like Fox Hastings and her contemporaries, Fern Sawyer and other postwar cowgirls emphasized their feminine characteristics and struggled to show how their femininity was not at danger from the animals in the arena.

One final, important goal of this chapter is to help fill a significant hole in the historiography of rodeo. As detailed in the previous chapter, women contestants such as Fox Hastings were a regular fixture of mainstream American rodeo as early as the 1880s, but especially between 1919 and 1929. Although chapter one demonstrated that access to mainstream rodeos was not guaranteed for women during this period and often required the employment of different strategies (such as the construction of publicly feminine identities) to gain inclusion, there is no arguing that the decade following World War I was the peak of popularity for the rodeo cowgirl. Between 1929 and the beginning of World War II, though, cowgirls endured what many rodeo historians have commonly described as their "decline" from mainstream rodeo. Throughout the 1930s, male rodeo producers steadily and increasingly grew

unwilling to include women's events in their programs, and historians have offered several different explanations for this "decline" in opportunities.¹²⁹

There is no doubt that the previous prospects available for women to compete at the largest, most popular, and most lucrative rodeos in North America evaporated nearly completely in the decade following 1929. Cowgirls seeking a significant role in rodeo during these years faced increased scrutiny, limited inclusion, and outright hostility from producers unlike any time prior. However, framing the history of women in rodeo as a simple narrative of brief yet wide popularity followed by sudden decline and marginalization obscures the efforts and successes by women like Fern Sawyer in their fight for inclusion after World War II.¹³⁰ Women's participation in rodeo, including the dangerous, male-dominated events of rodeo, did not end when Bonnie McCarroll died in Pendleton. Cowgirls continued to organize and perform at all-women rodeos and even some professional, mainstream rodeos from World War II to the present. The regrettably underexplored history of women in rodeo post-World War II is a history of resistance, one that can help reveal important insights about evolving gender norms in post-war America and within an ever-changing myth of the American West. Artificially concluding the narrative of women's history in rodeo at World War II effectively obscures the vitally important

¹²⁹ A few of the more prominent works that describe the period between 1929 and World War II as one of "decline" for women in rodeo include Michael Allen, "The Rise and Decline of the Early Rodeo Cowgirl: The Career of Mabel Strickland, 1916-1941," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 83 (October, 1992), 44-55; Joyce Gibson Roach, *The Cowgirls* (Denton: University of North Texas Press, 1977); Mary Lou LeCompte, "Home on the Range: Women in Professional Rodeo, 1929- 1947," *Journal of Sport History* 17 (1990): 318-346; Candace Savage, *Cowgirls* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996)

¹³⁰ Recent examples of the benefits of unveiling the ways in which women and other marginalized groups have staked a claim of belonging in the story of the American West through their participation in rodeo include Rebecca Scofield, *Outriders: Rodeo at the Fringes of the American West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019) and Elyssa Ford, *Rodeo as Refuge, Rodeo as Rebellion: Gender, Race, and Identity in the American Rodeo* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2020).

and complex relationship between women contestants and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

Early Life on the Ranch

Fern Sawyer was born in 1917 among the arid mesas of eastern New Mexico, on a desolate ranch near the small ghost town of Yeso. Her father, a sheep and cattle rancher, moved the family a few times during Sawyer's adolescence, crisscrossing the border between western Texas and eastern New Mexico looking for work. Eventually they settled on a ranch near Crossroads, New Mexico, when Sawyer was six or seven years old.¹³¹ Sawyer's world view, especially her perspective on gender, was indelibly shaped during long days astride a horse, working cattle as a young girl beside her father. Later in life Sawyer recalled longingly how he lifted her into the saddle before she was tall enough to reach the stirrups herself, where she remained "from morning till night."¹³² Her father taught her the necessary skills of a ranchhand like roping and horsemanship, and no tasks were considered too arduous for Sawyer's age or gender. She later recalled how she had "always worked. From the time I was a year old, I worked – riding, helping men, branding, everything."¹³³

Working on the ranch with her father not only taught Fern Sawyer about working with horses and cattle, but also lessons on perseverance and her belonging among the male-dominated space of the pasture and branding pen. Sawyer described how her father "told me I didn't have to be a good cowboy, but I couldn't be a fair-weather cowboy. So, I'd be out there when it was

¹³¹ Willard Porter, "New Mexico Cutting Horse Gal," *Hoof and Horns*, May 1949; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 25, 1983.

¹³² *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 25, 1983.

¹³³ Jordan, *Cowgirls*, 229.

freezin' and all right alongside him."¹³⁴ She could have remained at the house, safe and dry and warm, but Sawyer earned respect and equal treatment from her father and the male ranchhands through her determination. According to Sawyer, her father stated bluntly that "if you go [work] with us [cowboys], you are going to be treated just like one of the cowboys. You don't quit. You are just one of them."¹³⁵

The lessons that Sawyer learned from her experiences performing ranch duties alongside her father and numerous male ranchhands forged a strong internal conviction that not only was it possible for a woman to reject traditionally feminine roles, doing so was a prerequisite for a happy, fulfilling life. In her view, most women lived in "a pretty small world" full of "gossip" which she had "no time and no use for."¹³⁶ Although it is doubtful that Sawyer read Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and other works of feminist social commentators of the time, she seemed to echo Friedan's core cultural argument when she expressed her belief that the conservative mid-century ideal of an attractive housewife was a role that essentially sentenced a woman to a life of misery.¹³⁷ Most women, she claimed, "just don't have enough to do, so they get bored. This is especially true of girls that have been real beauties. They live of beauty and that's all they have. Then, at 40, they get frantic and start taking pills like Valium."¹³⁸

Through her upbringing, Sawyer came to view the rugged life of the cowboy as one that was both inherently masculine and more fulfilling than that of a housewife, but also one that was available to women who displayed the necessary characteristics and desire. She repeatedly said

¹³⁴ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 25, 1983.

¹³⁵ Jordan, *Cowgirls*, 229.

¹³⁶ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 16, 1943.

¹³⁷ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin, 1963).

¹³⁸ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 25, 1983.

that she thought, spoke, and acted “like a man” because she “grew up around cowboys.”¹³⁹

Sawyer carried a gun on her hip almost daily, regularly smoked a pipe, frequently made use of an expansive vocabulary of expletives, and, as she said, “never had any problems projecting myself.”¹⁴⁰ She understood each of these to be masculine traits that she acquired from her father and other men on the ranch, yet she viewed herself as a woman who held the agency to exhibit such traits. Sawyer also strongly believed that she – and any other woman – should wield their agency to improve their life and avoid the desolate experience of a housewife. As she explained, “I’ve never been bored in my life, and if I get bored, I’ll do something about it... You make life what it is.”¹⁴¹

A stubborn insistence on doing what made her happy regardless of societal gender norms was exemplified in Sawyer’s introduction to rodeo. She expressed an interest in competing as a young teenager, just as opportunities for women in mainstream rodeo began to disappear in the mid-1930s. Despite their shared love of horses and ranchwork, Sawyer said her father “didn’t want me to rodeo, but when he saw I wasn’t going to be stopped, he did everything to help me. If I made a mistake in a rodeo, we came home and worked until we had corrected it.”¹⁴² She began competing at the age of 15, in nearly every event except for roughstock. The horsemanship and roping skills that Sawyer developed on the ranch served her well in the arena. By the end of her first year competing in local rodeos she decided to try bronc riding as well. Her father was initially wary but told her “if I got on that bronc I damn sure better ride him,” and she did.

¹³⁹ *Albuquerque Journal*, September 10, 1972; *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, April 25, 1983.

¹⁴⁰ *Albuquerque Journal*, September 10, 1972; *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, April 25, 1983.

¹⁴¹ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 25, 1983.

¹⁴² *Albuquerque Journal*, September 10, 1972.

Sawyer stayed on her first bronc for the full eight seconds and received a score, but walked away with a hand broken in nine places from “hangin’ on so hard.”¹⁴³

Sawyer was well aware of the fact that her upbringing shaped her personal view on the appropriate behavior of women and her desire to compete in increasingly male-dominated rodeos. She recalled later in life that she “always lived on a ranch. Hell, I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else. I worked on my father’s ranch – that’s why I rodeo, there’s nothing else I could do... Maybe if I had lived in the city, my thinking would be different.”¹⁴⁴ In contrast to many of the earlier generation of women contestants like Fox Hastings who grew up in urban environments and were introduced to rodeo later through their husbands, Sawyer’s childhood on a ranch mirrored that of most rodeo cowgirls of her time. Wanda Harper Bush, a 32-time world champion roper during the 1950s and 1960s, was raised and worked on her family’s cattle ranch in central Texas.¹⁴⁵ Nancy Binford and Thena Mae Farr, the two organizers of the 1947 Tri-State Fair rodeo and core founders of the Girls Rodeo Association, both came from ranching families and learned to ride and rope at young ages.¹⁴⁶ Champion roper and barrel racer Jimmie Gibbs grew up on a cattle ranch in Valley Mills, Texas, where she learned how to ride at the age of three, and where the hired ranch hands taught her how to rope cattle at twelve.¹⁴⁷

Of course, postwar women rodeo contestants were certainly not a monolith, and each had unique life experiences and individual concepts of gender and work. The upbringing of many of these women on ranches, though, where they were expected to perform the same tasks as their

¹⁴³ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 25, 1983.

¹⁴⁴ *Albuquerque Journal*, September 10, 1972.

¹⁴⁵ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, January 27, 1982.

¹⁴⁶ Laegreid, “Ranch Women and Rodeo Performers in Post-World War II West Texas,” 221-222.

¹⁴⁷ *Chicago Tribune*, October 16, 1977.

fathers, brothers, and male counterparts with the same proficiency, instilled in them a perspective quite different from conservative gender distinctions of that time. Roughstock rider Benjie Prudom, for instance, specifically cited the fact that she began riding horses at the age of ten as the foundation of her belief that she was never meant to fulfil the stereotypical role of the feminine, domestic housewife. She explained that when she ““was growing up, most of the girls were told they had to become housewives, you know, sit at home and wash and knit and sew and make dinner. Well, I didn’t like that idea.”¹⁴⁸ Prudom’s rejection of feminine gender roles, grounded in her familiarity and comfort with masculine work, like many of her fellow postwar cowgirls, later guided her resistance to misogynist treatment within the rodeo world.

Rodeo Success and Sponsor Girl Contracts: Opportunities During World War II

Just as Fern Sawyer and a new generation of ranch-raised cowgirls began to show interest in competing at early 1930s rodeos, producers and mainstream rodeo associations started limiting the opportunities for women to ride and rope in the same events as men. Instead, new competitions known as sponsor contests grew in popularity throughout the Great Depression, especially in Sawyer’s home region of west Texas and east New Mexico. Although each rodeo’s sponsor contest had its own quirks, and the structure and participants shifted over time, these contests emerged from the 1931 Texas Cowboy’s Reunion rodeo in Stamford, Texas. Like at many western rodeos of the time, Stamford’s chamber of commerce “sponsored” or selected and supported a young local woman – often the daughter of a prominent rancher – to promote and represent the town at the rodeo. Rather than simply inviting one local sponsor girl, though, the

¹⁴⁸ *The Atchison Daily Globe* (Atchison, Kansas), August 19, 1975.

rodeo committee invited several sponsor girls from other west Texas rodeos to compete in a contest against one another. Unlike dangerous and masculine bronc riding events, the sponsor girl contest reinforced and celebrated more traditionally feminine traits. A panel of primarily male judges awarded the winner based on subjective evaluations of the sponsor girl's horsemanship, their outfit, and the physical attractiveness of their body and their horse.¹⁴⁹

As the daughter of a rancher and as a woman seeking any kind of involvement in rodeo during a time of dwindling opportunities, Sawyer began entering sponsor girl contests during the mid-1930s. Given her talent as a horsewoman and the determination she forged while working on the ranch, she excelled in the contests. Between 1935 and 1939 Sawyer competed in and won contests throughout east New Mexico and west Texas, often impressing the cowboy contestants with her skill as a rider.¹⁵⁰ In September of 1939, while performing at the Colorado City Frontier Round-Up in west Texas as part of the sponsor girl contest, Sawyer and seven of her opponents caught the eye of the publicity director and the arena director of the Madison Square Garden rodeo. The two New York City men, who were in the area looking for talent that could add a feminine flair to their production, quickly signed the heptad of women to contracts for the upcoming rodeo later that year, though specifically to “not be a part of the professional rodeo.” Instead, the contract stated the women would solely “ride in the grand entry” and “be used in publicity tie-ups.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ For more on the 1931 Stamford rodeo, the origins of sponsor girls contests, their ties to rodeo queen competitions, and their larger significance in the history of women in rodeo, see Renee Laegreid, *Riding Pretty: Rodeo Royalty in the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 71-116; Laegreid, “Performers Prove Beauty & Rodeo Can Be Mixed,” 46-48, and LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 114-116.

¹⁵⁰ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, October 13, 1935; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, May 29, 1936; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 4, 1937; *Abilene Reporter-News*, September 7, 1937; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 7, 1938; *Austin American-Statesman*, March 5, 1939.

¹⁵¹ *Billboard*, September 30, 1939.

Sawyer seemed personally conflicted by her appearance as a sponsor girl at the 1939 Madison Square Garden rodeo. Despite her experience as a ranchhand, her talent as a horsewoman, and her dexterity with a rope, the rodeo organizers directed Sawyer and her fellow sponsor girls to perform the simplest of equestrian skills such as mounting and dismounting.¹⁵² Most of their time was spent outside of the arena, completing public relations tasks and photo opportunities, like when Sawyer delivered a letter to New York City Mayor Fiorello La Guardia from Texas Governor Lee O'Daniel in front of a row of reporters and photographers.¹⁵³

At the time, the Madison Square Garden rodeo was one of the few remaining rodeos that continued to offer a women's bronc riding event, and Sawyer was troubled by the fact that she and other sponsor girls presented a dramatically different perspective on the appropriate role of women in rodeo. Instead of the strong, skillful women who rode the same broncs as men, the sponsor girls represented a more conservative vision of femininity that emphasized social status and physical appearance. By 1941, the rodeo organizers completely eliminated the women's bronc riding event in favor of an expanded role for sponsor girls, later known as glamor girls. Looking back on her time in New York City, with the knowledge that her appearance likely contributed to the elimination of the bronc riding event, Sawyer seemed especially troubled:

I thought it was real silly. I liked the bronc riding. I felt bad because Tad Lucas and Florence Randolph and all those great cowgirls I admired so much were back there. They were my idols. They weren't too nice to us at first, because they felt we were amateurs. Some of the glamour girls could hardly ride. Here the rodeo knocked out a good event to bring in a bunch of little old girls who weren't supposed to be anything. I don't blame them; I would have felt the same way.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² *New York Times*, October 20, 1939.

¹⁵³ *New York Times*, October 10, 1939.

¹⁵⁴ Jordan, *Cowgirls*, 229-232.

After returning from New York City, Sawyer competed in several more sponsor contests throughout Texas during the summer of 1940.¹⁵⁵ By 1941, though, Sawyer's days as a sponsor girl were largely over. Several historians have noted the ways in which, as Renee Laegreid described it, World War II "both devastated and created a renaissance for cowgirl athletes."¹⁵⁶ The war led many producers to cancel their rodeos, and those who did not cancel faced a dearth of professional contestants. The scarcity of professional contestants, though, created an opportunity for many women to enter alongside amateur male contestants, especially at rural western rodeos where that opportunity had not existed for over a decade. Sawyer seized that opportunity, abandoned her status as a successful sponsor girl, and demonstrated that she belonged among the male ropers and cutters. In 1941, Sawyer and Belen began their dominant run through New Mexico and Texas rodeos, raking in prize money and besting the top men on the cutting circuit. In addition to her success in cutting competitions, Sawyer excelled with a rope in her hands. She competed in and won both calf roping and team tying events at rodeos across Texas and New Mexico.¹⁵⁷ Sawyer made history when she and Margaret Montgomery became the first pair of women to compete alongside men in the team tying event at the 1944 Pecos rodeo, and Sawyer bested the entire field in the event at the Amarillo rodeo, winning a reported \$1,400 in prizes.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, June 30, 1940; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 2, 1940; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 21, 1940.

¹⁵⁶ Laegreid, *Riding Pretty*, 181. See also Jordan, *Cowgirls*, 237-242 and LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 127-143.

¹⁵⁷ Team tying, a precursor to the modern rodeo event of team roping, was an event in which two ropers worked together to immobilize a steer. One roper would catch the steer's horns, and the other would catch the steer's hind legs. The first roper would then leap off their horse, run to the steer, and tie three of its legs together. *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, November 19, 1940; *Billboard*, December 7, 1940; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, June 20, 1941.

¹⁵⁸ *Billboard*, July 22, 1944; Willard Porter, "New Mexico Cutting Horse Gal," *Hoof and Horns*, May 1949.

Throughout World War II, as she blazed a trail of success through the Texas rodeo circuit, Fern Sawyer continued her work on her father's ranch, assuming more responsibilities as she grew older. Sawyer's success as a ranchhand, a sponsor girl, and as a winning contestant in mainstream arenas earned her recognition by large east coast publications in stories on the ways in which women were capably filling the roles of cowboys who were off fighting in World War II. One such feature from Atlanta identified Sawyer as an experienced cowgirl who had "taken first place in ranch chore competitions against men." Along with dozens of similarly skilled women, the story described how Sawyer was fulfilling a duty critical to the survival of the nation by caring for cattle and maintaining the supply of beef. "If it weren't for the Girls of the Golden West, beef would be even scarcer than it is. Not only do the girls 'work' the cattle," the author explained, "they get them to market and hence onto your table." Additionally, the tasks involved in getting beef to tables "aren't too ladylike," such as caring for cattle with worms and pink eye, cutting off horns and cauterizing the stubs, and pulling newborn calves from bellowing mothers.¹⁵⁹

Celebratory stories of the successes of cowgirls on ranches and in arenas, in defiance of traditional gender roles and behavioral norms, were illustrative of the prospects for change that women contestants recognized during World War II. In contrast to the developments of the 1930s, in which rodeo producers increasingly eliminated dangerous events for women in favor of more conservative, safe, and superficial events like sponsor girl contests, World War II offered a chance for cowgirls to expand their participation in rodeo. Like women throughout American society, many of whom seized upon new opportunities to push against gender norms of work,

¹⁵⁹ *Atlanta Constitution*, August 6, 1944.

leisure, and family during the war, the experiences of rodeo cowgirls through this short period provided a glimpse of future possibilities.¹⁶⁰

The 1947 Tri-State All-Girls Rodeo and the Formation of the GRA

When World War II ended, mainstream producers returned to their prewar preferences for entirely male contestant lists as professional rodeo cowboys returned to the circuit. As bronc and trick rider Mitzi Lucas Riley recalled, “during the war, the women kept the rodeo going. All the fellas were gone...that’s when the women, they just came from everywhere. They did all the performing and all the riding. And when the war was over, the cowboys came back and they said ‘you can go home now and raise the kids.’”¹⁶¹ Without any rodeos allowing women entries in the roping, cutting, or bronc riding events, Sawyer and other women contestants once again were left with few opportunities aside from sponsor contests.

After enjoying several years of success in traditionally male-dominated events, though, Fern Sawyer and her contemporaries were unwilling to settle for glorified horseback beauty contests. The persistence of rodeo cowgirls and their conviction that women could capably perform the same tasks as men, fostered through their upbringing on western ranches, led these women to create a new space for themselves within rodeo. In early 1947, after two years of drastically reduced opportunities for cowgirls, Nancy Binford and Thena Mae Farr set out to organize a completely all-women rodeo production at the Tri-State Fair in Amarillo, Texas. Binford and Farr, two ranch-raised Texas cowgirls who made names for themselves in sponsor

¹⁶⁰ Elaine Tyler May, “Pushing the Limits: 1940-1961,” in *No Small Courage: A History of Women in the United States*, ed. Nancy Cott (Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2000), 473-528.

¹⁶¹ Mitzi Lucas Riley, interview by Kim Moslander, October 21, 1994, Mitzi Lucas Riley file, National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

contests and at rodeos before and during World War II, worked tirelessly for months to convince the fair committee of the value of an all-women rodeo, to attract cowgirls from other states to travel to Amarillo, and to promote the rodeo to a skeptical audience.

Binford and Farr's planning, organizing, and promotional efforts ultimately paid off. A reported crowd of over 3,000 spectators attended each of the four performances, cheering as women contestants roped steers, rode broncs and bulls, and even bulldogged.¹⁶² Interest in the final night performance was so intense that multiple requests from the rodeo's announcer were required "to keep standees from blocking the view of the show." The fair's grandstand manager reported that he had sold at least 4,201 tickets to the show, and another member of the fair's committee described the crowd as "the biggest I've ever seen in this grandstand."¹⁶³ The large collection of Amarilloans that night witnessed a dominant performance by Fern Sawyer, as she won first in the team tying, second in the cutting contest, third in the calf roping and barrel racing, and claimed the prestigious all-around title.¹⁶⁴

The performances by Sawyer, Farr, Binford, and numerous other talented cowgirls at the 1947 Tri-State rodeo clearly influenced the perceptions by spectators about the appropriate gender roles for women, especially in the West. One recollection of the rodeo by Gene A. Howe, publisher of the *Amarillo Globe*, reveals the ways that witnessing the aptitude of women roping and riding in events commonly viewed as solely the realm of men fundamentally changed his perspective on gender and the value of all-women rodeos:

I can remember back, vividly, when I was a young man and what we were told about the young girls. They were delicate creatures. They were so fragile and so peculiarly and

¹⁶² *Amarillo Daily News*, September 23, 1947; *Amarillo Daily News*, September 24, 1947; *Amarillo Daily News*, September 25, 1947.

¹⁶³ *Amarillo Daily News*, September 26, 1947.

¹⁶⁴ *Amarillo Daily News*, September 26, 1947.

wonderfully constructed that they had to be protected against any undue exertion...But it seems the old-timers were entirely wrong. Or out in the West we have girls who are different. Those cow handlers out at the Tri-State Fair last week were as tough, according to their weight, as any cowboys I have ever seen in rodeos. How they could ride those steers and bulldog those steers and ride those broncos is beyond me. And they were not mannish-built girls. Practically all of them were slender and as pretty as most any group of girls in the Panhandle. One of the contestants weighed only 85 pounds and was sufficiently pretty for most beauty contests.¹⁶⁵

Howe's remarks on the physical stature and attractiveness of the contestants demonstrates the pervasiveness of the concern for the safety of the bodies and femininity of cowgirls that would extend well into the 1960s and 1970s. His comment drawing a distinction between the seemingly delicate women of the east coast and the "different" women "out in the West" also effectively creates a separate category of gender for rodeo cowgirls, one in which they are allowed to perform masculine activities as long as they maintain feminine traits. Most importantly, though, Howe's recollection reveals the progressive impact of the Tri-State rodeo, not just among and for women contestants, but among the larger community of Amarillo and the region of west Texas more generally.

A number of historians have framed the production of the 1947 Tri-State rodeo as an essentially feminist achievement.¹⁶⁶ The cowgirls who organized, promoted, and participated in the rodeo created new prospects for gender equality in the face of widespread public scrutiny, against the winds of shifting societal views on women's postwar roles, and within the context of rapidly diminishing opportunities for women in mainstream rodeo. Their actions, from seemingly any perspective, were undoubtedly and definitionally feminist. As Renee Laegreid has

¹⁶⁵ Gene A. Howe, "The Tactless Texan," *The Amarillo Globe*, October 11, 1948.

¹⁶⁶ The most prominent depictions of the 1947 rodeo as a feminist achievement include Candace Savage, *Cowgirls* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996); Mary Lou LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo: Pioneer Professional Athletes* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Joan Burbick, *Rodeo Queens and the American Dream* (New York: Perseus, 2002).

shown, though, an analysis of contemporary interviews as well as oral histories decades later reveals that most of the core group of cowgirls rebuffed any insinuation that their actions could or should be perceived as part of a larger feminist movement.¹⁶⁷ This simultaneous employment of radical strategies toward feminist goals and expression of antifeminist sentiments would be a dynamic that continued for decades into the twentieth century across multiple generations.

Emboldened by the triumph of the 1947 Tri-State rodeo and several more successful all-women rodeos in west Texas, the same group of cowgirls set out to formally establish an organization that – like the Rodeo Cowboys Association had for men – would offer stability and consistency for women in rodeo. On the night of February 29, 1948, Sawyer, Farr, Binford, and several others met at the St. Angelus Hotel in San Angelo, Texas, and founded the Girls Rodeo Association. They crafted membership guidelines, standards of behavior for members, regulations on prize money, and rules for each event (including the sponsor girl event, which the women changed into a timed event rather than a subjectively judged beauty event).¹⁶⁸ The women voted for Sawyer to serve on the board of directors as the association’s cutting contest director. Sawyer was “proud and happy” and considered it “a great honor” to be selected to the board, but she was “mainly pleased about the forming of the organization” because it meant that women contestants finally had “a real feeling of security.”¹⁶⁹ Following decades of misogynist marginalization, inconsistent opportunities, and shifting roles that increasingly emphasized

¹⁶⁷ Renee Laegreid, “Ranch Women and Rodeo Performers in Post–World War II West Texas: A Cowgirl by Any Other Name – Than Feminist,” in *Texas Women: Their Histories, Their Lives*, eds. Elizabeth Hayes Turner, Stephanie Cole, and Rebecca Sharpless (Athens: University of Georgia Press), 220-232.

¹⁶⁸ LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 154-156.

¹⁶⁹ Willard Porter, “New Mexico Cutting Horse Gal,” *Hoof and Horns*, May 1949.

traditional, restrictive visions of women's role in rodeo, cowgirls finally had created a home for themselves.

The Postwar Rise of – and Objections to – Women's Rodeo

Fern Sawyer permanently retired from rodeo competition in 1949 at the age of thirty-two.¹⁷⁰ As the all-around champion at Amarillo and clearly one of the most talented and influential cowgirls on the circuit, Sawyer's retirement was fairly shocking. She explained her decision by saying that "nobody made me quit, but I thought that was a good time to quit – when you are on top, not when you are on bottom."¹⁷¹ Although she was done competing, Sawyer never stopped working. She owned and operated the Tiachuela Ranch in eastern New Mexico, a cattle ranch with twenty-eight sections of pasture and rugged forest land.¹⁷² She was heavily involved in the Democratic Party of New Mexico, serving as the party's chairwoman for a quarter-century and forming close friendships with the likes of John F. Kennedy and New Mexico governor Bruce King.¹⁷³ Of course, Sawyer also remained heavily influential in the rodeo community, especially in her home region of east New Mexico and west Texas. She served as a member of the New Mexico State Fair board for fifteen years, where she was responsible for organizing the annual Albuquerque rodeo.¹⁷⁴ Local rodeo committees and producers frequently sought her expertise as a judge for roughstock, cutting, and rodeo queen

¹⁷⁰ *Albuquerque Journal*, September 10, 1972.

¹⁷¹ Jordan, *Cowgirls*, 233.

¹⁷² *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, April 25, 1983.

¹⁷³ *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, April 25, 1983.

¹⁷⁴ Jordan, *Cowgirls*, 234-235.

contests.¹⁷⁵ She garnered a reputation as one of the top cowhorse breeders in the nation.¹⁷⁶ Most importantly in the world of women's rodeo, Sawyer continued to serve on the board of directors for the GRA as the cutting contest representative.¹⁷⁷

In the three decades following her rodeo retirement, Sawyer witnessed – and helped contribute to – a surge of national interest in women's rodeo. As a new, fledgling organization with relatively few members, the GRA could have fizzled out quickly. From 1948 through the early 1950s, though, membership numbers increased from seventy-four mostly Texan charter members to over 600 cowgirls throughout the United States and Canada.¹⁷⁸ Sawyer and her fellow GRA board members offered tens of thousands of dollars in prize money at dozens of rodeos, many of which received the same level of public interest and celebration as the 1947 Tri-State rodeo. As historian Mary Lou LeCompte argues, the GRA had “succeeded” and “triumphed because of the members’ indomitable spirit and determination.”¹⁷⁹

Despite a brief lull in the late 1950s and early 1960s when many of the early members of the GRA retired from competition, women's rodeo enjoyed the same gains in participation and popularity as women's sports more generally during the late 1960s and through the 1970s.¹⁸⁰ GRA membership exploded to at least 800 members by 1975, many of which competed at the 57 all-women rodeos produced across the country.¹⁸¹ Throughout the mid-1970s, GRA president Margaret Clemons happily described women's rodeo as “the fastest growing sport in the

¹⁷⁵ *Lubbock Avalanche-Journal*, September 15, 1957.

¹⁷⁶ *Reno Gazette-Journal*, August 2, 1956.

¹⁷⁷ *The Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, September 17, 1950.

¹⁷⁸ LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 159.

¹⁷⁹ LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 159.

¹⁸⁰ Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport*, 2nd ed. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 246-280.

¹⁸¹ *The Orlando Sentinel*, November 5, 1975.

country” and boasted of the strong interest from sponsors who were flooding the GRA with prize money.¹⁸²

The success of women’s rodeo during the 1960s and 1970s came despite significant disapproval and reservations from groups such as rodeo announcers, journalists, male contestants, and a large portion of the general public. Much of the opposition to women’s involvement in rodeo extended from the fear that cowgirls were putting their bodies at risk, which in turn risked their femininity as well as the masculinity of those who witnessed the performance. When photographer Douglas Kent Hall travelled with rodeo contestants for months in 1975, he observed that “cowboys tend to be old-fashioned and courtly, and they tend to regard women as the fair – and weaker? – sex. To see women come out on a bronc or bull that they themselves might be riding ruffles that cowboy gentility.” According to Hall, one male bronc rider declared that “it’s not that I don’t think they’re strong. I see girls everyday I know could wrestle down an elephant. But that doesn’t make it right. I don’t want a woman to just stay in the kitchen all day, you know. But there ought to be a limit. I can’t stand the idea of watching one go out in the arena and get stomped. I guess I don’t want to have to watch them be that equal.”¹⁸³ In the minds of male contestants, the presence of women in rodeo was perfectly acceptable, as long as the cowgirls avoided the bodily danger that was inherent in practically every rodeo event.

Rodeo announcers also frequently emphasized the supposedly delicate physical bodies of women contestants – and the danger presented to bodies by their actions in the arena – in both their commentary during rodeos as well as in interviews with press. At one GRA rodeo in 1972,

¹⁸² *The Cumberland News* (Cumberland, Maryland), April 25, 1974; *The Orlando Sentinel*, November 5, 1975.

¹⁸³ Douglas Kent Hall, *Rodeo* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), 104.

the “old cowboy” announcer gleefully informed those in attendance that they “ain’t seen nothin’ ‘til you see 95 pounds of ‘Honky Tonk Angel’ come riding out of the chute on 1,200 pounds of bucking Braham bull.”¹⁸⁴ Famed announcer Bob Tallman, one of the top rodeo announcers of the last fifty years, similarly stressed what he considered an unacceptable level of danger presented to female bodies by participating in roughstock events. Tallman prefaced his answer to an interview question about women competing in male events by stating that he is “not a chauvinist pig” but explained he “would vote against” it. The reason, he said, was that “God didn’t make [women] to take that kind of a beating. He made some of them with a mind to think they can.”¹⁸⁵

Journalists similarly noted the physical stature and feminine appearance and attractiveness of women contestants for readers. Both male and female reporters from large and small publications across the country frequently remarked on the height and weight of women riders, the type and amount of makeup they applied, and used adjectives such as “petite,” “attractive,” and “good figures” to describe the cowgirl subjects of their features.¹⁸⁶ One columnist reported his surprise that, when meeting cowgirls in person, “they do not resemble Amazons” and expressed that it was “hard to believe that the ladies can be so rugged” despite their feminine appearance.¹⁸⁷ Sexist observations such as these hindered the otherwise rapid growth of women’s rodeo, as they focused the public’s attention on the appearance of the cowgirls rather than on their performances in the arena.

¹⁸⁴ *The South Bend Tribune* (South Bend, Indiana, July 2, 1972).

¹⁸⁵ *Clovis News-Journal* (Clovis, New Mexico), June 1, 1975.

¹⁸⁶ *The South Bend Tribune* (South Bend, Indiana), July 2, 1972; *Valley Morning Star* (Harlingen, Texas), December 16, 1974; *Petaluma Argus-Courier* (Petaluma, California), May 8, 1968.

¹⁸⁷ *Petaluma Argus-Courier* (Petaluma, California), May 8, 1968.

Other concerns about the inclusion of women in professional rodeo stemmed from the view that life on the rodeo road was antithetical to the postwar ideal of a domestic housewife, and would delay a woman's courtship, marriage, and motherhood. Most professional rodeo cowboys were more likely to view the appropriate role for women as one of submissive rather than equal competitors. This perspective was on full display in a short profile of steer wrestler Gene Lorenzo in a 1970 issue of *Cosmopolitan*, in which the author observed that Lorenzo's wife, Janet, "does not dare object to his rodeo mania." Rather than travelling the country riding and competing alongside Lorenzo, he expected his wife to remain at home, raising children and spending "most of her time at household chores." When Lorenzo returned home following a long day of rodeoing, he quickly settled into a comfortable chair while Janet hurriedly prepared dinner for him, leading the author to comment that "a strong male has control of this home."¹⁸⁸

Despite a long history of women performing many of the same tasks on the ranch as their brothers and fathers, many rural communities where GRA contestants grew up shared this normative expectation that cowgirls should remain subservient to their dominant husbands and faithful caretakers of the home. Sue Pirtle Hays, who grew up in rural Oklahoma, remarked how "the townspeople always thought there was something wrong with me because I rodeoed" as a single woman, yet when she "got married, suddenly I was okay. Isn't that sickening? I'm the same person I ever was."¹⁸⁹ Journalists as well, from both rural and urban publications, frequently saturated their accounts of women contestants with assumptions that the women should prioritize their role of wife and mother over their role as a cowgirl. For example, one

¹⁸⁸ John Bowers, "Brave Men and How Women Cope with Them," *Cosmopolitan*, March, 1970, 179-180.

¹⁸⁹*The Daily Times-News* (Burlington, North Carolina), June 24, 1976.

feature on Margaret Clemons, the president of the GRA in 1974, made careful note that “about 90 percent” of GRA contestants were happily married, including Clemons. The story’s author reassured readers that the “rugged” life of travel from one rodeo to another did not negatively affect the ability of Clemons and her fellow cowgirls to “remain first and foremost a wife and mother.”¹⁹⁰

The fertility of women contestants was also a frequent concern by spectators and journalists, especially as the GRA gained in popularity during the late 1960s and early 1970s. At the 1974 GRA championships, a reporter asked bull rider Benjie Prudom if she worried about injuring herself so severely that she would “not be able to have babies” to which Prudom replied “I haven’t even considered getting married yet.”¹⁹¹ The question of whether competing in rodeos endangered a woman’s fertility served as a perfect distillation of concerns over the perceived danger that rodeo livestock presented to a cowgirl’s health and her domestic role. For many spectators and journalists, a ride on the back of a bull threatened both a woman’s physical body and the function that body served to society, it compromised both her present femininity and her potential for motherhood.

Perhaps the most vicious outcry came when a woman’s participation in rodeo intersected with her role as mother, especially as an expectant mother. Public disapproval of Sue Pirtle Hays’ bronc and bull riding may have subsided briefly following her marriage, though it reemerged on a national scale in 1975 when she rode broncs as late as eight months into her pregnancy. Hays received an avalanche of disconcerting letters following coast-to-coast news

¹⁹⁰ *Valley Morning Star* (Harlingen, Texas), December 16, 1974.

¹⁹¹ *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 1974.

coverage of her pregnant performances, the authors of which reprimanded her for continuing to compete. One Associated Press reporter who interviewed Hays shortly after she gave birth to a healthy son made note that “her husband consented, but said he couldn’t watch her compete this year.” For her part, Hays expressed frustration at the fact that she only placed fourth at her final rodeo before giving birth, blaming the poor performance on “the pregnancy weight gain of 20 pounds on her 5-foot frame” which had “cramped her bronc busting style.”¹⁹² Hays defended her performance when questioned about performing such a dangerous task at such an advanced stage of pregnancy, stating “the doctor told me ‘just don’t get kicked in the stomach – if you don’t get kicked or stomped you’ll be alright.’ Girls aren’t as delicate as people think.”¹⁹³

Whether based on fear for a cowgirl’s intrinsic femininity, potential fertility, or status as a wife or mother, within each critique of women’s involvement in rodeo was an inherent concern over the perceived dangers that broncs, bulls, calves, and steers presented to female bodies in the arena. As livestock contractors succeeded in selectively breeding their animals to grow progressively larger and stronger following World War II, concern over whether women could physically withstand the beatings dealt to their bodies by riding these animals grew as well.¹⁹⁴ Many cowgirls seemingly shared these concerns, yet tried to defend their place in the rodeo arena by stressing the need for a separate, smaller, less dangerous group of livestock for women’s rodeo. As one anonymous cowgirl explained, “there is no living way you can put girls on anything that compares even closely with the stock the guys ride.”¹⁹⁵ Instead, women

¹⁹² *Casa Grande Dispatch* (Casa Grande, Arizona), September 17, 1975.

¹⁹³ *Intelligencer Journal* (Lancaster, Pennsylvania), October 25, 1975.

¹⁹⁴ Chapter six examines the complicated process of selectively breeding rodeo livestock as one of evolutionary history, and explores the gender dynamics involved in the motivations for – and consequences of – that process.

¹⁹⁵ Hall, *Rodeo*, 105.

contestants argued that the GRA and other rodeo associations at the college or junior level should provide bulls and broncs that bucked hard enough to display a woman's riding skills and put on a good show for the audience, but did not present the level of danger as the bulls and broncs that the men rode.

Sue Pirtle Hays frequently made the case in numerous interviews that using smaller stock for women's rodeo could sufficiently reduce the risks to female bodies while maintaining the value of women's rodeo as an entertainment product. Hays consistently argued that, even when similar in size and stature to male counterparts, women's bodies would simply be unable to take the physical punishment levied by the livestock used in mainstream rodeo. In 1976 she contended that "women don't compete with men in rodeo because a 130-pound woman is not on par with a 130-pound man physically," and that for a woman to ride the same broncs as men "would be suicide."¹⁹⁶ Even in the timed events, where the cattle were simply larger and not necessarily more dangerous, Hays argued that women's bodies simply could not handle the same livestock as men's bodies. She told one reporter that "in the girls' rodeo we limit the weight of the calves we rope to 200 pounds, while the men have calves that weigh as much as 300 to 400 pounds. I weigh 125 pounds. What if I caught one of those 400-pounders? I'll stick to competing with women."¹⁹⁷ Hays went on to explain that, in her view, "men are so much stronger than most women, and strength is such a factor in riding, roping, and bulldogging, that skills can't really be compared."¹⁹⁸ Hays' contention that the differences in size and strength between male and female contestants necessitated differences in livestock did not influence her opinion that all-

¹⁹⁶ *The Leaf Chronicle* (Clarksville, Tennessee), August 15, 1976.

¹⁹⁷ *Colorado Springs Gazette-Telegraph*, June 27, 1976.

¹⁹⁸ *The Times* (Shreveport, Louisiana), July 13, 1976.

women rodeos were just as entertaining and deserved the same attention. In 1980, Hays remarked that women “don’t compete against the men and don’t want to. There are physical limitations. We have smaller stock, but we have good rodeos.”¹⁹⁹

Of course, women contestants were not unanimous in their stance that the livestock they rode was – or should be – any less dangerous or difficult to ride than that of the men. Some cowgirls felt the bucking ability of the broncs they rode was equivalent to that of the broncs on the men’s circuit. In 1974, Benjie Prudom argued that women were “out there riding the same broncs and bulls the men are.”²⁰⁰ The overwhelming majority of cowgirls, though, explicitly differentiated between men’s and women’s rodeo based on the size and behavior of the animals they rode. The difference between the genders was, in large part, defined by the difference between the animals they rode. That difference, they argued, did not justify the marginalization of women from rodeo, but instead justified the continuation and even elevation of women’s rodeo to a status equal to the men’s circuit. The difference also did not detract from the value of women’s rodeo, but in fact added value, by allowing women to demonstrate their riding skills.

Women’s Rodeo and Women’s Lib – A Complicated Relationship

In the face of doubts and outright opposition from male contestants, announcers, producers, organizing committees, journalists, and their own families and communities, women contestants during the 1960s and 1970s fought for and earned a role in the rodeo arena. Cowgirls employed multiple strategies of resistance, especially rhetorically strategies, that often sounded

¹⁹⁹ *Los Angeles Times*, April 11, 1980.

²⁰⁰ “Sport: The New Bronco Breed,” *Time*, September 2, 1974.

similar – or outright mirrored – those of contemporary feminist activists. Fern Sawyer, for example, criticized the evolution of rodeo queen contests and their increasing emphasis on appearance during the 1970s, arguing that women should be evaluated and judged on their abilities rather than their looks. As she put it, “I hate those contests, and I bet I’ve judged a million of ‘em. They don’t judge that much how the girls ride anymore. All they do is dress ‘em up and make ‘em pretty.”²⁰¹ Sawyer also was an ardent promoter throughout her retirement for “the same pay for the same work.”²⁰² She repeated in several interviews during the late 1970s and early 1980s that “women ought to get the same pay as men,” especially women contestants.²⁰³ In addition to pay equality, Sawyer argued that cowgirls rarely received the formal recognition they deserved from the male rodeo establishment. As early as 1978 she advocated for the inclusion of cowgirls in the Professional Rodeo Hall of Fame, which did not induct women contestants until 2017. Although she was proud to be recognized by the newly formed Cowgirl Hall of Fame, Sawyer lamented that women were once again forced to create a separate organization in order to be recognized, saying “I think women have not ever got their share of the glory.”²⁰⁴

At the same time that cowgirls expressed feminist arguments regarding their desire for gender equality in rodeo, most of them outright rejected feminist labels or any association with second wave feminism or the Women’s Liberation Movement. In the same interviews where she maintained women deserved recognition, should earn equal prize money to men, and should be judged based on performance over appearance, Sawyer nearly always lambasted feminist

²⁰¹ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 25, 1983.

²⁰² *Albuquerque Journal*, September 10, 1972.

²⁰³ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 25, 1983.

²⁰⁴ Rhonda Sedgwick, “Fern Sawyer – A Pioneer,” *World of Rodeo and Western Heritage*, November 1979.

organizers, frequently singling out congresswoman and activist Bella Abzug for criticism.

Sawyer explained to Teresa Jordan that she did not “believe in women’s lib...I don’t believe in preaching women’s lib or hollering about it...Take old Bella Abzug – I can’t stand her!”²⁰⁵

Sawyer’s life experiences as a woman who worked alongside men on a ranch and bested men in competition instilled a belief in her that, although specific personal and broad systemic obstacles may be in the way, women held the power to earn a place in the rodeo arena. As an example, Sawyer cited the fact that although judges in cutting competitions tended to favor male contestants, she defeated them regardless, even though she “had to do double good to get the same marking.”²⁰⁶ “I never did have any problems competing with men,” she explained, saying that “if you’re good enough, you’ll make it.”²⁰⁷

Simply put, Fern Sawyer believed her success in rodeo was of her own making. In her view, she never relied on any kind of broad, group-based organizing or a collective action by women contestants to achieve her goals. This perspective required Sawyer to largely disregard the united efforts of cowgirls to produce the 1947 Amarillo rodeo and the role of the GRA in advancing women’s participation in rodeo through the following decades, yet she clung to this belief throughout her life. Sawyer rejected any suggestion of cooperative action against misogynist systems and instead embraced the ideal of rugged individualism as the solution for women to improve their specific circumstances. As she put it, “the people that are really independent and do things, they don’t like women’s lib...You can’t tell me that in America, if

²⁰⁵ Jordan, *Cowgirls*, 235.

²⁰⁶ Jordan, *Cowgirls*, 235.

²⁰⁷ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, April 25, 1983.

you're good at your job, you won't make it. I've seen too many of them make it. And without no women's lib."²⁰⁸

Sawyer's simultaneous embrace of feminist objectives and rejection of inclusion in feminist movements was shared by nearly every cowgirl who spoke publicly about these issues at the time. One of the most prominent cowgirls of the 1970s, Sue Pirtle Hays, made clear in interviews with press that she was "not a staunch feminist." Yet, in seemingly the same breath, Hays echoed many of the same objectives of staunch feminists of the era and declared her personal ambition to raise the popularity and prize money of women's rodeo to that of mainstream men's rodeo. Despite her claim that women contestants could not possibly survive rides on the same bucking livestock as men, Hays argued frequently and emphatically that their compensation should be equal. In a 1976 interview she said "I'd like to see equal pay for equal work...Right now there's too big a difference."²⁰⁹ That difference, according to Hays, was stark. She explained that, during the mid-1970s, "men's rodeo guarantees a take-home purse of \$60,000 to \$80,000, while women have to settle for between \$4,000 and \$6,000."²¹⁰

In addition to Hays, numerous cowgirls throughout the 1960s and 1970s embraced feminist goals of equality in pay while simultaneously distancing themselves from inclusion in any form of feminist movement. Benjie Prudom contended that she did not believe that "more women in competition has anything to do with the liberation movement," yet argued that she could not "see why women can't do the same work here as men" and confidently stated that

²⁰⁸ Jordan, *Cowgirls*, 235.

²⁰⁹ *The Daily Times-News* (Burlington, North Carolina), June 24, 1976.

²¹⁰ *The Leaf Chronicle* (Clarksville, Tennessee), August 15, 1976.

"there's no reason we shouldn't get paid the same."²¹¹ In 1976, Jann Anderson, who produced one of the few annual GRA rodeos in Montana, remarked that "even though cowgirls aren't what you would call women's lib, we do want equal money."²¹² In a joint interview that same year, GRA contestants Ardith Bruce and Ann Marshall both, like Hays, were careful to clarify that they did not "consider themselves staunch feminists." When asked about the reduced prize money purse at women's rodeos compared to professional men's rodeos, though, Ardith acknowledged that the discrepancy was "a big bone we've been picking for years." She pointed out that the size of the purse at women's rodeos had improved slightly in recently years, which she credited in part to her "a little more militant" strategies, but the women explained they would not be satisfied until the pay was completely equal.²¹³

The antagonism toward the Women's Liberation Movement demonstrated by rodeo cowgirls is in itself not unsurprising, given the context within which these women operated. Feminist movements are historically culturally coded as politically liberal and urban, while mainstream rodeo is historically a culturally conservative setting, one in which participants cling to traditional and rural identities. Denunciation of the movement by the cowgirls was a prerequisite to mitigate criticism and gain acceptance for their substantively feminist objectives. Additionally, though, cowgirls' rhetorical rejection of feminist movements despite shared goals can also be explained in part by the cowgirls' perception of feminist activists as determined to erase gender distinctions entirely. Just as earlier generations of women contestants like Fox Hastings tried to emphasize feminine characteristics in order to appease concerns over their

²¹¹ *The Pocono Record* (Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania), August 24, 1974; "Sport: The New Bronco Breed," *Time*, September 2, 1974.

²¹² *The Montana Standard* (Butte, Montana), August 27, 1976.

²¹³ *Colorado Springs Gazette-Telegraph*, June 27, 1976.

participation in a masculine activity, postwar cowgirls similarly stressed the importance of appearing and behaving “like a lady.” Sawyer was especially adamant that women contestants should wear feminine clothing whenever they appeared in a rodeo arena. She explained that, when she was roping calves against men during the 1940s, she always “wore my best clothes. I didn’t come out in Levi’s, I didn’t want to look like a man.”²¹⁴ Following her retirement, Sawyer’s reputation as an extravagant dresser grew among the women’s rodeo community. She appeared at the Fort Worth rodeo every year until her death in 1994, either to carry the American flag at the front of the grand entry or simply to sit among crowd, but always wearing carefully coordinated and brightly colored hats, pants, and boots. By the 1980s she needed a 40-foot closet to hold over 100 pairs of boots and dozens of sequined jackets and felt hats.²¹⁵

Active women contestants of the 1960s and 1970s similarly stressed the importance of appearing and behaving feminine, often in contrast to stereotypical depictions of butch feminist activists. As roper and barrel racer Jan Woolery remarked, “I just don’t go in for all that women’s lib stuff. I don’t think women should act like a man...The bucking events make you rough. I think you can be a cowgirl and a lady, too.”²¹⁶ In addition to wearing feminine clothing and presenting more feminine behavior, cowgirls expressed the importance of maintaining a feminine physique, even if it detracted from their performance in the arena. Bronc rider Jan Edmondson explained to a reporter that she “always refused to lift weights to build up” her arms. “You have to look like a woman, too,” she said.²¹⁷ Bronc and bull rider Cindy Dodge

²¹⁴ *Just for the Ride*, Directed by Amanda Micheli (Runaway Productions, 1995), VHS.

²¹⁵ *Just for the Ride*, Micheli.

²¹⁶ *The Tyler Courier Times* (Tyler, Texas), June 1, 1980.

²¹⁷ *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1980.

summarized the difficult dichotomy of fighting for a role in a traditionally masculine event while exhibiting feminine features and rebuking any kind of association with feminist activism:

“People always say I’m a women’s libber. I’m not. I’ve worked on a ranch all my life and I don’t see why I can’t be just as good at roping or riding as any man. If I bad-mouth people or chew Copenhagen, then I’m not a lady, but to me it’s challenging to be female – and good. I keep ribbons in my hair to show people I’m feminine. I’m not competing against men, anyway, but women. Why can’t I be a lady, on or off a bull? I do what I want to do. I’d be beserk wearing a dress and being a secretary.”²¹⁸

One promotional newspaper article for the 1976 GRA rodeo in Reno, Nevada, succinctly illustrated the ways in which women contestants sought to demonstrate their distance from feminist movements and utilize their feminine characteristics in order to attract spectators. The article’s author, a local reporter who interviewed several GRA leaders in advance of the rodeo, tried to entice spectators by contrasting the women contestants with the masculine traits of the stereotypical rodeo cowboy. The author asked incredulously: “Rodeo contestants that don’t chew and spit tobacco? Bull riders that don’t walk like they’ve got a barrel between their legs? Bronc riders that actually have pretty legs?” Maintaining such feminine characteristics throughout the performance of a masculine act not only justified the act but helped broaden its appeal for spectators. In case readers and potential audience members were also concerned about the cowgirls’ potential participation as feminists, the author explained that “the association holds its members are not involved in a women’s liberation movement but merely want the chance to compete in the entire gamut of the rodeo world.”²¹⁹

Despite their ardent rejection of the Women’s Liberation Movement and instance that they were not associated with its values or objectives, by the mid- to late-1970s some cowgirls

²¹⁸ *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 1974.

²¹⁹ *Nevada State Journal*, April 19, 1976.

attributed the increase in opportunities within women's rodeo to the movement. In 1975, GRA member Sammy Thurman looked back at the previous half decade and exclaimed that "all of a sudden, with the women's lib bit, everything happens. They want to see women involved in everything – it doesn't make any difference what it is. Actually, the GRA didn't go out and promote itself. We didn't try to get people to have all-girl rodeos. We just kind of sat back and they came to us."²²⁰ Margaret Clemons, president of the GRA in 1975, similarly distanced the organization from the movement while simultaneously recognizing its contributions, stating that "although the GRA never was a part of it, women's lib has helped rodeo."²²¹ A few cowgirls, though, argued that the increase in prize money and attendance at GRA rodeos had little if anything to do with any kind of feminist activism. When a reporter attended the GRA championships in 1974 and made note of the significant amount of prize money to the quartet of cowgirls she was interviewing, they all acknowledged the potential winnings had rapidly increased yet "none of them [thought it had] much to do with women's lib."²²²

By the early 1980s, the gains in popularity and prize money of the prior two decades began to rapidly dwindle specifically for women's roughstock and roping events. Participation in these traditionally masculine events declined, prize money purses that had peaked in the mid-1970s returned to paltry amounts, and grandstands that once held large crowds quickly emptied. In 1980, nearing the end of her storied career, Sue Pirtle Hays looked back at the relatively sudden and short growth in popularity of women's roughstock and roping in the early to mid-1970s and attributed it to the Women's Liberation Movement. She lamented that interest in

²²⁰ Hall, *Rodeo*, 104.

²²¹ *Greeley Daily Tribune* (Greeley, Colorado), June 26, 1975.

²²² *Reno Gazette-Journal*, October 2, 1974.

women's rodeo was "dying right now because the women's movement is dying. Women got a little bit of what they wanted and then they up and quit. Nobody's out there beating the bushes anymore."²²³

Hays's observations were only partially accurate, though, and her report of the death of women's rodeo proved to be overexaggerated. While interest in women's roughstock and roping events did indeed decline during the 1980s, cowgirls have continued to ride and rope over the last four decades. Some, especially bull rider Jonnie Jonckowski, garnered fame through their performances at large mainstream rodeos such as Pendleton and Cheyenne in the 1980s and 1990s.²²⁴ Most importantly, women contestants have never stopped "beating the bushes," as Hays claimed. Rodeo cowgirls of the past four decades may have been increasingly less likely to grow up among the same environs as Fern Sawyer and her fellow GRA founders: on rural cattle ranches, working among and performing the same tasks as men. As GRA president Margaret Clemons explained simply in 1975, "the times are changing with more city girls competing."²²⁵ Despite this difference, women contestants have continued to reject and resist against marginalized roles and unequal treatment in mainstream rodeo. While overt rejections of any association with the Women's Liberation Movement diminished steadily as the movement dwindled throughout the 1980s, cowgirls continued to employ feminist strategies and rhetoric. As the next and final chapter of this section demonstrates, women contestants of the GRA (and later the WPRA) drew upon the successes of cowgirls like Fern Sawyer in their fight for inclusion and eventually equality within mainstream rodeo.

²²³ *Los Angeles Times*, November 7, 1980.

²²⁴ *Casper Star-Tribune* (Casper, Wyoming), July 1, 1988; *The Billings Gazette* (Billings, Montana), April 8, 1992.

²²⁵ *Greeley Daily Tribune* (Greeley, Colorado), June 26, 1975.

Chapter 3

“You’ve Come a Long Way Baby”: Barrel Racers and Their Fight for Pay Equality

When Charmayne James arrived at the Thomas & Mack Center in Las Vegas, Nevada, on the afternoon of Friday, December 13, 1985, the fifteen-year-old had already established her position at the pinnacle of the barrel racing world. Born in Amarillo, Texas, in 1970, James expressed an interest in riding and rodeo from a young age, and rapidly developed the skills of an expert horsewoman. Like Fern Sawyer, James learned by working alongside her father on their cattle ranch in eastern New Mexico.²²⁶ By the time she was nine the prodigious cowgirl knew she wanted to compete as a professional barrel racer, and at eleven she was already winning enough prize money at rodeos to pay for all of her own expenses.²²⁷ In 1984, at just fourteen years old, James blazed a cloverleaf-shaped trail through the ranks of professional rodeo. That year she defeated hundreds of the top barrel racers on the circuit by winning some of the richest rodeos, including San Antonio, Houston, and Phoenix.²²⁸ James concluded her rookie season as the world champion barrel racer at the National Finals Rodeo in Oklahoma City.

James continued her dominance throughout the 1985 season. By November she sat in first place in the standings with a commanding \$20,000 lead over her closest competitor and entered her second National Finals Rodeo as the favorite to win another championship.²²⁹ For financial reasons the organizers moved the season-ending rodeo from the large Oklahoma City

²²⁶ Janet Woolum, *Outstanding Women Athletes: Who They Are and How They Influenced Sports in America* (Phoenix: Oryx Press, 1998), 152.

²²⁷ *The Wichita Eagle*, November 2, 1986.

²²⁸ *The Crowley Post-Signal* (Crowley, Louisiana), April 22, 1984.

²²⁹ *The Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma), November 17, 1985.

pen to the miniscule arena inside the Thomas & Mack Center for 1985, but the change of venue failed to rattle James. Over the course of the first six rounds of the ten-round rodeo, James won four of them. As she prepared for the seventh night's performance, the teenaged cowgirl was surely brimming with confidence.

James' early accomplishments in barrel racing were in large part attributable to her successful partnership with an eight-year-old bay gelding named Scamper. The indomitable duo formed in 1982 when James' first barrel racing horse suffered an injury. In search of a temporary replacement, her father suggested that she try out an irascible quarter horse whose owner had recently dropped him off at a feedlot due to his petulant disposition and proclivity for bucking. As James recalled, regardless of the gelding's ill-tempered notoriety, he seemed to instantly take to the young horsewoman. "I think Scamper sensed right away that I was no threat to him, that I was just a kid," she said. "He kinda liked me."²³⁰ Within a few months James trained Scamper on the barrel racing pattern and won prizes at numerous local rodeos, and less than two years later the pair won their first of an eventual ten consecutive world championships together.²³¹

As James and Scamper dashed into the arena for their seventh run of the 1985 National Finals Rodeo, James felt one side of the reins lose its tension. She looked down and noticed that the screw that held the side of the leather bridle around Scamper's bit had come undone, and by the time she rounded the first barrel, it had fallen off of the bit. James had effectively lost control – without the bridle attached to the bit in Scamper's mouth she could not send cues to slow down, turn, or stop. Rather than panic, James trusted her horse to continue the run without her

²³⁰ Woolum, *Outstanding Women Athletes*, 152.

²³¹ Woolum, *Outstanding Women Athletes*, 152-153.

guidance. “I figured I’d better go on,” she remembered later, “I felt he was making a good run...I couldn’t stop him so I decided to just go ahead and run the barrels.”²³² The crowd of over 16,000 rodeo fans recognized the bridle was detached and dangling, and they seemed to collectively seize up as Scamper turned the second and headed to the third barrel with his usual finesse. As the pair rounded the third barrel, the bit fell out of the gelding’s mouth entirely, and according to James, “the crowd went wild. Scamper loves it when the crowds do that.”²³³ The ill-tempered bucking horse from the feedlot raced out of the arena and stopped the clock at 14.4 seconds, first place once again.²³⁴



Charmayne James and a bridle-less Scamper at the 1985 National Finals Rodeo. Photo by Kenneth Springer.

Courtesy of the Women’s Professional Rodeo Association.

²³² *The Billings Gazette* (Billings, Montana), December 15, 1985.

²³³ *The Wichita Eagle*, November 2, 1986.

²³⁴ *The Billings Gazette* (Billings, Montana), December 15, 1985.

Charmayne James and Scamper's bridle-less victory in round seven of the 1985 National Finals rodeo, the exhaustive media coverage of the event, and the nearly mythical status of the run among the rodeo community are illustrative of the success enjoyed by barrel racers since the late 1980s – success reaped following decades of struggle. James ended the 1985 season as world champion with \$93,847 in winnings, more than the total won by the male champion of rodeo's iconic event of saddle bronc riding.²³⁵ James' incredible earnings were directly attributable to the efforts of cowgirls to promote barrel racing as a legitimate and competitive rodeo event since the 1950s, and to their collective organization and strike for equal prize money during the 1985 season.

The history of barrel racing is a story of marginalization and resistance. It is a story in which the male producers of mainstream rodeo attempted to relegate women from the classic, dangerous, masculine events and into a more docile and feminine one, only for the women to excel, popularize the event, and utilize their newfound popularity as leverage in their fight for equality. Unlike the history of women bronc riders of the 1920s or even the cowgirls who established the GRA in the 1940s, rodeo historians have largely ignored the transformative influence of barrel racers on the role and sway of women in mainstream rodeo. Several scholars have disregarded barrel racing as somehow undeserving of attention because it is “not as exciting as...when women pitted themselves against the men or against each other in the men's events,” and because riders do not directly challenge conservative norms of feminine behavior through simply riding a fast horse around three barrels.²³⁶ An emphasis on the gendered aspects of

²³⁵ *Barrel Racing Records*, Women's Professional Rodeo Association, 2019.

²³⁶ Roach, *The Cowgirls*, 120. Also see Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, *Rodeo: An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 110-111.

performance inside the arena, though, misses the important struggles barrel racers have endured to overcome decades of misogyny and mistreatment outside the arena, and the significant advances they have achieved, especially relative to women athletes in other sports.²³⁷

Aside from rodeo historiography specifically, the story of barrel racers and their fight for equality during the 1970s and 1980s lies at the intersection of several crucial fields of historical inquiry. Of course, it is a story of women and the construction of gender, but it also fits within the history of feminism and the labor movement of the same period, it confronts questions of western authenticity, and it incorporates the importance of human-animal relationships. The collective movement among barrel racers to fight for equality in pay emerged both from broad societal changes in women's role in the workplace and specifically from a noticeable shift in the views of women contestants toward the role of rodeo in their lives. Fern Sawyer's generation fought for the opportunity to compete against one another in rodeos, but cowgirls during World War II and during the infancy of the Girls Rodeo Association viewed rodeo as primarily a recreational or social event. Most women contestants of the 1940s and 1950s grew up on ranches and continued to work on ranches fulltime as adults. For them, entering two or three rodeos each month was a chance to get away from the ranch, see old friends, show off their roping and riding skills, and possibly win enough money to cover fuel costs.²³⁸

²³⁷ As Mary Lou LeCompte points out, by the mid-1990s, rodeo and tennis were the only two professional sports in which women earned equal or even nearly-equal money to their male counterparts at the highest level. See Mary Lou LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo: Pioneer Professional Athletes* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1993), 183-184. Twenty-five years later, that largely remains the case. See Olivia Abrams, "Why Female Athletes Earn Less Than Men Across Most Sports," *Forbes*, June 2019.

²³⁸ Renee Laegreid, "Ranch Women and Rodeo Performers in Post-World War II West Texas: A Cowgirl by Any Other Name – Than Feminist," in *Texas Women: Their Histories, Their Lives*, eds. Elizabeth Hayes Turner, Stephanie Cole, and Rebecca Sharpless (Athens: University of Georgia Press), 223.

As the barrel racing event grew in popularity during the 1970s, many contestants, especially younger women, began to view rodeo more as a job than as recreation. While most enjoyed and found personal value at rodeos, they also viewed rodeo as a profession. Shayne Mason, a barrel racer who began competing professionally in the 1970s and was elected director of the WPRA from 1980 to 1985, clearly stated that “from the beginning, I treated riding like a career, not a hobby.”²³⁹ Like the male contestants of decades earlier, who successfully unionized during the 1930s, women contestants came to view their competition as labor.²⁴⁰ In many ways, the struggle of barrel racers of the 1970s and 1980s reflects the struggle of working-class women in other fields during the same period. As such, this chapter is guided by – and seeks to add to – the historiography of laboring women of the 1970s and 1980s who, despite the hostility they faced from male coworkers and superiors, employed unique strategies of community building, organizing, and resistance to make critical contributions in labor activism and toward pay equality.²⁴¹

Barrel Racing’s Early Years: From Stamford to Amarillo

²³⁹ *El Paso Times*, November 1, 1987.

²⁴⁰ Gail Hughbanks Woerner, *The Cowboys’ Turtle Association: The Birth of Professional Rodeo* (Walnut Springs, Texas: Wild Horse Press, 2011).

²⁴¹ The historiography of working-class women and their efforts at organizing and fighting for workplace equality is extensive, but some of the more influential works for this chapter include: Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out: Waitresses and Their Unions in the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991); Karen Sacks, *Caring by the Hour: Women, Work and Organizing at Duke Medical Center* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Mary Margaret Fonow, *Union Women: Forging Feminism in the United Steelworkers of America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Dennis Deslippe, “Rights Not Roses”: *Unions and the Rise of the Working Class Feminism, 1945-1980* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Nancy Gabin, *Feminism in the Labor: Women and the United Auto Workers, 1935-1975* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Gendering Labor History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

Barrel racing's origins are part of the long history of efforts by male producers to marginalize women from the traditional roping and riding events of rodeo, and to restrict women to distinct, feminine roles within rodeo performances. Women undoubtedly raced their horses through different patterns of various obstacles at informal gatherings on ranches or in between rodeos throughout the first few decades of the twentieth century. Rodeo historians trace the origin of the use of barrels and the standard cloverleaf pattern, though, to the first sponsor girl contest at the 1932 Texas Cowboy Reunion rodeo in Stamford, Texas.²⁴²

Producers at Stamford structured the barrel race as a subjectively-judged event in which sponsor girls rode their horses through a predetermined pattern with scores awarded based on horsemanship and the physical appearance of the horse and rider.²⁴³ As sponsor girl contests spread across Texas and eventually nationwide to major rodeos such as Madison Square Garden, the barrel racing event spread as well. While many rodeo organizers used the same subjective scoring system as the original Stamford contest did, some judged the barrel race on time alone. Displeased with a rule construction that rewarded women on a basis other than an objective measurement of skill, sponsor contest participants frequently wielded their leverage to convince all organizers to switch to a timed barrel race. At the Stamford rodeo specifically, the contestants collectively threatened in 1949 not to return unless the producers met their demand. As one of the women who led the stand against the Stamford organizers told folklorist Beverly Stoeltje:

²⁴² LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 158-159; Renee M. Laegreid, "Performers Prove Beauty & Rodeo Can Be Mixed: The Return of the Cowgirl Queen," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, 54 (Spring 2004); Hooper Shelton, *50 Years of a Living Legend: Texas Cowboy Reunion and Old-Timers Association* (Stamford, Texas: Shelton, 1979).

²⁴³ Renee Laegreid, *Riding Pretty: Rodeo Royalty in the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 81; Beverly J. Stoeltje, "Gender Representations in Performance: The Cowgirl and the Hostess," *Journal of Folklore Research* 25, no. 3 (Fall, 1988): 219-241.

There was twenty of us went straight to that office and told them that unless it was a straight timed event that we'd never come back, and the biggest part of us then was married, and girls that had come off these ranches. They cut it out. The Reunion was started for cowboys and the cowgirls. Well, it went to going the other way. They changed it, and they started a straight time event ... because in straight timed events everybody's got a chance.²⁴⁴

When Fern Sawyer, Thena Mae Farr, Nancy Binford, and other top cowgirls organized the 1947 Amarillo all-girls rodeo and formed the GRA in 1948, they formally cemented in their rulebook two critical aspects of the barrel racing event: the standardization of the cloverleaf pattern and the awarding of winners based solely on time. Two original GRA members, Jackie Worthington and Margaret Owens, were especially influential in shaping and popularizing the event. According to rodeo historian Larry Pointer, Worthington and Owens worked tirelessly during the late 1940s and early 1950s to promote the timed cloverleaf pattern and, through their persistence, successfully spread the adoption of the event at rodeos across Texas.²⁴⁵

Collective organization and resistance are foundational characteristics of the barrel racing community. From its inception, the event of barrel racing has been a conduit through which women contestants have actively shaped their participation in rodeo. As Renee Laegreid points out, the successful efforts of barrel racers to shift from subjective judgements of appearance to objective determinations of skill “was crucial for women to spring back into serious rodeo competition” during the late 1940s.²⁴⁶ For the first time since the golden era of Fox Hastings and other women bronc riders of the 1920s, barrel racing offered a consistent, competitive role for women in rodeo. But more than simply finding a serious role in the competition, barrel racers

²⁴⁴ Stoeltje, “Gender Representations in Performance: The Cowgirl and the Hostess,” 227.

²⁴⁵ Larry Pointer, “Cowgirls,” Articles on Rodeo, Box 8, Folder 8, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

²⁴⁶ Laegreid, *Riding Pretty*, 193.

demonstrated the influence they could wield to create the specific kind of role they wanted for themselves.

Fighting for Inclusion

Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and into the 1970s, barrel racers in the GRA sought to expand the opportunities available to them in rodeo. Importantly, as Mary Lou LeCompte points out, these women “planned to work within the system.”²⁴⁷ From the founding of the association in 1948, in addition to producing their own all-women rodeos, GRA cowgirls cooperated with the predominant mainstream men’s rodeo association, the Rodeo Cowboys Association, in order to get barrel racing included in the programs of the nation’s largest rodeos. Barrel racers promoted their event as serious and competitive yet also feminine, and complementary rather than adversarial to the rest of the rodeo.

Although barrel racers fought to remove subjective judgements of their appearance as a factor in deciding the event’s winner, they, like Fox Hastings and other early cowgirls, recognized the importance of a feminine appearance for winning societal approval of their role in the arena. In order to guarantee that all members conformed to this feminine expectation, the first GRA bylaws in 1948 mandated that contestants “always be dressed in colorful attire when they appear in the arena.”²⁴⁸ For the first several decades of the association’s growth, GRA leadership emphasized the difference between dirty, brawny men’s events and the graceful, exhilarating action of barrel racing. In their advertisements during the 1970s, the GRA worked to attract

²⁴⁷ LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 155.

²⁴⁸ Girls Rodeo Association Handbook, Binford Tri-State file, National Cowgirl Hall of Fame and Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

spectators to rodeos by declaring that “the colorful cowgirl’s barrel racing contest is a full-fledged part of the rugged, he-man sport of Professional Rodeo.” The association asserted that not only was barrel racing “fast” and “exciting,” but most importantly “provides a thrilling yet gentle contrast to the slam-bang action that characterizes big league rodeo.”²⁴⁹ In 1976, two regulars of the GRA circuit, Ardith Bruce and Ann Marshall, similarly explained that barrel racing’s popularity and its appeal to rodeo organizers and sponsors could be directly attributed to the feminine respite the event offered within an otherwise entirely masculine performance. “The sponsors depend on the girls for color and sparkle,” Bruce said, and Marshall added that “barrel racing is fast, it’s colorful, and the spectators can understand it immediately...They always appear to enjoy barrel racing more than anything else.”²⁵⁰

In addition to and in concert with the femininity of the riders, the close bond between barrel racers and their horses worked as a vital source of the appeal of barrel racing for rodeo audiences. The charm of the cowgirl-horse partnership was evident in sports reporter Marvin McCarthy’s account of his visit to the 1950 Pikes Peak or Bust rodeo in Colorado Springs, Colorado. McCarthy seemed almost mesmerized by the silent coordination between Margaret Montgomery and her horse, Joe Brown. McCarthy wistfully wrote of how Montgomery’s “chestnut hair stood straight out in the slipstream of her own self-made breeze” as “the two of them, a girl and a horse, wheeled around the course.” Montgomery’s performance, and those of the other women racers, reportedly excited the crowd of 8,000 Coloradoans. According to

²⁴⁹ *Greeley Daily Tribune* (Greeley, Colorado), June 28, 1977.

²⁵⁰ *Colorado Springs Gazette-Telegraph*, June 27, 1976.

McCarthy, “they were intrigued by the feminine intrusion into a game known for so many years as purely masculine.”²⁵¹

Barrel racers clearly understood that the presentation of an event that featured a close, skillful partnership between a fast horse and a flashy feminine rider was the key to popularizing barrel racing at major rodeos. Wanda Harper Bush, a west Texas ranch cowgirl who joined the GRA in 1949 and won several barrel racing championships during the 1950s and 1960s, recalled that she and her contemporaries “sold our event with speed and color. I mean, that is what sold it, speed and color... You had to promote it that it is a horseman event. It’s – well, like I say – just fast horses and women riding them.”²⁵² Speed and color proved to be an effective combination, as interest in barrel racing spiked quickly throughout the 1950s. Nearly every one of the largest and richest rodeos in the country added barrel racing to their program of events during the 1950s and 1960s, including Houston in 1950, Madison Square Garden in 1954, and, following a prolonged effort by GRA leadership, the National Finals Rodeo in 1967.²⁵³ As one national correspondent reported in 1960, the “colorful, smartly tailored western outfits” and the “breakneck speed” of the cowgirls and their horses was exciting rodeo crowds throughout the country.²⁵⁴

Despite their success in popularizing the event and expanding their opportunities to compete at rodeos, by the mid-1970s barrel racers were reaching a breaking point. The tense, asymmetrical relationship between the GRA and the RCA, in which GRA members relied on the

²⁵¹ Newspaper clipping, n.d., Girls Rodeo Association File, National Cowgirl Museum and Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

²⁵² Wanda Harper Bush, interview with Scott White, February 4, 2003, transcribed, Wanda Harper Bush file, National Cowgirl Hall of Fame and Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

²⁵³ LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo*, 158-177.

²⁵⁴ *The Chillicothe Constitution-Tribune* (Chillicothe, Missouri), November 26, 1960.

RCA's goodwill for inclusion in major rodeos, created an environment in which cowboys and RCA leadership viewed the women as simply riding their coattails. In 1975, photographer Douglas Kent Hall described a toxic environment in which "grudgingly, the cowboys have allowed barrel racing to become a part of their rodeos. Some of them still object to it, saying it is boring, a waste of time."²⁵⁵ Barrel racer Rosie Webb similarly described how acceptance from professional cowboys had "not come easily or quickly," succinctly stating that "the cowboys put up with us."²⁵⁶ Ann Marshall explained further, saying "I hate to say that the cowboys are really just 'anti-women' but some of them do have the attitude that increasing the barrel racing purse will take away from their earnings. We have no problem in our all-girl rodeos, as the GRA is the governing body for them. It's where we have the barrel racing in conjunction with PRCA rodeos [that there's a problem]."²⁵⁷

Most critically, though, barrel racers faced skyrocketing costs and stagnant prize money that lagged far behind that of the men's events. The colorful shirts and glitzy pants worn by barrel racers cost significantly more than the standard button down shirt and jeans worn by cowboys.²⁵⁸ The funds necessary for a reliable truck, trailer, and tack, as well as fuel to drive to dozens of rodeos across the country every year, added up quickly. The largest investment for a barrel racer, though, was her horse. By the mid-1970s, as the number of women on the circuit

²⁵⁵ Douglas Kent Hall, *Rodeo* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976), 105.

²⁵⁶ *Los Angeles Times*, February 9, 1979.

²⁵⁷ *Colorado Springs Gazette-Telegraph*, June 27, 1976. The RCA added "Professional" to their name in 1975 to become the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, or PRCA.

²⁵⁸ *Colorado Springs Gazette-Telegraph*, June 27, 1976.

grew and demand for elite horses increased, the cost for a horse that could reliably win at top rodeos could range from \$15,000 to as high as \$40,000.²⁵⁹

The exorbitant cost of competing at the highest level of barrel racing was exacerbated during the 1970s by the expanding gulf between women's and men's purses at professional rodeos. For men's events, organizers regularly added funds from sponsors or ticket sales to the pot of prize money in order to entice the top contestants to their rodeos. By contrast, barrel racers frequently competed solely for each other's entry fees, with little or no added money from the rodeo organizers. This discrepancy meant that the winner of the barrel racing regularly walked away from a rodeo with half or less than the winner of the saddle bronc riding, calf roping, or any other men's event. At the 1976 National Finals Rodeo, for example, the winner of each of the ten rounds in the men's events earned \$1,169, while the winner of the barrel racing won \$570 per round.²⁶⁰ Women earned about half of what the men did in terms of total prize money across all rodeos as well. In 1978 barrel racers won a total \$668,931 in prize money, whereas men contestants split \$7.9 million across six events, for an average of over 1.3 million per event.²⁶¹ Such stark disparities had an enormous effect on an individual level. At the end of the 1976 season, the top earners in each of the men's roughstock events finished with over \$33,000, while top earner in barrel racing, Jimmie Gibbs, finished with \$22,557.²⁶² The differences were even more extreme when averaged across the top fifteen contestants that year. While the average

²⁵⁹ *Colorado Springs Gazette-Telegraph*, June 27, 1976;); Teresa Jordan, *Cowgirls: Women of the American West* (New York: Anchor, 1982), 243.

²⁶⁰ *The Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma), December 13, 1976.

²⁶¹ *Los Angeles Times*, February 9, 1979.

²⁶² *Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association Media Guide*, Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, 2020; *Barrel Racing Records*, 2019.

earnings for an NFR bareback bronc rider was \$21,399, an NFR barrel racer only won on average \$10,115 for the entire year.²⁶³

With the cost of horses and equipment so high and prize money so low, most women on the circuit, even the elite riders, barely broke even at the end of each year. As one barrel racer explained in 1976, “it’s a little discouraging to travel a long way to a rodeo where you can participate in only one event, and then usually for not as much money as the men.”²⁶⁴ In just a few decades, cowgirls had succeeded in growing and promoting a wildly popular rodeo event just for themselves. They were competing on rodeo’s grandest stages in front of roaring, adoring crowds. Yet, they faced regular resentment and obstruction from their male counterparts and an increasingly dire if not existential financial situation. As they did in Amarillo in 1947 and Stamford in 1949, by the end of the 1970s, barrel racers were ready to once again collectively organize and brandish their ability to shape their own circumstances within rodeo.

Fighting for Equality

Some outspoken barrel racers began to publicly decry the disparity between men’s and women’s prize pools at professional rodeos in the early 1970s. California barrel racer Teda Hudson, for instance, argued in 1974 that “our gas, expenses, and horses are just as high or higher than the cowboys. But even though barrel racing is a full-fledged professional activity of big league rodeo, the purse is always smaller.”²⁶⁵ Those in GRA leadership, though, tended to (at least publicly) view the situation with an optimistic lens. Margaret Clemons, president of the

²⁶³ *PRCA Media Guide*, 2020; *Barrel Racing Records*, 2019.

²⁶⁴ *The Montana Standard* (Butte, Montana), August 27, 1976.

²⁶⁵ *The Californian* (Salinas, California), July 19, 1974.

GRA, predicted confidently in 1975 that “in a couple of years some of our top barrel racers are going to be winning as much money as some of the RCA leaders.”²⁶⁶ Top barrel racer Sheila Bussey was similarly hopeful when she said in 1976 that an upcoming PRCA vote on standardizing barrel racing and equal prize money “is looking good this time.”²⁶⁷ The vote failed, and by the end of the decade most barrel racers, especially those negotiating directly with the PRCA and individual rodeo organizers, recognized that hope and optimism would change nothing in their negotiations unless accompanied by collective action.

In 1979, some decisionmakers in the GRA began publicly advocating for the PRCA and local rodeo committees to institute an equal money requirement, citing the popularity of barrel racing at PRCA rodeos. Kay Vamvoras, a recent past president of the GRA, argued emphatically at the 1979 Phoenix Jaycees Rodeo that “we (barrel racers) should be paid at least as much as the men.” Vamvoras and several other barrel racers exasperatedly explained to an Arizona reporter that rodeo producers and committees were simply shortchanging the barrel racers. For example, that year in Phoenix, they explained, the committee announced that the prize money for men’s events would total \$5,000 each, while the barrel racers would compete for less than half of that, for a total pool of \$2,200. The disparity “makes you a little ill,” said Vamvoras.²⁶⁸ Pam Earnhardt, who at the time was vice president of the GRA, cited the popularity of barrel racing in comparison to bull riding to make the case that prize money should be equal, saying that “surveys have shown that barrel racing comes right behind bull riding in terms of popularity.”

²⁶⁶ *Greeley Daily Tribune* (Greeley, Colorado), June 26, 1975.

²⁶⁷ *Longview News-Journal* (Longview, Texas), October 24, 1976.

²⁶⁸ *The Arizona Republic*, March 11, 1979.

Nevertheless, she lamented that “when it comes down to writing out our paycheck, it’s the same old story.”²⁶⁹

Beginning the following year in 1980, the GRA took several additional steps in order to improve the financial situation for its members, beyond just publicly decrying the prize money discrepancy. First, GRA president Jimmie Gibbs Munroe initiated the process to change the name of the association from the Girl’s Rodeo Association to the Women’s Professional Rodeo Association. The change, according to rodeo historian Larry Pointer, was meant to raise the association’s public image onto equal footing with the PRCA as a professional rodeo association.²⁷⁰ By the following year, the association that organized and represented barrel racers had metaphorically matured, ready to fight for equality. In their own words, the WPRA announced that their association “was developed by a group of young ranch women in 1948 and has emerged through the years as a strong association of organized women.”²⁷¹

With the name change complete, Munroe, the board of directors, and the WPRA membership collectively agreed in 1981 to implement a plan designed to gradually require rodeo committees to increase their prize offerings for barrel racers to be on par with the men. The plan stipulated that, effective immediately, WPRA members would announce a strike against – and refuse to compete at – any rodeo where the added prize money for barrel racing was not at least half that for the men’s events.²⁷² From there, the WPRA expected organizers to continue increasing the added prize money each year. By 1984, three years from the implementation of

²⁶⁹ *The Arizona Republic*, March 11, 1979.

²⁷⁰ Larry Pointer, “Cowgirls,” Articles on Rodeo, Box 8, Folder 8, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

²⁷¹ *The Daily Sentinel* (Grand Junction, Colorado), June 14, 1981.

²⁷² *The Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma), December 12, 1981; *Reno Gazette-Journal* (Reno, Nevada), June 17, 1982.

the WPRA plan, the women committed to striking against any rodeo that did not match the money added to men's events by three-quarters for barrel racing. The following year, in 1985, cowgirls expected full equality. If any rodeo, regardless of size, prestige, or tradition, did not offer equal money for barrel racers, WPRA members would refuse to attend.²⁷³

Taking such a stand was risky for barrel racers. Wanda Harper Bush, who by the 1980s was retired from competition but continued to serve as the Texas Circuit Director for the WPRA through 1989, recalled the challenging optics of demanding equal prize money for an event that was already offering more money than women had ever made through rodeo:

We went for equal money in the '80s, and that was tough. That was really tough because it was especially tough down in this country (Texas). Some of the northern states came in when the rule was made that we – and they came in on equal money. But down in here where it'd been pretty good money for a long time, it was hard for people to understand – especially the big money rodeos – that they needed to come on up with more money. I mean, it was a tough decision to make, and it was tough to follow on through with it some places.²⁷⁴

The cowgirls' plan was measured and forgiving, yet at the same time revolutionary within the history of women's resistance to marginalization in mainstream rodeo. The collective agreement on such steadfast demands announced that barrel racers now viewed their role in rodeo as fully equivalent to the century-old events of saddle bronc riding and calf roping. Barrel racers unequivocally argued that rodeo was not rodeo without their event, and they deserved to be compensated as such. Initially, the first stage of the plan seemed to be working, as nearly all committees reacted quickly to preserve barrel racing as part of their program. In December of 1981, Jimmie Gibbs Munroe reported that every one of the 632 WPRA-sanctioned rodeos would

²⁷³ Sharon Camarillo, "Rodeo Arena: Battle for Equality," *Western Horseman*, January 1986, 164-166.

²⁷⁴ Wanda Harper Bush, interview with Scott White, February 4, 2003, transcribed, Girls Rodeo Association file, National Cowgirl Hall of Fame and Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

contribute at least half of the amount to the barrel racing purse as they did to the purses of all other events.²⁷⁵

Munroe's report proved to be premature. The next month the WPRA board of directors voted to implement their first boycott against the Cheyenne Frontier Days, one of the oldest, richest, and most storied rodeos on the circuit. According to Ken Rutledge, chairman of the rodeo committee, the disagreement stemmed from a misunderstanding of the amount that constituted half of the men's purse. Whereas most rodeos included barrel racing in each performance, Cheyenne only featured the event in one of its nine performances. As a result, the committee offered \$3,000 in added money for the women and \$18,500 for each of the men's events.²⁷⁶ Consistent with their usually restrained approach, the WPRA board responded by asking for just \$500 more, to bring the total to \$3,500 in added money. The Cheyenne committee refused, and the WPRA decided to hold their ground. As WPRA secretary Lydia Moore recalled, "we didn't feel we were asking Cheyenne for that much."²⁷⁷ In fact, the women were asking for significantly less than they had warned rodeos they would ask for, and the rodeo's committee still rebuffed them. The barrel racers held firm to their plan, though, and the decision to boycott was unanimous.²⁷⁸

Despite the boycott against Cheyenne, many in the WPRA leadership and the elite barrel racers remained optimistic about the slow yet steady progress being made toward financial equality. Sharon Camarillo, a Californian barrel racer who sat aboard the standings in July of 1982, remarked that "it's really gotten progressive," in reference to the increased money

²⁷⁵ *The Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma), December 12, 1981.

²⁷⁶ *Casper Star-Tribune* (Casper, Wyoming), July 24, 1982.

²⁷⁷ *Casper Star-Tribune* (Casper, Wyoming), July 2, 1982.

²⁷⁸ *Casper Star-Tribune* (Casper, Wyoming), July 2, 1982.

available to women contestants. Following pressure from the WPRA, Camarillo believed that “little by little, the rodeo contractors are coming around.”²⁷⁹ The women were in fact making noticeable, tangible headway. By the end of the 1982 season, the average earnings for the top fifteen barrel racers totaled \$27,480, an increase of more than 270% in just six years.²⁸⁰ The problem, though, was that rodeo committees and advertisers were contributing to the prize pools for men’s events at the same rate or more. The top fifteen bareback riders earned on average \$47,768 during the 1982 season, still over \$20,000 more than the women.²⁸¹

The 1983 and 1984 seasons saw more gradual increases in prize money for barrel racers. Seemingly every rodeo met the three-quarters purse requirement except Cheyenne, where the boycott remained in place, and in 1983 the champion barrel racer, Marlene Eddleman, broke \$50,000 in one-year earnings for the first time. The following year, fourteen year-old Charmayne James and Scamper broke onto the scene, winning the world championship with a total of \$53,499.²⁸² By comparison, the all-around champion cowboys of those years, calf ropers Roy Cooper and Dee Pickett, won \$153,391 and \$122,618, respectively.

Entering the 1985 season it appeared that most rodeo committees would voluntarily meet the equal purse demands of the WPRA and avoid a strike. A few committees, though, resisted, arguing that either “they didn’t feel the women deserved equal consideration,” or because “it was economically impossible to come up with the difference.”²⁸³ For those rodeos that were struggling financially, WPRA leadership and members worked extensively to find and convince

²⁷⁹ *Reno Gazette-Journal* (Reno, Nevada), June 17, 1982.

²⁸⁰ *Barrel Racing Records*, 2019.

²⁸¹ *PRCA Media Guide*, 2020.

²⁸² *Barrel Racing Records*, 2019.

²⁸³ Camarillo, “Rodeo Arena,” 164-166.

outside sponsors to subsidize the barrel racing purse and raise it to a level on par with the men's events. A small minority of rodeos, though, many of which were large, popular, and tradition-rich with significant purses, flat out refused to meet the demands of the cowgirls.

Barrel racers faced their first such challenge of 1985 in January at the Denver's National Western Stock Show & Rodeo, the first major rodeo of the season. Jacqueline Bonney, the WPRA regional director in Colorado, spent weeks negotiating with the rodeo's coordinator, Guy Elliott, seeking to find a way for the barrel racing purse to match the \$17,000 added in the men's events. According to Elliott, the rodeo's committee was only willing to pitch in \$10,000 of its own money but would offer to help find a sponsor that could cover the difference. In the days leading up to the rodeo, though, it became apparent that, as Elliott ambiguously said, "there were some details that could not be worked out to the satisfaction of all concerned," and all sponsorship opportunities fell through.²⁸⁴ As a result, the committee scratched barrel racing from the program on the opening day of the rodeo after the WPRA made clear that no association members would compete in Denver.

While cowgirls faced an early challenge at Denver, they also won successes at key February rodeos such as Houston, where organizers offered an equal purse of \$20,000, and at Tucson, where the committee committed to an equal \$6,000 purse.²⁸⁵ Some rodeos refused to offer fully equal purses but avoided boycotts due to extra efforts by barrel racers to leverage personal connections to bring in outside money. In March, the Phoenix Jaycees rodeo nearly became the second rodeo to face a WPRA strike. At the last minute, though, local barrel racer

²⁸⁴ *The Billings Gazette* (Billings, Montana), January 9, 1985.

²⁸⁵ Camarillo, "Rodeo Arena," 164-166; *Tucson Citizen*, February 28, 1985.

Bonnie Lemaire convinced her brother-in-law to donate \$2,000 in addition to the \$3,250 that the rodeo offered in order to increase the pot to an amount equivalent to the men's events.²⁸⁶ These kinds of situations, in which women contestants went above and beyond to ensure equal money – struggles through which men contestants never had to endure – illustrated both the engrained inequality in mainstream rodeo as well as the extensive lengths barrel racers went through for a chance to compete in the arena.

As the rodeo season progressed through the spring, the commitment by WPRA membership to equal money held firm. While some rodeos such as Phoenix required creative solutions and exceedingly more work from the women for simply equal purses, barrel racers began to reap the financial rewards of their efforts. By early April, Charmayne James had already won \$23,459, more than all but three cowboys on the circuit.²⁸⁷ Prominent rodeo journalists such as Willard Porter and Kenneth Springer made note of the radical improvement, noting that, as of 1985, barrel racing undoubtedly held “the same importance in pro rodeos as men's rough-string and timed-event contests.”²⁸⁸

Entering the busy summer stretch of the rodeo season, the WPRA encountered a second situation similar to Denver with the committee of the Reno Rodeo in Nevada, set to take place in July. Early in January, the committee announced that their added purse money would be \$17,200 for men's events and \$12,000 for barrel racing, both of which constituted a \$2,000 increase over the year prior. Although committee president Chuck Ewoldt acknowledged that the committee was aware of the WPRA's equal money requirement, they “just felt it was wrong” to increase the

²⁸⁶ *Arizona Republic*, March 13, 1985.

²⁸⁷ *The Bismarck Tribune* (Bismarck, North Dakota), April 4, 1985.

²⁸⁸ Williard Porter, “Barrel Racers Have ‘Come a Long Way,’” *The Daily Oklahoman*, May 26, 1985; *Women's Pro Rodeo News*, April, 1985.

barrel racing purse to match the men's because "we felt we had done them a good job in the past."²⁸⁹ As they had with dozens of other rodeos, the WPRA leadership went to work finding a sponsor to cover the \$5,200 difference, but the rodeo's committee essentially shut down the effort. Instead, the committee elected to invite local amateur barrel racers as replacements for the striking professionals. As in Denver, WPRA members seemed equal parts devastated, bitter, and resolute. The association's secretary, Lydia Moore, told reporters that "Reno has always been one of our premier rodeos as it's tragic that we won't be there," but the committee should be "ashamed they're not having it."²⁹⁰

Following the Reno strike, barrel racers sat out of several more crucial rodeos such as Cheyenne and Salt Lake City in July, Omak, Washington in August, and Lewiston, Idaho in September. In total, WPRA members refused to compete at seven rodeos during the 1985 season for failing to offer equal money. Seven rodeos constituted only about one percent of the total number of WPRA-sanctioned rodeos, yet the number would have been exceptionally higher if not for the extraordinary labor undertaken by barrel racers to seek out and negotiate additional sponsorships for rodeo organizers. Additionally, as Sharon Camarillo pointed out at the time, the actions (or inaction) of the PRCA significantly hindered the efforts of the cowgirls. Had the men contestants stood in solidarity with the WPRA and similarly agreed to strike at any rodeo without equal purses, "they would indirectly offer a great deal of negotiating support."²⁹¹ Yet, due in part

²⁸⁹ *Reno Gazette-Journal* (Reno, Nevada), May 18, 1985.

²⁹⁰ *Reno Gazette-Journal* (Reno, Nevada), May 18, 1985.

²⁹¹ Camarillo, "Rodeo Arena," 164-166; *Tucson Citizen*, February 28, 1985.

to internal power struggles among the different men's events and in large part to the cowboys' misogynist views of barrel racers, solidarity was simply out of the question.²⁹²

The lack of support from the PRCA for the WPRA's objectives became especially apparent and troublesome entering the 1985 National Finals Rodeo. The rodeo's committee, organized by the PRCA and well aware of the WPRA's requirement for identical purses, informed the barrel racers that they would not allocate equal prize money for the women.²⁹³ While offering a \$165,000 total purse for each men's event, the committee would only offer \$150,000 for barrel racing. The top fifteen women who qualified for the richest rodeo of the year stood ready to boycott, but WPRA leadership scrambled, and president Jimmie Gibbs Munroe eventually secured a sponsorship from Purina Feeds to cover the difference.²⁹⁴ The rodeo legend that was born as Charmayne James and a bridle-less Scamper raced through the Thomas & Mack arena to the roars of an adoring crowd in round seven of the 1985 NFR nearly never happened, had it not been for the persistence of Munroe and the WPRA board of directors.

Ahead of the 1986 season, barrel racers remained optimistic about their future of earning equal money at every rodeo, citing ongoing negotiations with rodeos such as Denver and Reno, as well as with the PRCA regarding the National Finals.²⁹⁵ The women earned a key victory early, as Denver agreed to offer equal purses. Many of the same summer rodeos continued to snub the WPRA's requirements, though, most notably Reno and Cheyenne. Bob Beach, the vice

²⁹² Camarillo, "Rodeo Arena," 164-166. In her article, Camarillo refers to disputes between PRCA roughstock and timed event contestants. Differences in the entry fee structure, the administration of the events, and representation of the event contestants in PRCA governance have led to off-and-on conflicts between contestants since at least the 1930s.

²⁹³ Camarillo, "Rodeo Arena," 164-166.

²⁹⁴ Camarillo, "Rodeo Arena," 164-166.

²⁹⁵ Camarillo, "Rodeo Arena," 164-166; Aleta Waither, "He's Not Clowning Around Now: Cogburn Leads Barrel Racers' Fight for Equal Money," *The Daily Oklahoman*, February 6, 1986.

president of the Reno rodeo, told reporters that he offered the cowgirl association \$12,000 in added money, but barrel racers voted to continue the boycott because the rodeo added \$17,200 to the men's events. Beach incredulously exclaimed that "they would have wanted us to come up with \$17,200" for the barrel racing event, seemingly flabbergasted that women would expect to be paid the same as men contestants.²⁹⁶ The standoff continued through the following year as well, as both Reno and Cheyenne continued to reject the WPRA's demands.²⁹⁷

In 1986 and 1987, Charmayne James made national news when she ended both years with more money won than any cowboy won in a single event: \$151,969 in 1986 and \$120,002 in 1987.²⁹⁸ The press celebrated the precocious barrel racer's winnings as evidence of the progress women had made at earning equal pay with the cowboys. In reality, though, WPRA members continued to go to great lengths to personally find and guarantee outside sponsorships for dozens of rodeos just to ensure equal prize money, a task rarely if ever required of male contestants. The largest and most frustrating example of a rodeo that by 1987 still required this extra labor from cowgirls was the National Finals Rodeo.

The PRCA, which managed the NFR and its payout, continued through 1987 to refuse to offer equal prize pools, and relied on Purina's sponsorship to supplement the barrel racing purse. The stated reasoning for this discrepancy from NFR production manager Shawn Davis illustrated the misogynist and patronizing view of barrel racers that most in PRCA leadership held through the late 1980s:

We try to include them and take care of them, but I don't see how in any way they would be entitled to equal money. We love to help them in every way we can. But our cowboy

²⁹⁶ *Reno Gazette-Journal* (Reno, Nevada), June 20, 1986.

²⁹⁷ *Reno Gazette-Journal* (Reno, Nevada), June 19, 1987; *Beatrice Daily Sun* (Beatrice, Nebraska), April 21, 1988.

²⁹⁸ Bruce Anderson, "Having a Barrel of Fun," *Sports Illustrated*, December 10, 1986; James Hirsch, "For Nomadic Rodeo Cowboys, a Few Dollars More," *New York Times*, March 4, 1988; *Barrel Racing Records*, 2019.

membership, well, many of them feel if we didn't have the women there, we could split all that money up among the rest of us. I just hope they don't make too much trouble and get our membership upset about this.²⁹⁹

Davis, a retired former saddle bronc champion, represented the kind of rodeo organizer that barrel racers viewed as the toughest obstacle in their pursuit of pay equality. Connie Combs Kirby, the 1976 world champion, said in 1987 that "we used to have a problem with some of the younger cowboys."³⁰⁰ After several years of a gradual increase in barrel racing purses with no effect on the men's purses, though, most young male contestants saw no reason to protest the goals of the barrel racers. The primary objections came from the older, mostly retired cowboys who made up most rodeo committees such as Reno and Cheyenne, as well as the PRCA leadership. As Kirby described it, "now it's really the older ones, the people who run the national finals. I think they're kind of staying back in the horse and buggy days."³⁰¹

Through the late 1980s and into the 1990s, barrel racers overwhelmingly viewed their efforts at demanding equal money as successful. Most importantly, the cowgirls expressed pride in demanding change and shifting the views of most male contestants as well as the rodeo audience on the status of barrel racing as a vital event for any performance. In 1989, Kathy Jennings, the director of the WPRA circuit for Arizona and New Mexico, explained that "now we get equal money and are pretty well thought of...Attitudes have changed. Now women have a lot more to say about things."³⁰² Despite continued struggles with the PRCA and occasional boycotts at rodeos such as Reno in the early 1990s, barrel racers felt emboldened to take a stand

²⁹⁹ *Houston Chronicle*, March 6, 1987.

³⁰⁰ *Houston Chronicle*, March 6, 1987.

³⁰¹ *Houston Chronicle*, March 6, 1987.

³⁰² *Arizona Daily Sun*, June 15, 1989.

when necessary.³⁰³ In 1991, hall of fame barrel racer Marilyn Camarillo recalled that “the older board members didn’t like the women telling them what to do, but you have to stand up for yourself... You have to change an image, a whole way of thinking and it doesn’t happen overnight. It’s a tough deal, but you have to hang in there.”³⁰⁴

Over the course of the last three decades, barrel racers have continued to draw upon their own resiliency and the legacy of women fighting for a space in the mainstream rodeo arena. In 1998, cowgirls succeeded in earning fully equal prize money at the National Finals Rodeo.³⁰⁵ In 2007, the WPRA successfully sued the PRCA when the latter attempted to use the women’s association’s confidential membership records to form its own barrel racing association in a cost-cutting effort.³⁰⁶ In 2018, Hailey Kinsel and her horse Sister finished the season with total earnings of \$350,700, more than any cowboy has ever won in a single season in iconic rodeo events such as calf roping, saddle bronc riding, or steer wrestling.³⁰⁷ Barrel racers have fought for and won their place as an equal and irreplaceable aspect of modern professional rodeo, an unmitigated success that is built upon the long history of women’s resistance to marginalization and inequality in mainstream rodeo. From the efforts of Fox Hasting’s generation to maintain their inclusion in rodeo in the 1920s and 1930s, to Fern Sawyer’s generation and their founding of the GRA in the 1940s, to the growth and development of that organization until its members fought for and earned equal money in the 1980s, these first three chapters have demonstrated that

³⁰³ *Reno Gazette-Journal* (Reno, Nevada), June 19, 1992.

³⁰⁴ *Oakdale Leader*, March 6, 1991.

³⁰⁵ *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, December 12, 1998.

³⁰⁶ Chelsea Shaffer, “No Winners: 2007 PRCA v. WPRA Legal Battle,” *The Team Roping Journal*, July 2016.

³⁰⁷ *Barrel Racing Records*, 2019.

the history of women in rodeo is one of constant struggle. Recognizing and remembering that struggle will be a crucial part in ensuring a just and inclusive future for rodeo.

Chapter 4

Exporting Cowboy Contests: American Rodeo in Twentieth-Century England

On the afternoon of June 14, 1924, John Van “Tex” Austin sat astride a handsome black gelding, underneath a tunnel leading to the expansive dirt field of Wembley stadium.³⁰⁸ The slender, tall 38-year old American rodeo producer peered across the enormous grandstands. He might have yelled instructions as 150 contestants – bronc riders, ropers, trick riders, and bulldoggers – streaked past him for the grand entry.³⁰⁹ If so, his orders would have been overtaken as the roars of an estimated crowd of over 80,000 exhilarated London spectators echoed around the warm, humid, dusty air.³¹⁰ Austin likely felt immense relief in this moment. He was an experienced producer of the grandest rodeos in the United States, having successfully staged performances in Madison Square Garden, Yankee Stadium, Soldier’s Field, and the Boston Garden.³¹¹ Still, nobody had ever attempted to produce a modern American rodeo overseas. Austin spent tens of thousands of his own dollars to transport all the contestants, 232 horses, and even more steers across the Atlantic.³¹² They had departed New York City a full three weeks prior, and finally, it was time for the rodeo to begin. As he rode out from under the tunnel, Tex Austin probably felt like a bronc who had just thrown its rider, proudly striding across the arena for the audience to relish. In just three short days, though, Austin would find

³⁰⁸ Charles Simpson, *El Rodeo* (London: John Lane, 1924), 51.

³⁰⁹ Simpson, *El Rodeo*, 51; *The Graphic*, June 14, 1924; *The Illustrated Police News*, June 19, 1924.

³¹⁰ *The Illustrated London News*, June 21, 1924.

³¹¹ Mary Lou LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo: Pioneer Professional Athletes* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 86.

³¹² *New York Times*, May 25, 1924.

himself in court, defending himself, his business partners, and his contestants against charges of animal cruelty. Ten years later, he would find himself there again.

This chapter primarily examines competing notions of appropriate human-animal relationships within and surrounding two specific productions of American rodeos on British soil: the 1924 rodeo at Wembley Stadium and the 1934 rodeo at the White City Stadium. England was by no means the only foreign nation to host an American rodeo. Numerous other producers followed Austin's lead and staged countless performances in dozens of countries across the globe throughout the twentieth century, in locations as diverse as France, Belgium, Germany, Cuba, Venezuela, Japan, and Australia.³¹³ All of those rodeos warrant further study and consideration of their individual and collective historical significance. However, the 1924 and 1934 London performances will be specifically highlighted here for a couple of important reasons. First, examining the entirety of rodeo's history and influence on a global scale would necessitate a dauntingly immense web of national and transnational historiographies that is outside the achievable scope of this single chapter.

Secondly, and most importantly for the focus of this dissertation, the events that unfolded at both the 1924 and 1934 rodeos provide a useful perspective on how human-animal relationships – both the actual embodied relationships and the cultural significance of what those relationships represent – shift across time and borders. As they shift, new, unforeseen

³¹³ Unlike the copious stacks of scholarship on the influence of Wild West shows in Europe and the global impact of Western fiction and film in the twentieth century, the history of international rodeo performances is strikingly thin. For more, see Clifford P. Westermeier, "Rodeo: The Cowboy Sport Abroad," *Colorado Magazine*, 56 (Summer/Fall 1979): 209-230; Renee M. Laegreid, "Finding the American West in Twenty-First-Century Italy," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (2014): 411-428. Souvenir programs from dozens of international rodeos that have yet to be considered can also be found in Boxes 42 and 43, Collection of Rodeo Programs and Ephemera, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

contradictions arise. Tex Austin's rodeos in London were immensely popular, due in large part to their perceived authenticity and their association with imperial expansion and the conquest of the American frontier by Western civilization, all of which was grounded in the specific relationships between contestants and animals in the arena. Yet the rodeos also faced a strident backlash for their treatment of livestock, primarily from advocates who knotted their defense of humane treatment of animals with notions of Englishness and proper practices of a civilized, cosmopolitan society. The conflicts between supporters of the rodeos and anti-cruelty activists demonstrate the extent to which the context and content of human interactions with animals influence our perceptions of the humane or cruel nature of those interactions, and the construction of national and cultural identity based on those perceptions.

Although Tex Austin's presentation was the first competitive rodeo staged in England, it was far from the first performance of an idealized American West across the Atlantic. Almost immediately after the United States gained its independence, British audiences demonstrated an infatuation with images of an expanding North American frontier through their consumption of travelogues, journalist accounts, and visual art and photography of the West. Perhaps the most prevalent and influential medium throughout the nineteenth century was the Western novel, especially those by authors such as James Fenimore Cooper and Mayne Reid.³¹⁴ The popularity of the Western genre in England and Europe eventually attracted numerous Wild West shows. From the 1880s through the 1910s, an impressive array of enterprising businessmen staged battle reenactments, exhibitions of equestrian and firearm skills, and other thrilling scenes from the

³¹⁴ Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 111. See also Kate Flint, *The Transatlantic Indian, 1776-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

American West across Europe. The most well-known of these producers, William Cody, toured central and western Europe a total of eight times between 1887 and 1906. His troupe of soldiers, cowboys, sharpshooters, Native Americans, horses, bison, and other animals entertained millions of spectators across fourteen different countries, including England.³¹⁵ Several historians have rightly argued that the popularity and longevity of shows such as Cody's demonstrates the appeal and familiarity of the story of the expansion and closing of the American frontier to Europeans.³¹⁶ Incredibly, though, historians have largely ignored the similar yet specific appeal of rodeos from 1924 through the rest of the twentieth century.

The memories left by novels, films, Wild West shows, and other popular cultural representations of the West in the minds of European audiences unavoidably informed the perception of the rodeos that swept through the continent in later decades. Specifically, Cody's use of animals within his show as representations of progress toward man's domination over nature would later shape the ways in which British crowds viewed the role of broncs, steers, and calves in rodeo.³¹⁷ Tex Austin's audiences in London, though, interpreted an important distinction between the two representations of human-animal interactions in the West. Unlike Wild West shows, which were necessarily staged and understood as such by most British spectators, many of them understood rodeo to be real – or at least as real as possible, given the confinements of an arena's walls within a European metropolis. In contrast to Cody's explicitly

³¹⁵ Frank Christianson, "Introduction: American Theses," in Frank Christianson, ed., *The Popular Frontier: Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Transnational Mass Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017): 13-24.

³¹⁶ David Wrobel, Prologue, in Frank Christianson, ed., *The Popular Frontier: Buffalo Bill's Wild West and Transnational Mass Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017): 3-12; Paul Reddin, *Wild West Shows* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Rydell and Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna*.

³¹⁷ On Cody's use of animals in his shows, see Reddin, *Wild West Shows*, 73, 177; Louis Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 52, 133.

narrative performances that emphasized the triumphant conquest of the wild frontier by white settlers and the American cavalry, rodeos primarily reproduced the daily life and labor of cattlemen and cattlemen in the American West as realistically as possible. Tex Austin may have strategically invited contestants and carefully selected livestock for his rodeos, and he purposefully advertised and arranged the events in a way to attract as many spectators as possible. Yet, once the show began, rodeos seemed to present to London audiences a seemingly unchoreographed and unscripted reproduction of the kinds of tasks actual North American ranch workers had been performing for decades.

Like Cody's earlier Wild West shows, the 1924 rodeo received widespread publicity and attracted Londoners in droves. According to several accounts, the first performance drew between 80,000 and 93,000 spectators, and after sixteen days of twice daily shows, the rodeo still attracted crowds of more than 50,000 per performance.³¹⁸ The event was so popular that Austin decided to extend it seven additional days due to high demand. When the show at Wembley finally ended, a small band of enterprising contestants stayed behind to produce their own rodeo at the London Coliseum. They performed thirty shows on the cramped stage, all to packed houses.³¹⁹

The intense popularity of the first rodeo in London begs the question: what was it about rodeo – a performance of human-animal relationships so distinctly representational of the American West – that appealed so strongly to British audiences? Why were British spectators so enthralled by a presentation of a uniquely American interaction between humans and livestock?

³¹⁸ Vera McGinnis, *Rodeo Road: My Life as a Pioneer Cowgirl* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1974), 186; *The Sportsman*, July 7, 1924.

³¹⁹ McGinnis, 188-189.

The answer might be as simple as the fact that the story of the West that riding broncs and roping steers represented was not uniquely American, but in fact mirrored the national narratives of European powers and expanding empires. To British eyes, the struggle between contestants and livestock within rodeo demonstrated, in a visceral way, the simultaneously romantic and treacherous experience of imperial conquest. The participants – male and female, human and animal – who performed in London rodeos embodied a familiar British narrative of life and labor on the edges of their broadening global reach. Bronc riders valiantly confronted the dangerous beasts of the frontier. The ropers and bulldoggers wrangling steers exhibited the skills necessary to survive on the boundary of civilization.

Perhaps the clearest evidence that British audiences connected the interspecies interactions of American rodeo to a national narrative of expanding empire was the inclusion of Austin's production in the British Empire Exhibition held at Wembley in the summer of 1924. Organizers of the Exhibition intended to display the expansive power of the empire through reenactments of "important episodes of English history."³²⁰ They filled Wembley Park with enormous reproductions of "luxurious palaces from India, primitive walled cities from Central and West Africa, great buildings from all the colonies of the mother country."³²¹ Attendees could experience the "Palace of Engineering" where the most technologically advanced ships and mining equipment were displayed, or the "Palace of Industry" with demonstrations of the latest manufacturing processes, or the "Palace of Arts" with "pictures and sculptures by the greatest

³²⁰ "British Empire Pageant to Have 15,000 Actors" from unknown newspaper, Clippings – 1924-1934, Box 2, Folder 4, Ashby Collection, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

³²¹ *New York Times*, June 8, 1924.

artists from every corner of the Dominions.”³²² The featured piece of the exhibition, though, was the display of exotic animals from the far reaches of the empire.³²³ An aquarium filled some of “the strangest fish of the seas,” as well as zebras, camels, tigers, and “the state elephants of India” demonstrated British control over the natural as well as the social worlds of their colonial processions.³²⁴

According to one account, the inclusion of Austin’s production in the Empire Exhibition was largely inspired by Prince Edward, the Prince of Wales, and his infatuation with the North American West. An avid horseman who made frequent trips to cattle ranches in rural British Columbia and Alberta, the prince gained notoriety for falling from his horses several times in full view of reporters and photographers. When British promoter Charles Cochran was tasked by Parliament to find a way to “Americanize” the exhibition, he met with noted New York City promoter Tex Rickard. In the course of their conversation, Cochran mentioned the Prince’s troubles with maintaining his seat in his saddle, and the semi-controversy and embarrassment it had caused for the royal family. In response, Rickard reportedly asked “Why don’t you take a bunch of cow-punchers over there and show ‘em how to ride?”³²⁵ Cochran was thrilled with the suggestion, so Rickard introduced him to Tex Austin, who had just successfully produced the inaugural Madison Square Garden rodeo the year prior.

For Cochran and Parliament, aside from appeasing the prince’s personal fascination with the Western lifestyle, including the rodeo as one of the core attractions of the Empire Exhibition

³²² *New York Times*, June 8, 1924.

³²³ The use of popular exhibitions of exotic animals from colonies as a demonstration of British dominance has an extensive and fascinating history, best explored in Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

³²⁴ *New York Times*, June 8, 1924.

³²⁵ *The Hamilton Evening Journal*, April 19, 1924.

was an obvious choice. Like the exhibitions of British mining prowess and caged animals thousands of miles from their natural habitat, the American ropers and riders represented Anglo-Saxon superiority and capability in taming and conquering the wild natural forces of the frontier. As one reporter excitedly explained, “the breath-taking events...the loose limbed ease of the cowboys lying or standing round the chutes...the superb indifference in the face of danger. Such physical suppleness and control gives the impression to us over here of watching a new and superior race. Mr. Tex Austin and his fellow-promoters of Rodeo, have, in fact, given us at once the best ‘showmanship’ and the most thrilling reality. Above all they lift us for a glorious couple of hours clean out of the world of pedestrianism and petrol.”³²⁶ The bronc riding and steer roping of rodeo fascinated and excited British spectators both as confirmation of the supremacy of their imperial power and as a momentary escape to the furthest reaches of that power.

Aside from the inclusion of the actual rodeo performance within the British Empire Exhibition, Tex Austin and Charles Cochran tied the contestants and their relationships with their animals to Britain’s center of political might outside of the arena. Shortly after their arrival in London, Austin and Cochran arranged for a select group of contestants to visit Parliament, of course dressed in their finest Western outfits. The ropers, riders, and bulldoggers enjoyed tea at the Terrace house, marveled at the extravagant corridors of Parliament, and exhibited their talents by “skillfully encircling” Sir Henry Brittain with a rope.³²⁷ According to bronc and trick rider Ruth Roach, several contestants gave a private performance for the royal family, and some

³²⁶ *London Times*, June 1, 1934.

³²⁷ *Chicago Tribune*, July 4, 1924.

were invited to ride along Hyde Park's tree-lined royal bridle path, supposedly in the company of King George V.³²⁸

The wealthy British elite were so enthralled with the rodeo that invitations to extravagant luncheons and evening dances were an almost daily occurrence for the contestants. Based on interviews with contestants who travelled to London in 1924, historian Joyce Gibson Roach described how "the performers were welcomed into British high society." They appeared at events ranging from "dances to high teas to receptions" always wearing their "full cowboy kit," creating a stark contrast of dusty boots and satin shirts among a sea of tuxedos and top hats.³²⁹ As bronc and trick rider Vera McGinnis recalled, "We were in vogue with royalty and society...we were entertained, wined, and dined lavishly. The hostess who could materialize the largest and most attractive group of rodeo performers at her party had the most successful affair."³³⁰ Thelma Crosby, the wife of roper Bob Crosby, remembered how "we'd been told that the English do not entertain foreigners unless they are of great importance, and we were not. But to our surprise and delight we had many invitations."³³¹ Nearly every one of those invitations included a request from the British hosts for the Americans to dress in their Western garb, including boots and spurs. As one can imagine, the presence of booze regularly turned these dances into rowdy affairs. On one particularly memorable evening, in the presence of Romanian royalty and British bourgeois, several intoxicated contestants stormed the orchestra and stole the

³²⁸ Joyce Gibson Roach, *The Cowgirls* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1990), 99.

³²⁹ Roach, 97.

³³⁰ Vera McGinnis, *Rodeo Road: My Life as a Pioneer Cowgirl* (New York: Hastings House Publishers, 1974), 186.

³³¹ Thelma Crosby and Eve Ball, *Bob Crosby: World Champion Cowboy* (Clarendon, TX: Clarendon Press, 1966), 76-77.

instruments. According to Thelma Crosby, they launched into a rough rendition of *Turkey in the Straw* and, as the Europeans looked on in awe, the Americans performed a square dance.³³²

The insistence by their British hosts that the American visitors dress in solely “western” garb indicates the importance of authenticity of the contestants and their actions to British spectators. Although rodeo performances took place within the safe urban confines of London, the perceived authenticity of the interactions between contestants and the animals in the arena was crucial to the rodeo’s success. Oftentimes, organizers defended the legitimacy of the rodeo by differentiating it from earlier staged Wild West exhibitions. In the official program for the 1924 show, they committed an entire page to explaining that the rodeo was “Not A ‘Wild West’ Show.” Austin forcefully stated that the performance which readers were about to witness was “first, last, and all the time a sports contest” and he directly connected the action inside the arena to the physical labor of American cowboys, arguing that the rodeo contestants “embody the everyday activities in the life of a cowboy.”³³³ He understood that a rider’s spurs digging into the neck of a bronc or a roper’s loop closing around a steer’s horns would hold more significance for a British audience if they viewed those as authentically western interactions with animals, as directly descendent from human-animal relationships of the American frontier.

Austin was not the only one who vouched for the authenticity of the rodeo by explicitly linking the actions of the contestants to the daily lived experiences on the edges of American society. One British journalist, who claimed to have witnessed rodeos “in the Wild West” yet seemed to lack any extensive knowledge of the realities of the American West, explained that “in

³³² Crosby and Ball, *Bob Crosby*, 79-80.

³³³ London, First International Rodeo program, 1924, Box 43, Folder 14, Collection of Rodeo Programs and Ephemera, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

real cowboy states, like Texas and Arizona, where the population is few and far between and the towns mere collections of wooden cabins, these rodeos are almost the only form of amusement.”³³⁴ Other reporters more directly connected the action inside the arena to the physical labor of American cowboys, arguing that the rodeo contestants “embody in contest form the activities of their everyday life on the ranges.”³³⁵

While Tex Austin’s 1924 rodeo was broadly popular and well-attended, it, and especially Austin’s second London rodeo ten years later, faced fervent critiques, passionate protests, and controversial legal challenges concerning charges of inhumane handling of animals inside the arena. British anti-cruelty advocates, primarily the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), fought the use of livestock in the rodeo and what they described as the unacceptable treatment of animals within an industrialized British society. Like the organizers of the rodeo, the RSPCA also invoked imperialism and notions of Englishness, but in arguments for ending the rodeo rather than promoting it. This nationalistic claim was a longstanding strategy of the RSPCA, which from its inception in the 1830s had explicitly asserted that kind treatment of animals was an innately Anglo-Saxon trait, in contrast to other “foreign” cultures.³³⁶ The zeal with which British anti-cruelty advocates fought the use of livestock in the rodeo demonstrates the shifting norms of human-animal relationships in twentieth-century urban centers such as London and rural peripheries like the American West. It also unveils the tensions and contradictions inherent in national narratives of an empire expanding into primitive frontiers, and the celebration of those narratives through performances such as rodeo.

³³⁴ *The Daily Herald*, March 27, 1924.

³³⁵ *The Era*, June 4, 1924.

³³⁶ Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*.

Even before the contestants arrived in London for the 1924 rodeo, it was clear that a controversy over the treatment of animals would unfold throughout the show's stay. Tex Austin, Charles Cochran, and their business partners worked ahead of time to ensure that potential spectators unfamiliar with rodeo events would not interpret the animal action as cruel or abusive. This strategy was undoubtedly shaped by Austin's experience with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) and their protests at earlier rodeos in New York City just a few years prior.³³⁷ In an attempt to avoid the same misunderstandings and objections he faced at those eastern American rodeos, Austin took special care in advance advertisements to avoid common rodeo terms and colloquialisms that might be misinterpreted as descriptive of abuse. Most notably, rather than "bulldogging," which was the more common term in the American West, he instead used the tamer and less confusing terms of "steer wrestling" or "steer throwing." In a *Sportsman* newspaper article announcing the scheduling of the rodeo over two months before its arrival, the organizers argued that events such as "bronk riding, steer roping, and steer wrestling...do not offend the finer sensibilities of an audience, because they are absolutely free from cruelty." They repeatedly emphasized the supposed fairness of the event, describing it as a "contest between man and beast," in which the contestant "depends entirely upon his skill and courage" which creates a "spirit of fair play and good sportsmanship."³³⁸

³³⁷ Various animal welfare advocacy groups protested the treatment of animals at Wild West shows and rodeos across the United States throughout the twentieth century. Austin's 1922 rodeo in New York City in particular made national news when the ASPCA argued in magistrate court that the performances should be stopped due to cruelty in the steer wrestling event. After a visit to the rodeo, the magistrate dismissed the charges. See *New York Times*, November 14, 1922. For more on the history of animal advocacy and rodeo, see Susan Nance, *Rodeo: An Animal History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019); Kristine Fredriksson, *American Rodeo: From Buffalo Bill to Big Business* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1985).

³³⁸ *The Sportsman*, March 29, 1924.

Austin and Cochran also preemptively worked with newspaper editors in England to publish celebratory reports of the rodeo's arrival and editorials that defended against charges of cruelty. Just days before the rodeo was set to begin, one British journalist noted that the performances "will doubtless result in a further fierce controversy on the subject of cruelty to animals," but pledged to his readers that the promoters were "emphatic in their declaration that the contests are wholly devoid of cruelty in any shape or form."³³⁹ Another reporter for *The Daily Herald* assured readers that the life of a rodeo bronc was entirely free from abuse, and that they "live a life of ease and luxury. All that is required of them is that they should behave like indiarubber balls as soon as a man gets on their back."³⁴⁰ Similarly, a brigadier general who became "familiar" with rodeo through his time in Australia admitted in an editorial that "there have been some severe criticisms with regard to...the element of cruelty" within the upcoming performances. Yet he guaranteed to his fellow Englishmen that "such criticism was totally without foundation."³⁴¹ It is unclear if these proactive reassurances from either the promoters or native Brits had any effect on the London public's reception to the use of livestock in the performances, but their presence in numerous newspapers demonstrates the contentious context into which Austin's rodeo strode in 1924.

The RSPCA similarly engaged with the public preemptively to frame the rodeo as inherently abusive, often using violent and gruesome exaggerations of rodeo events. One member described to a reporter that he had "seen steers brought down so violently with the lasso that their horns were torn out by the roots, and then they were dragged out of the arena by

³³⁹ *The Era*, June 4, 1924.

³⁴⁰ *The Daily Herald*, March 17, 1924.

³⁴¹ *The Graphic*, June 14, 1924.

horses.”³⁴² Although injuries to steers and other livestock did occur, especially at smaller amateur rodeos without professional contestants or producers, it is extremely unlikely that a steer’s horns could have been pulled from its head by a single rope and horse. Whether or not this RSPCA member actually witnessed this violence occur, the exaggerated and gruesome portrayals of rodeo events by RSPCA advocates was part of a longstanding strategy dating to the group’s origins in the nineteenth century. Historian Harriet Ritvo explains that “the vivid description of abuses laid the groundwork by stirring up readers’ feelings of moral outrage. The repeated emphasis on the shocking or horrifying nature of cruelty to animals presented offenses as intentional lower-class assaults on more refined sensibilities.”³⁴³ Whereas grisly descriptions of offenses imparted by members of the lower classes reinforced the moral superiority of those with higher social standing, the accounts of rodeo events served to reinforce the moral superiority of a metropolitan British society over a rural American society.

After months of simmering angst surrounding the treatment of rodeo livestock leading up to the rodeo, protests erupted once the rodeo kicked off, with many objectors specifically noting the ways in which the rodeo insulted notions of proper British relationships with animals. Letters to editors from local citizens included statements such as “the rodeo was a direct challenge to the British idea of sport and of fair play for the dumb animal and the underdog,” as well as “roughness to animals, even of the size of a steer, is something we do not like in this country.”³⁴⁴ Many anti-rodeo activists cited their personal knowledge of horse behavior in their objection to the bronc riding they witnessed at Wembley, claiming incredulously that no horse could buck

³⁴² *The Daily Herald*, June 7, 1924.

³⁴³ Ritvo, *The Animal Estate*, 144.

³⁴⁴ *The People*, June 15, 1924.

with such ferocity without mistreatment. One woman wrote to *The Daily Herald* and claimed that based on her “more than fifty years riding” she could confidently state that no horse, brought thousands of miles over land and sea, can retain wildness if properly treated. Cattle, kindly handled and confined, become placid enough; they must be goaded to provide a spectacle with thrills.”³⁴⁵ Some Londoners viewed the roping events as not only abusive, but also as a negative influence on their children. One mother lamented that the rodeo was “having a very bad effect on our children and young people...Already boys have been chasing and lassoing cows in emulation of Rodeo, and I understand that in London streets children are amusing themselves by trying to lasso unfortunate cats.”³⁴⁶

The event that provoked the most serious charges of cruelty, though, was the steer roping, in which a contestant ropes a steer’s horns, throws it to the ground by tripping it, dismounts, and ties the steer’s legs together. During the first night’s performance, one contestant’s rope caused a steer to trip and fall so violently that the steer’s leg was fractured. “Distressed and groaning” and limping on three legs, the steer was driven out of the arena, away from public view. An RSPCA inspector present at the rodeo, Henry Knight, examined the steer with Tex Austin and both agreed that it should be “put out of its misery.” An American veterinarian travelling with the rodeo then euthanized the steer with three revolver shots to the head.³⁴⁷

A passionate debate over the crowd’s initial reaction, the cruelty of the event, and the proper response immediately ignited in the British press. One local newspaper *The People*, led by editor Hannen Saffer, published particularly extensive accounts of the controversial action.

³⁴⁵ *The Daily Herald*, June 17, 1924.

³⁴⁶ *The People*, August 10, 1924.

³⁴⁷ *The Daily Express*, July 2, 1924.

The paper's unnamed "special correspondent" reported how "a storm of boos and hisses broke from the audience" and "many left the stadium, especially women" when it began apparent that the steer was injured.³⁴⁸ Other newspapers described the accident in milder terms as an "unfortunate incident" and claimed that only "some people rose in their places and booed."³⁴⁹ One report in the *Newcastle Sun* quoted supporters of the rodeo who used comparisons to other British animal sports to justify the steer roping event. While acknowledging the "overwhelming evidence of cruelty," the reporter included claims from Tex Austin and "thousands" of rodeo fans who asserted that the event was "no more cruel" than fox hunting or steeplechasing.³⁵⁰ Regardless of their defense of the event, the reaction was severe enough for Austin and the rodeo organizers to announce the next day that the steer roping contests would continue, but without an audience "that might have mixed opinions concerning it," as Charles Cochran explained.³⁵¹ Instead, the eighty steer ropers would contest their event earlier in the day, before the gates to the stadium opened.

Neither the accidental injury nor the absence of steer roping from the program of events seemed to discourage the public from attending. The following day, an "enormous crowd" rained a "liberal applause" upon the contestants at the afternoon performance.³⁵² More than a week later, the afternoon performances still attracted a reported 77,000 spectators, with the evening performances bringing in about half that.³⁵³ The rodeo had its defenders in the press as well. One theater critic passionately pleaded with his readers to attend what he described as "a very

³⁴⁸ *The People*, June 15, 1924.

³⁴⁹ *The Illustrated Police News*, June 19, 1924.

³⁵⁰ *Newcastle Sun*, June 17, 1924.

³⁵¹ *The Illustrated Police News*, June 19, 1924.

³⁵² *The Sportsman*, June 17, 1924.

³⁵³ *The Sportsman*, June 23, 1924.

wonderful show indeed.” Aside from “one or two minor mishaps, and one rather more serious spill,” he declared that he had “failed to detect the slightest suggestion of cruelty in any shape or form.” To not attend the rodeo, he argued, would be “to miss the most remarkable demonstration of splendid horsemanship ever witnessed in this country.”³⁵⁴

Despite the rodeo’s continued popularity, Austin and Cochran’s decision to continue the steer roping in private outraged the RSPCA, who demanded that the event be banned, and they appealed to Parliament for action. Two days after the incident, Home Secretary Arthur Henderson announced in the House of Commons that Parliament had no power to stop the event, but that the police would be ordered to observe future rodeo performances alongside the RSPCA.³⁵⁵ When a second steer was injured and euthanized during the private steer roping contest the next day, Henderson instructed the police “to apply for summonses in respect to cases of alleged cruelty” and recommended to Cochran and Austin that the steer roping be completely suspended, which they accepted.³⁵⁶

Eventually the court granted a total of nine summonses, one against five different contestants who were charged with “causing and permitting cruelty” of an animal, and two each against Tex Austin and Charles Cochran, who were additionally charged with “the keeping of premises for the purpose of fighting or baiting animals.”³⁵⁷ The court proceedings in Wealdstone that began in early July were nearly as well-attended as the rodeo performances in Wembley, as both RSPCA protesters and rodeo fans amassed outside the courthouse. The *Daily Express* reported that the five charged contestants “had to fight an entrance” as “crowds cheered them,

³⁵⁴ *The Era*, June 25, 1924.

³⁵⁵ *The Daily Herald*, June 17, 1924.

³⁵⁶ *Daily Telegraph*, June 18, 1924.

³⁵⁷ *The Sportsman*, June 18, 1924.

clustered round to secure ill-scrabbled autographs, women gave them roses for luck, and in some instances tried to kiss the boys.”³⁵⁸ On July 11th, after over fifteen hours of hearings, the summonses were dismissed by a vote of six magistrates to five at Hendon Court. According to the court reporter for *The West Middlesex Gazette*, when the decision was announced “the cowboys, with loud whoops, rushed into the corridor, threw their wide-brimmed hats into a circle, and danced around them until policemen cleared them off the premises.”³⁵⁹

The fierce protest over the treatment of animals at the 1924 rodeo, and the steer roping court case in particular, begs the question as to why the rodeo sparked such a vehement protest while earlier presentations of Western human-animal interactions – such as Buffalo Bill’s shows – did not. Robert Bontine Cunningham Graham, a Scottish author and politician, argued that the absence of any controversy related to William Cody’s exhibition in London versus the fervent backlash to the treatment of animals in 1924 was primarily due to the general unfamiliarity of the British audience with the particulars of rodeo, and its hazy presentation of an expansionist narrative. In his introduction to artist Charles Simpson’s collection of sketches from the 1924 rodeo, Cunningham Graham argued that “the rodeo gave a special opportunity, for nearly everyone was absolutely ignorant of what it was, and so enjoyed a latitude of speech rarely vouchsafed to them. Buffalo Bill at least brought Indians and buffalos. Few understood that his great show was in reality a panorama of a life just passing, in which he and many of his comrades had borne considerable roles. All, though, had read of scalping, tomahawks, moccasins, mustangs and buffaloes. The rodeo was new ground.”³⁶⁰ Even if the audience’s

³⁵⁸ *The Daily Express*, July 2, 1924.

³⁵⁹ *The West Middlesex Gazette*, July 12, 1924.

³⁶⁰ R.B. Cunningham Graham, Introduction to Charles Simpson, *El Rodeo* (London: John Lane, 1924), 3.

knowledge was based on fictionalized, colonialist portrayals, the action presented by Cody's show mirrored and reinforced that knowledge. The action presented in the rodeo arena, however, was entirely new for some, and presented a relatively indirect connection to the kinds of stories of the American West with which British audiences were familiar from the likes of James Fenimore Cooper and Mayne Reid.

Still, most Londoners who witnessed the rodeo understood what its organizers hoped it would represent. Based on the size of the audiences and the reported zeal of their cheers, many accepted and celebrated it, while many others were clearly disgusted and horrified by it. But, most importantly, they were not disgusted and horrified simply by the treatment of animals at the rodeo, they were disgusted and horrified by the treatment of animals at the rodeo *in London*. This discrepancy demonstrates the often incongruous norms of human-animal relationships among early twentieth-century Londoners. While celebrating an imperial narrative of expanding frontiers that included the treatment of animals as presented in the rodeo, many Londoners rejected that treatment so close to home. As Bishop Willdon of Durham succinctly stated in his support of the RSPCA's protests, the act of roping a steer and throwing it to the ground may be "tolerable perhaps of necessity in the wild, uncultivated parts of the earth, but inexcusable as an exhibition or amusement offered to citizens in the heart of the British Empire."³⁶¹ For Londoners, the expansion of the empire's reach demanded the subjugation of non-human animals, but the mistreatment inherent in that subjugation was best left on the edges of civilization rather than brought to its center.

³⁶¹ *Daily Telegraph*, June 18, 1924.

The intense controversy and prolonged court battles clearly wore on Austin, Cochran, and the other organizers and contestants. An exasperated Cochran told *The People* that he had “no heart left. It is a case of banging one’s head against a stone wall. I loathe the constant fight. I have resolved, if I can possible do it, never to have another production of any kind in England.”³⁶² Nevertheless, the popular and financial success of the rodeo must have convinced Tex Austin that a second production would be profitable. Ten years later, after numerous successful rodeos across North America, Austin set out to produce another top-rate rodeo in London, this time at the White City Stadium in Shepard’s Bush. He invested heavily in recruiting the premier rodeo talent throughout the United States and Canada, both human contestants and livestock. Even before he sold a single ticket, Austin guaranteed a total of \$9,000 in cash prizes for contestants, and offered to award the entirety of gate receipts from one day’s performance to contestants, both of which were nearly unheard of at the time.³⁶³ The allure of such potential riches succeeded in attracting over one hundred of the leading cowboys and cowgirls of the time, including bronc rider Pete Knight, roper Dick Shelton, bronc rider Alice Greenough, and steer wrestler Fox Hastings. Austin also agreed to contracts with several top stock contractors, especially Eddie McCarthy and Verne Elliott, to ship over four hundred head of horses and cattle, including their best bucking horses that had performed at famed rodeos such as Cheyenne and Pendleton. He also paid one of the premier rodeo announcers of the day, Abe Lefton, to narrate the action in the arena.³⁶⁴

³⁶² Willard H. Porter, “When they took the West to London,” *True West*, (September 1985): 12.

³⁶³ *Hoof & Horns*, May 1934, 12.

³⁶⁴ *Hoof & Horns*, May 1934, 12.

The logistics of moving such an enormous hoard of contestants and livestock across the Atlantic was both wildly complex and expensive for Austin. He arranged for specialized trains to carry both humans and animals from three separate departure points throughout western North America: Fort Worth, Texas; Cheyenne, Wyoming; and Calgary, Alberta. The trains converged in Montreal, where the livestock was loaded onto one massive freighter and the humans on another, and they departed for the long voyage to England.³⁶⁵ Austin's extensive effort to attract and extract the best contestants and animals from the West demonstrates his desire to produce the most authentically Western rodeo performance he possibly could for the London audience. Yet, the burdensome cost of his efforts seemed to doom the rodeo before it even began. Fellow rodeo producer Tex Sherman echoed the general concern among the rodeo community for the financial potential of the rodeo more than a month before it began. In his monthly column in *Hoof & Horns*, Sherman reflected on the 1924 rodeo at Wembley that "broke all records for attendance in the world," yet in reference to the 1934 rodeo, he ominously lamented "I doubt if they will repeat."³⁶⁶

Just as a decade earlier, anti-rodeo protesters and pro-rodeo advocates waged a public relations contest during the months preceding the 1934 rodeo. Several members of the British press were disheartened by the planning of another rodeo, partly for animal cruelty reasons, but also due to the general unrest caused by the last one. In particular, Hannen Swaffer, the former editor of *The People* who adamantly opposed the 1924 rodeo, decried the proposal for another rodeo in his new opinion column in *The Daily Herald*. Citing the court proceedings and "the

³⁶⁵ "Rodeo Cowhands Signing up for London Classic," *The Weekly Pioneer Times* (Deadwood, S.D.), May 3, 1934.

³⁶⁶ *Hoof & Horns*, May 1934.

rows there were all over the country because of imitation rodeos that cropped up everywhere” in 1924, he exclaimed that he “cannot believe that it is proposed to hold a rodeo at the White City in June.”³⁶⁷ A reported 80,000 British citizens agreed with Swaffer’s sentiment and signed a petition demanding that Parliament pass a bill outlawing the rodeo. By April, Sir Robert Gower had presented such a bill in the House of Commons, and it was quickly passed into law.³⁶⁸ The “Protection of Animals Act” prohibited public performances that featured the “throwing or casting, with ropes or other appliances, any unbroken horse or untrained bull,” as well as “wrestling, fighting, or struggling with any untrained bull,” and “riding, or attempting to ride, any horse or bull which by the use of any appliance or treatment involving cruelty is, or has been, stimulated with the intention of making it buck during the performance.”³⁶⁹

Tex Austin and his fellow organizers of the 1934 rodeo took numerous, extensive preemptive steps to assure the London audience that the rodeo events were absent any abuse and would not violate any British animal protection laws. They explained in an advance advertisement that “any element of cruelty to animals that may have existed in former rodeos has been entirely eliminated. If there is any suffering in the present contests, it befalls the human participants and not the animals.”³⁷⁰ Austin personally authored a wide-ranging rebuttal in *The Daily Herald* to what he described as “statements...made concerning the proposed rodeo which have no foundation whatever in fact.” He adamantly declared that only four steers were injured

³⁶⁷ *The Daily Herald*, March 1, 1934.

³⁶⁸ “Anti-Rodeo Measure Advances in Britain,” *New York Times*, April 14, 1934.

³⁶⁹ Protection of Animals Act, UK Public General Acts, 1934 c. 21, Section 1

³⁷⁰ *The Illustrated London News*, June 16, 1934.

in 1924, not the fifty percent that the RSPCA claimed, and that no “brutal methods” were employed to induce horses to buck.³⁷¹

In the official program for the 1934 rodeo, Austin similarly emphasized the competitive nature of the event as he had in 1924. Far more ink, though, was spent defending the treatment of the livestock, from their birth to their performance in the arena. Austin simultaneously made the case for the ethical conditions under which the stock was raised and the Western nature of the rodeo action when he declared that “the Management has secured...one hundred and fifty head of range raised cattle and sixty head of range raised horses, from the foothills of Alberta, Canada.” Echoing arguments that he made against earlier claims of cruelty in the United States, and that subsequent defenders of rodeo’s treatment of livestock would make for decades, Austin plead for the audience to use their common sense. Given that he had invested such a heavy sum to gather and ship the stock to Europe, and “as the success of the whole contest depends upon this stock it is extremely foolish to suppose that the Management would knowingly permit any contestant to abuse them even if they should so desire.” Finally, Austin repeatedly stressed the social relationship between the human and animal contestants as nearly definitive proof that the former would never intentionally harm the latter. Throughout the program, he included statements such as “the competitors...and their horses are really partners,” and “the cowboys and cowgirls of the ranchland love animals and are their best friends.”³⁷²

Austin also proactively adjusted the traditional steer roping event and replaced it with a breakaway event in order to avoid another controversy or court battle. Whereas in steer roping

³⁷¹ *The Daily Herald*, May 24, 1934.

³⁷² London, Worlds Championship Rodeo program, 1934, Box 43, Folder 14, Collection of Rodeo Programs and Ephemera, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

the steer must be roped, thrown to the ground, and tied, in the breakaway roping the rope was tied to the saddle horn with a small thread, which easily broke as soon as the steer was caught and the rope came tight. This adjustment was likely made by Austin to avoid violating the Protection of Animals Act, as it would ensure that no cattle would be thrown to the ground with a rope. Despite his efforts, however, Austin quickly found himself in court again, alongside a contestant named J. Richards, after a steer that Richards was chasing crashed through the arena fence and was knocked unconscious during one of the early performances.³⁷³ As in 1924, the RSPCA lobbied the British government to charge Austin with “causing a steer to be cruelly terrified” and “to be cruelly ill-treated,” and within days the magistrate in the West London Police Court issued a summons.³⁷⁴

The court’s hearing lasted two full days, as Magistrate W.J.H. Borderick questioned Austin, Richards, and several RSPCA members. Unlike the hearings of a decade earlier, the press coverage and public interest was much more subdued, but the accusations lobbed at the rodeo by the anti-cruelty activists were similarly violent and gruesome exaggerations. According to Austin, the RSPCA claimed in their arguments that rodeo officials were “pouring acid on the backs of the horses and putting tacks in the saddles to make them buck, and a lot of other untruthful stuff.”³⁷⁵ Despite the allegations, the Magistrate determined that the steer’s crash through the fence was simply “an accident” and “if you are going to have competition you must have accidents.” The fact that Austin had taken several precautions before the rodeo to attempt to avoid animal abuse, and that no non-RSPCA member of the public had protested at the rodeo or

³⁷³ Westermeier, “Rodeo: The Cowboy Sport Abroad,” 216.

³⁷⁴ Westermeier, “Rodeo: The Cowboy Sport Abroad,” 216.

³⁷⁵ *Oakland Tribune*, November 4, 1934.

in court, convinced him that the actions taking place in the arena did not constitute cruelty.³⁷⁶ He concluded that “this competition is not unlawful and I cannot stop it” and dismissed the charges entirely.³⁷⁷

In contrast to the 1924 rodeo, which managed to be financially successful and popular despite the public controversy and court hearings, the 1934 rodeo was poorly attended and a commercial disaster. It ended with most of the stock auctioned off simply so that Austin could recoup as much of the losses as possible. Local newspapers reported that Austin and the organizers owed “up to £30,000” total to the contestants, the staff, and the venue owners, even though the rodeo only brought in £20,000 in gate money.³⁷⁸ Austin himself claimed that he lost \$200,000 on the failed production.³⁷⁹ Tex Sherman reported in *Hoof & Horns* that the rodeo lost Austin \$125,000, which Sherman attributed completely to the animal cruelty controversy. He expressed his frustration with what he perceived as uninformed urbanites who were either “worked up through sympathy for the animal or just finding a chance to let the public know they are on the job.” Sherman continued by explaining that “to my honest way of thinking, I believe that it was pure ignorance that causes these loud, long haired brothers and the short haired sisters in London to raise hell over something that they don’t know what it’s all about.”³⁸⁰

The RSPCA officials clearly disagreed with any notion of their unfamiliarity with the horses and cattle of the American West. As rodeo officials rushed to sell the livestock to local farmers, the RSPCA stood watch, carefully ensuring that the new non-human British subjects

³⁷⁶ “Rodeo Head Defeats Suit of S.P.C.A. in England,” *New York Times*, July 1, 1934.

³⁷⁷ Westermeier, “Rodeo: The Cowboy Sport Abroad,” 216.

³⁷⁸ *The Daily Herald*, July 14, 1934.

³⁷⁹ “Austin and Cowboys Back,” *New York Times*, July 25, 1934.

³⁸⁰ *Hoof & Horns*, August 1934.

were humanely transferred from life in the arena to life across the pond. Such an ignominious conclusion to his second international rodeo infuriated Tex Austin. After completing the voyage back across the Atlantic, he returned to his ranch in Santa Fe, still rife with anger and resentment. In an interview conducted the day following his return, he furiously quipped that “if England ever wants any more cowboys she’ll have to raise them, because none of us are going back.”³⁸¹ A few months later, Austin bristled at any suggestion that he might make another attempt to take his production across the pond again. Despite admitting he had received interest from promoters in Holland, France, Italy, and Spain, he emphasized that he would “never take another show back [to Europe] ...last Summer’s experience finished that for me.”³⁸²

Tex Sherman’s conclusion that the efforts of the RSPCA and the controversy surrounding the animal abuse cases were primarily responsible for the financial catastrophe of Austin’s 1934 rodeo was likely correct. One other possible and seemingly obvious reason is that the British audience, struggling through a global Great Depression, simply could not afford to attend multiple performances as they had a decade earlier. Industrial unemployment in the United Kingdom had risen from 10.3% in 1924 to 16.7% in 1934, and other factors such as decreased exports, the devaluation of the pound, and little to no government unemployment benefits meant the economic context of the 1934 rodeo was much worse than that of the 1924 rodeo. However, the effects of the Great Depression were felt just as hard if not harder in the United States at the same time, with industrial unemployment rates reaching 32.6% in 1934, nearly double that of the UK.³⁸³ And yet, rodeos in the US remained just as popular and well-attended as any year prior.

³⁸¹ “Austin and Cowboys Back,” *New York Times*, July 25, 1934.

³⁸² *Oakland Tribune*, November 4, 1934.

³⁸³ Barry Eichengreen and Tim Hatton, “Interwar Unemployment in International Perspective,” Working Paper Series, Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, UC Berkeley, April 1, 1988.

Spectators flocked to performances in large metropolises like Boston and New York City, traditionally significant rodeos like Cheyenne, and small county fairs in rural towns by the thousands.³⁸⁴ Clearly, it was the contentious atmosphere of accusations and court cases over animal abuse, not the economic context, that resulted in the financial failure of Austin's second rodeo in London.

The stories of the 1924 and 1934 London rodeos, although they are ultimately just two small examples in an otherwise long history, reveal a great deal about rodeo's dominant man-versus-beast myth. They show how rodeo historically has worked to further engrain – and respond to the public's expectations for – the types of human-animal relationships exhibited and celebrated in popular cultural representations of the West such as literature, Wild West shows, and films. They illustrate the multitude of ways in which broad, complex processes like national and cultural identity construction have been (and are) entwined with perceptions of the appropriate treatment of animals, not only in the United States, but internationally as well. Finally, and perhaps most importantly for the goals of this dissertation, they collectively demonstrate the complicated, tenuous, and ultimately precarious task of knotting notions of combative human-animal relationships with ideas of western authenticity by rodeo promoters. As the following chapter reveals, interdependent and cooperative interspecies relationships have played just as crucial of a role in defining the genuine western character of rodeo for audiences, and in shaping the lives of rodeo contestants.

³⁸⁴ *New York Times*, October 21, 1934; *Salt Lake Tribune*, July 27, 1934; *Galveston Daily News*, October 20, 1934.

Chapter 5

The Two are Partners: Rodeo Cowboys, Their Horses, and a Distinctly Western Relationship

On a cool Sunday night in November, 1931, over 20,000 excited Bostonians packed into the warm Boston Garden to witness the final performance of the first competitive rodeo ever held in Beantown.³⁸⁵ With the complex scents of fresh dirt and livestock manure wafting up to their noses, and the thunderous calls of an excited announcer filling their ears, the audience witnessed thrilling feats performed by contestants in a variety of events, including bronc and bull riding, trick riding, steer wrestling, and calf roping. At the conclusion of the night, producer W.T. Johnson entered the arena and announced the champions of the week-long rodeo. One of those champions was Jake McClure, a tall, strong, twenty-seven year old calf roper from New Mexico. McClure was in the prime of his roping career in 1931. He had won the world championship the year before, and he was earning a steady living doing what he loved at a time when most Americans were struggling to make ends meet. Most importantly, he had two horses, Nap and Silver, on which he could rely on in pressure situations when large purses were on the line. If any Bostonians had attended all of the rodeo performances throughout that week, they would have witnessed McClure and Silver rope and tie a total of six calves in 160 seconds, earning McClure a total of \$300.³⁸⁶

Wild West shows and exhibitions were fairly common in early twentieth-century Boston, but rodeos with competitive events such as calf roping were new to the city in 1931.³⁸⁷

³⁸⁵ "Indian Bronk Rider Critically Injured," *Boston Globe*, November 15, 1931.

³⁸⁶ "The Corral," *The Billboard*, November 28, 1931.

³⁸⁷ For more on the prevalence and popularity of Wild West shows in eastern cities such as Boston, see Louis Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); Paul

Spectators surely would have consulted their souvenir programs for more information about the intricacies of this novel event. They would have learned that “nearly everything in the rodeo has grown out of the cowboy’s work on the cattle range, and this is peculiarly true of calf roping.” The authors of the program explained that working cowboys of western ranches roped and tied calves for branding and doctoring out on the open range, and that contestants in the tiny Garden arena displayed the same skills. In order to accomplish their task, however, ropers needed intelligent, devoted horses that “have been trained on the cattle range.” This is because, as soon as the contestant ropes the calf and dismounts, the horse must “keep backing just enough to hold the rope taut...to keep the animal flat on the ground and prevent it from struggling to its feet and delaying a tie.” This “wonderful exhibition of equine intelligence,” which grew from an eagerness to work with his rider, made the horse invaluable to a calf roper. As the program concluded, “the two are generally ‘pardners,’ and the pony gets the best of care in return for the prizes he helps bring to his owner.”³⁸⁸

The promoters of the 1931 Boston rodeo were not the only ones to portray the relationship between rodeo horse and rider as an unyielding partnership forged in an idyllic Western setting. Promotional materials from rodeos across the country similarly depicted ropers and their horses as equal, interdependent companions from the mythic cattle ranges of the frontier. Throughout the early 1920s, producer Tex Austin wrote in his description of the steer roping events that “the rope horse plays fully as important a part as the roper.”³⁸⁹ The authors of

Reddin, *Wild West Shows* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill's Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).

³⁸⁸ Boston rodeo program, 1931, Box 13, Folder 11, Collection of Rodeo Programs and Ephemera, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

³⁸⁹ Chicago rodeo program, 1920, Box 15, Folder 10, Collection of Rodeo Programs and Ephemera, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

the souvenir program at the 1930 New York City rodeo in Madison Square Garden wrote that the horses “used in calf roping have been trained on the cattle range.”³⁹⁰ Six years later they stressed that the calf roping horses “have been brought by their owners all the way from the West” to accomplish a task in which “man and horse must work together.” Attendees learned that ropers took great care to ensure that their mounts were in excellent health following the cross-country journey, because “calf roping is a partnership proposition from the start, between cowboy and pony.”³⁹¹ The program at the 1942 Chicago rodeo emphasized the Western ranching roots of calf roping, and explained that a “quiet, dependable” horse was a necessity. The event tested not only “the skill of the cowboy, but also that of his best friend, his pony, for it is a well known fact that in calf roping, about 50 percent of the success depends on the pony.”³⁹² The 1947 Tucson program likewise claimed that “the trained cowpony needs no guiding hand from its rider, yet the coordination between them spells the difference between championship points and just another ride.”³⁹³

The constructed identity of rodeo timed event horses as committed companions to their contestant riders, and of a faithful partnership between the two, was a crucial element in the promotion and performance of rodeo as representative of a mythic West. Rodeo promoters understood that a close working relationship between cowboy and horse appealed to audiences –

³⁹⁰ New York, World’s Championship Rodeo program, 1936, Box 20, Folder 11, Collection of Rodeo Programs and Ephemera, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

³⁹¹ New York, World’s Championship Rodeo program, 1936, Box 21, Folder 1, Collection of Rodeo Programs and Ephemera, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

³⁹² Chicago, Gene Autry’s Flying A Ranch Rodeo program, 1942, Box 13, Folder 3, Collection of Rodeo Programs and Ephemera, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

³⁹³ Tucson, La Fiesta de los Vaqueros program, 1947, Box 3, Folder 10, Collection of Rodeo Programs and Ephemera, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

especially those from eastern urban areas – and regularly exploited that appeal to sell more rodeo tickets. This chapter looks closely at these culturally constructed representations of the relationship between horses and riders, where they originated from, and why they appealed to consumers.

Additionally, and perhaps more crucially, this chapter looks beyond mere representations, and considers the historical implications of the actual social relationships between the living, embodied human and horse participants. Ranchers and rodeo contestants frequently spoke of a close social bond they developed with their horses. These interspecies relationships held significant cultural meanings for the humans, and social and material meanings for both species. They were a vital part of the cultural definition of legitimate Western cowboys, and they affected the quality of life and daily lived experiences of both humans and horses.

In closely examining the embodied human-animal social relationship between timed event horses and riders, this chapter is partially a response to what Erica Fudge calls the “ethical impetus” of animal history: to disrupt anthropocentrism in the study of history and to recognize the importance of animals in defining humans, thus forcing us to reevaluate the meaning of human as a category. In her landmark essay “A Left-Handed Blow,” Fudge argues that animal historians must “write a history that refuses the absolute separation of the species.” By reading the past “for the animals as well as the humans,” we must “place ourselves next to the animals, rather than as the users of the animals.”³⁹⁴ A consideration of the social relationships between humans and animals – including the culturally constructed representations of the relationships

³⁹⁴ Erica Fudge, “A Left-Handed Blow: Writing the History of Animals,” in Nigel Rothfels, ed., *Representing Animals* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002): 3-18.

but especially the embodied members of those relationships – can offer a new vantage point from which to assess the category of human. Rather than defining what is human through what makes us *different* from animals, an examination of social relationships such as those between contestants and their horses offer a definition of human through what *bonds* us with animals.

A few historians have recently offered fleeting glimpses of the potential for assessing the history of human-animal social relationships within broader inquiries. Perhaps the best demonstration of this type of inquiry appears in a work that, while it shares a labor history element, is only tangentially related to animal history. In his analysis of the 1914 Ludlow Massacre, *Killing for Coal*, Thomas Andrews describes how miners developed symbiotic friendships with mice by sharing food, and established dysfunctional, occasionally combative partnerships with laboring mules. He reveals how miners came to value these social, cross-species relationships, which brought humor, entertainment, companionship, and meaning to their otherwise dangerous and unbearable working lives. These relationships also helped miners make sense of their place in their domestic spaces and political struggles above the mine.³⁹⁵ In his relatively brief analysis, Andrews clearly demonstrates how human interactions and bonds with non-human animals have reshaped the ways humans understand and interpret both the cultural and natural world around them. Further analyses of these types of embodied social relationships – with different animals and in different cultural contexts – would accomplish Fudge’s goal of disrupting anthropocentrism in the study of history and help with rethinking how humans are defined in relation to non-human animals.³⁹⁶

³⁹⁵ Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America’s Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 129-135.

³⁹⁶ For another recent example, see Ann Norton Greene, *Horses at Work: Harnessing Power in Industrial America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008). Greene’s broader focus is on the ways Americans put horses to use as

Any foray into the history of human-animal relationships will encounter the inevitable quandary that non-human animals do not produce the same documents upon which historians traditionally rely. Obviously, horses do not leave written records of their own lives nor shared recollections of their relationships with riders. Any conclusions that can be drawn regarding the horse's side of the relationship will unavoidably be filtered through a human perspective. Yet, incorporating an interdisciplinary methodology that includes standard primary sources along with animal science studies on horse behavior can help in the goal of decentering the human and assessing both sides of the relationship. Animal scientists have long understood that many animals, especially horses, have deep emotional lives and personalities that can be shaped by their relationships with the humans around them.³⁹⁷ For horses specifically, animal scientists recognize that environmental factors, especially the humans they interact with, can influence certain aspects of a horse's behavior and personality. This chapter will utilize such observations in order to assess more completely the cowboy-horse relationship, rather than simply looking at just the human side. From this comprehensive perspective, this chapter seeks to further what Susan Nance has called the "central task" of animal history, and, by extension, one of the vital tasks of this dissertation: to "recognize and document the degree to which all history is inherently interspecific."³⁹⁸ Ranchers and rodeo contestants defined themselves and made sense of their world not only through their interactions with other humans, but also through their relationships with their horses, and through their horses' relationships with them.

a form of technology during the industrial transformation of the country. Within her analysis, though, Greene examines the social relationships that formed between humans and working horses, and explains that the ability of horses to bond with humans was a characteristic that raised their value above other working animals.

³⁹⁷ For more on the emotional lives of animals, see Marc Beckoff, *Minding Animals: Awareness, Emotions, and Heart* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

³⁹⁸ Susan Nance, introduction to *The Historical Animal* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 5.

The Social Relationships of Ranchers and Ranch Horses

Just as the sport of rodeo originated from the daily tasks of the Western range, the importance of the bond between rodeo contestants and their mounts reflected a similar partnership on the ranch. Working cowboys and their horses regularly spent long days together for months at a time, eventually developing a rapport and trust in each other's abilities. That close understanding and cooperation between them was necessary to accomplish a variety of tasks, from rounding up cattle to roping, doctoring, and branding calves. Jack Culley, an Oxford-educated cattleman who moved from his native England to northeastern New Mexico to work on Western ranches through the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, including as manager of the famous Bell Ranch, commented extensively on the bond that inevitably developed between cowboys and horses while working on a ranch. In his memoir, Culley remembered that it was a "curious feature of range life that a fellow grew just as attached to horses that belonged to the outfit he was working for as to horses he owned himself. That was because, after all, it was the work a horse did for a cowhand, and his way of doing it, that won his rider's good opinion and regard. If a cattle boss wanted a hand to hate him, all he had to do was to take away his top mount."³⁹⁹

Culley also observed that the partnerships between ranchers and their horses grew stronger through the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century as "ranches became fenced up and ranching, so to speak, more domesticated." With horse herds closer to ranch headquarters

³⁹⁹ John H. Culley, *Cattle, Horses, and Men of the Western Range* (Los Angeles: The Ward Ritchie Press, 1940), 161.

rather than far away on the open range, “the ties with certain of one’s horses grew closer.”⁴⁰⁰ As an example, Culley illustrated the close bond he formed with his own horse Smoky. He said he often wondered “whether I ever had a horse I was more attached to or remember more affectionately, than old Smoky.” Culley fondly recounted the time he spent with Smoky, explaining that “he and I between us worked up a flat-footed walk of our own contrivance and traveled many a hundred miles together at it to our complete satisfaction...I wish I could get a ride on him today!”⁴⁰¹ While Culley’s education and personal background may not have been the same as most western ranchers of the time, his writing serves as a useful glimpse into the bond that many of his fellow cattleman shared with their horses.

Ranchers often celebrated their relationships with their horses through short poems and songs, several of which were published in popular ranching and rodeo periodicals. One such poem that appeared in *Hoof and Horns* in 1938 illustrated a bond between cowboy and horse that ran so deep that the two even shared emotions.

You’ve heered people discuss the lone cowboy
Who’s got nothin’ but range land to cross,
But I jest cain’t see nothin’ plumb lonesome
About pardin’ around with a hoss
‘Cause a hoss is a sociable critter
Who will always fall in with yore mood,
He will kick up his heels when yo’re rarin’
An’ look knowin’ an’ still when you brood,
Still they auger about us lone cowboys
Jest as if no one ever had known
That as long as his hoss is his pardner
A cowboy ain’t hardly alone.⁴⁰²

⁴⁰⁰ Culley, *Cattle, Horses, and Men of the Western Range*, 167.

⁴⁰¹ Culley, *Cattle, Horses, and Men of the Western Range*, 171.

⁴⁰² *Hoof and Horns*, June 1938, 8.

For ranch cowboys, a horse's value was determined by more than its utility in accomplishing daily tasks. They treasured the ability of the horse to cheer up its rider, share in frustrations, and generally offer companionship in an otherwise lonely profession.

As early cowboy competitions and formal rodeos emerged around the turn of the century, ranchers brought along their favorite and most trustworthy equine companions to compete. The fact that rodeo events were modeled after daily ranching tasks meant that the cowboy/horse partnership developed in the branding pen translated well to the rodeo arena. Even as rodeo became more professionalized and contestants began to compete more than they ranched, they commonly sent their horses to ranches for training. According to one Arizona rancher, well known calf roper Homer Pettigrew brought his horse Brownie to the ranch for training sometime in the 1940s. The rancher "rode Brownie to round up 56 calves in a large pasture and drove them to the corral lot across the dirt road from our house. He would rope a calf, jump off to run down the rope to flank the calf, and tie it down with a piggin string while Brownie held the rope tight so he could brand, earmark and vaccinate the calf and dehorn and castrate it if it was a bull calf. The work took all day." The rancher remembered how a neighbor drove by and asked if he needed any help, to which he responded, "not as long as Brownie keeps workin this rope the way he's doing." The rancher declared that, in both the arena and out on the range, "a good roping horse was as important as the roper."⁴⁰³

Representations of the Cowboy/Horse Relationship in Western Fiction and Film

⁴⁰³ Mildred Walker Perner, *Life with Old-Time Cowboys* (Mayer, AZ: Mildred Walker Perner, 1995).

Most of the attendees of a twentieth-century rodeo, especially a major urban rodeo in cities such as Boston, Chicago, or Los Angeles, would not have been intimately familiar with the horses of a working Western ranch or the relationship between those horses and their riders. However, nearly every member of the audience entered the arena with a predetermined idea of what a cooperative horse-rider relationship symbolized, and that interpretation was largely informed by the audience's consumption of Western fiction and film. The representation of the cowboy-horse partnership disseminated and popularized by Westerns fundamentally shaped the way in which producers marketed – and audiences interpreted – rodeo as an authentic Western performance.

Artists and authors have utilized the iconic image of a heroic man on the back of a horse – a gendered symbol of power and social status – for centuries, and it clearly did not originate with the Western genre. Yet Western books, films, and television shows presented a unique connection between the cowboy hero and his horse. Rather than simply an unnamed vehicle, the authors and directors of Westerns depicted horses as equal partners and inseparable from their cowboy counterparts. Audiences rarely saw Roy Rogers without Trigger, Gene Autry without Champion, or Tom Mix without Tony. These legendary pairs (and dozens of other less famous ones) rode the range together, fought crime together, and persevered through dangerous situations together. The intimate relationships these men formed with their horses in their films symbolized one of the virtues that characterized the mythic West: loyalty.⁴⁰⁴ Spectators attending

⁴⁰⁴ For more on the symbolic relationship between Western hero and horse, see especially Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything: The Inner Life of Westerns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 89-110; John G. Cawelti, *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1999), 76-78; John H. Lenihan, *Showdown: Confronting Modern America in the Western Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 12-14; Roderick McGillis, *He Was Some Kind of a Man: Masculinities in the B Western* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009), 105-113.

rodeos expected to witness the same loyal partnership between contestants and their horses as the ones they had seen on screen.

Rodeo producers understood this expectation, and often hired actors such as Rogers, Autry, and Mix to advertise and appear at rodeos with their famous horses. Rogers and Autry quickly recognized the lucrative possibilities of connecting their fame as Western actors to rodeo and became producers themselves.⁴⁰⁵ A clear part of their promotional strategy to attract urban audiences to their rodeos was to emphasize their reputations as expert Western horsemen. Both made sure to ride their wonder horses around the arena regularly throughout their rodeos, displaying their connection with the horse by performing tricks. Whenever Rogers or Autry entered the arena they would always ask Trigger or Champion to bow or wave to the crowd, which predictably thrilled the audience. The film stars similarly emphasized their equine partners in advertising materials for their rodeos, and explicitly tied their partnership to Western ideals. The program for the 1953 Madison Square Garden rodeo, produced by Autry, featured a giant photo of Champion bowing while Autry tipped his hat to the crowd. The caption enthusiastically declared “Gene Autry with Champion bring the romance of the great West to this year’s rodeo audiences.”⁴⁰⁶

For their part, rodeo contestants made an unambiguous distinction between the bonds they shared with their horses and those between actors and wonder horses. When Tad Lucas, a

⁴⁰⁵ See Michael Duchemin, *New Deal Cowboy: Gene Autry and Public Diplomacy* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 201-223; Leisl Carr Childers, “Black Light Shows and the National Finals Rodeo: Curating Gene Autry’s Cowboy Spectacle,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 41 (Autumn 2010): 353–361; Raymond E. White, *King of the Cowboys, Queen of the West: Roy Rogers and Dale Evans* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

⁴⁰⁶ New York, World’s Championship Rodeo program, 1953, Box 22, Folder 6, Collection of Rodeo Programs and Ephemera, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

popular trick rider, was asked what contestants thought about Hollywood cowboys, she simply stated that “they knew they weren’t real cowboys.” Lucas cited the fact that Western actors “didn’t even ride very well” as a reason why she “knew that they weren’t cowboys, they were never cowboys, they were just lucky they were in the movies.”⁴⁰⁷ One old cowboy in particular admitted that he had “been to a lot of picture shows and seen cowboy heroes and their ‘wonder’ hosses, and sure they’re good.” Yet, he urged his audience to visit a ranch or attend a rodeo because when it came to “wonder hosses, that’s where you see plenty of ‘em.” As an example, the cowboy fondly remembered one specific young roper and the partnership he developed with a horse he trained himself. The “Kid” spent as much time as he could with the horse, even sleeping in the stall with it, until the two were so bonded that “the Kid could whistle and the darn fool’d break his neck a-gettin’ to him.” As the elder cowboy asserted, “Hollywood ain’t got all the ‘wonder hosses,’ and many a cowpoke that has owned a good hoss, or owns one now, will agree with me.”⁴⁰⁸

Despite the incredulity of rodeo contestants, the actor-horse pairs of Westerns attracted audiences to rodeos, and producers continued to hire them to perform well through the twentieth century. Yet, producers also understood that audience members recognized the difference between rodeo performances and the wonder horses of Western fiction and film. What distinguished the two for consumers was the inarguable authenticity and sheer materiality of the contestants and their horses. Here, right in front of them, in the flesh, was a “real” cowboy and a “real” horse, teaming together to perform many of the same tasks that western ranchers would

⁴⁰⁷ Tad Lucas, interview by British Broadcasting Company, 1985, transcript from Tad Lucas file, National Cowgirl Museum & Hall of Fame, Fort Worth, Texas.

⁴⁰⁸ *Hoof and Horns*, May 1935, 16.

have accomplished on the range. Audiences did not need to translate the scene from a page to their imagination; there was no filter of the television screen or the artificiality of props, lighting, or stuntmen. Nor was this a wealthy Hollywood actor riding a carefully manicured horse performing relatively simple tricks. Although rodeos took place in urban settings with specific rules and regulations, for attendees, the work of timed event contestants and horses was as close to the “real deal” as they would get, and that realness attracted them. Rodeo producers recognized the appeal of an authentic cowboy-horse partnership forged in the West, commodified it, and marketed it in their advertisements and souvenir programs. The constructed representation of a cooperative relationship between contestant and horse, rooted in the popularity of Western actors and their wonder horses, was a significant factor in the successful promotion of twentieth-century American rodeo.

Timed Event Contestants and Horses: A Necessary Bond

The connection between contestant and horse was more than a mere representation or marketing ploy; it was an essential facet of the material and social lives of both parties. Just as cowboys and ranch horses developed close relationships from their long days on the range, timed event contestants inevitably and necessarily bonded with their horses through the hundreds of rodeos they competed at together. As professional rodeo grew in popularity nationally through the first two decades of the century, and as automobile and horse trailer technology advanced at the same time, contestants began competing at rodeos as a full time job by the start of the Great Depression. This circuit meant travelling thousands of miles every year, from New York to Los Angeles and from Calgary to El Paso, all with their horses in tow. Contestants spent nearly every

day with their horse no further than a trailer length away, continuously eating and sleeping and competing with each other. The two literally relied on each other for survival – horses depended on contestants for food and shelter, and contestants needed consistent horses to earn a steady living. That mutual reliance, along with the immense amount of time contestants and horses spent together, unavoidably forged a strong relationship between the two.

Steer wrestler CR Jones and his horse Peanuts, regulars on the rodeo circuit during the 1960s and 1970s, serve as just one example of how contestants and horses depended on – and were constantly engaged with – each other. Jones described how he and Peanuts travelled approximately 45,000 miles together in 1978, stopping at hundreds of rodeos along the way. At every stop, Jones would exercise Peanuts for an hour every morning and evening, and walk him by hand at other times throughout the day to keep the horse in shape. Jones would also spend untold hours feeding Peanuts a carefully crafted concoction of hay, grain, oats, and vitamins, as well as doctoring him with leg wraps and other preventative measures.⁴⁰⁹ Such an arduous regimen was common among timed event contestants, and demonstrates both the value they placed on the health of their horses and the extent of time they spent around them.

Recent animal science studies have demonstrated that a horse’s personality, behavior, and interspecies social relationships are significantly influenced by the amount and quality of their experiences with their primary human caretakers. For instance, one behavioral analysis found that the potential bond between a horse and its rider is influenced by their daily interactions, and that “it is possible that horses seek more contact with a familiar person whom they feel attached

⁴⁰⁹ Beth Griffith, “Peanuts: World Champion Dogging Horse,” Peanuts Collection, Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

to socially.”⁴¹⁰ Another study demonstrated that the positive attitude of a human, their relative confidence in a horse, and the extent of time spent around a horse can have a significant effect on the behavior of the horse.⁴¹¹ Other studies have suggested that affiliative contact with familiar humans can lower a horse’s heart rate and help reduce agitation.⁴¹² Based on these studies, it seems fair to conclude that horses such as Peanuts would have developed a close social bond with their riders through the immense amount of time and contact they had with each other.

A number of ethnographic studies have similarly confirmed that interdependent social relationships frequently develop between riders and horses in competitive contexts other than rodeo. For example, eventers commonly define their “partnership” with their horse as one of “mutual respect, trust, confidence, and close communication,” and one that is strengthened with more time together.⁴¹³ Dressage riders describe a sense “co-being” with their horse, which is expressed and experienced through spending time together and feeling “in sync” with the horse during competition.⁴¹⁴ By the same token, show jumpers emphasize the importance of an interspecific trust that must emerge through practice and personal knowledge of an individual horse’s character.⁴¹⁵

⁴¹⁰ Katalin Maros, Barbara Boross, and Eniko Kubinyi, “Approach and Follow Behaviour – Possible Indicators of the Human-Horse Relationship,” *Interaction Studies* 11, no. 3 (2010): 410-427.

⁴¹¹ Arnold S. Chamove, et al., “Horse Reactions to Human Attitudes and Behavior,” *Anthrozoös* 15, no. 4 (2002): 323-331.

⁴¹² J.L. Lynch, et al., “Heart Rate Changes in the Horse to Human Contact,” *Psychophysiology* 11 (1974): 472-478; J. Crawley and A.S. Chamove, “Thoroughbred Race Horse Behavioural Responses to Human Contact,” in *Looking Back and Moving Forward: 50 Years of New Zealand Psychology* (Wellington, New Zealand: New Zealand Psychological Society, 1997), 16–21.

⁴¹³ Audrey Wipper, “The Partnership: The Horse-Rider Relationship in Eventing,” *Symbolic Interaction* 23, no. 1 (2000): 47-70.

⁴¹⁴ Anita Maurstad, et al., “Co- being and Intra-action in Horse–human Relationships: A Multi-species Ethnography of Be(com)ing Human and Be(com)ing Horse,” *Social Anthropology* 21, no. 3 (2013): 322-335.

⁴¹⁵ Kirrilly Thompson and Lynda Birke, “The Horse Has Got to Want to Help: Human-Animal Habituses and Networks of Relationality in Amateur Show Jumping,” in James Gillett and Michelle Gilbert, eds., *Sport, Animals, and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 69-84.

These scientific and ethnographic studies offer a broader context for – and collectively support – contemporary interpretations of the relationships between rodeo contestants and their horses. Observers of early twentieth-century rodeos noted the mutual confidence and communication between the two. Clifford Westermeier, a historian who thoroughly documented nearly every aspect of rodeo’s past through mid-century, offered an extensive reading of the roper-horse partnership. Specifically, he claimed that “in skill and finesse, in smoothness and ability, the calf roping contest reveals the perfect coordination and understanding between man and horse...It is a revelation to see a man so confident in the training and abilities of his mount that he appears unaware of the fact that he is working at such a fast pace. The calf roper must be a skilled technician in handling the rope, but without his speedy, dashing, well-trained horse, this skill would be of little value.”⁴¹⁶ Westermeier’s observation of the trust contestants had in their horses inside the arena is complemented by a description from Jake McClure’s wife of his relationship with his horses outside the arena. Following McClure’s death in 1949, she remarked that she “often thought Jake and his horses could actually talk to each other, so close was the bond between them. He considered his horse a partner, not a pet, and always had good ones, which accounted for part of his success.”⁴¹⁷

Animal Agency in the Contestant/Horse Relationship

In order to assess the complexity of the social relationship between contestants and horses, it is essential to consider the role of the horse in shaping that relationship, which

⁴¹⁶ Clifford P. Westermeier, *Man, Beast, Dust: The Story of Rodeo* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1947), 213.

⁴¹⁷ *Western Horseman*, November 1949, 19.

inevitably evokes the question of animal agency. The term “agency” is undoubtedly an ambiguous word fraught with ontological problems. Recently, though, animal historians have argued for an interpretation of agency that recognizes a continuum of ways in which animals can bring about historical change, while accepting the fact that we will never know exactly what was their (or if they had a) motivating reason to do so.⁴¹⁸ The clearest examples of animals acting as historical agents can be found in instances of animal obstruction or interference in the plans of humans. Bulls that break free from their human-constructed pen or locusts that evade any human-devised eradication strategy plainly and visibly exhibit an ability to reshape their individual circumstances or environments. However, historians such as Andria Pooley-Ebert have argued that considerations of animal agency should not be limited to oppositional actions. In her essay on horse-human relationships in Chicago and rural Illinois, Pooley-Ebert reveals how horses interpreted their worlds differently depending on historical context, and remade their individual circumstances by willingly accepting their training and working with farmers.⁴¹⁹ This example from Pooley-Ebert serves as a useful guide for interpreting how cooperative actions between species, such as those between rodeo contestants and their horses, can also serve as evidence of animal agency.

Ropers and steer wrestlers frequently claimed that a necessary prerequisite for any great horse was the desire to learn and perform the tasks of their event. Contestants described this desire as originating from solely the horse; it could not be instilled or forced through any kind of human involvement. A horse that failed to demonstrate passion for its task would likely never

⁴¹⁸ David Gary Shaw, “The Torturer’s Horse: Agency and Animals in History,” *History & Theory* 52, no. 4 (2013), 146-167.

⁴¹⁹ Andria Pooley-Ebert, “Species Agency: A Comparative Study of Horse-Human Relationships in Chicago and Rural Illinois,” in Susan Nance, ed., *The Historical Animal* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 148-165.

see an arena, but one that did was incredibly valuable and treasured by contestants. In an extensive article about what makes a good steer roping horse, legendary roper King Merritt explained that “it’s not every horse that will make a steer horse. First you want one that likes it.” Merritt insisted that the best horses “have a feeling that he wants to reach out and grab the steer.”⁴²⁰ Ropers and horse trainers commonly referred to this essential characteristic as “cow sense.” Merritt described a horse with cow sense as one who could anticipate the movements of an unpredictable calf or steer, and stay in position long enough for the roper or bulldogger to catch the bovine.

Aside from instinctual and physical abilities, the most important trait of a horse with cow sense was the observable satisfaction it derived from chasing its quarry. Many contestants identified a horse’s satisfaction with a task in its refusal to give anything but maximum effort during competition. This is perhaps most evident in the observations of the riders of two of the most famous calf roping horses of the twentieth century: Baldy and Poker Chip. In describing what made his Baldy so successful, calf roper Ike Rude claimed that Baldy “really enjoys doing his best. Never once has he lain down on the job.”⁴²¹ Similarly, calf roper Dale Smith stated that Poker Chip “won’t cheat his owner or any other rider. He goes to a calf the same every time – as hard as he can – and he won’t quit running until the calf has been caught.”⁴²²

Some contestants and rodeo observers claimed that the best timed event horses exhibited more than just cow sense or consistency, but a distinct joy in undertaking their jobs. Joe De Yong, a close friend of Will Rogers, recalled how Rogers’s rope horse Boots seemed to revel in

⁴²⁰ *Western Horseman*, June 1949, 20-21.

⁴²¹ *Hoof and Horns*, March 1942, 11.

⁴²² *Hoof and Horns*, November 1960, 19.

his roping talent. “I always sensed that he liked to work cattle just a shade better than anything else. When working a herd, there was just the least touch of added self-cocking, hair-trigger alertness about his every move...At times I felt that Boots got a personal kick out of proving his ability...Something made him like it, anyway!”⁴²³ Another calf roper, Jack Van Ryder, commented how his horse Chico “seems to know just the amount of strain to put on the rope to hold the calf without choking it, and he enjoys the work – actually seems to grin as he trots away after each good performance.”⁴²⁴ Estelle Gilbert, a former trick rider and close friend of steer wrestler Mike Hastings, remembered Hastings’s horse Stranger as “the horse (that) the moment a bulldogger leaped and got his steer, would turn right around and run like heck to the back of the chutes for his next dogger, nickering his head off. Head high in the air, looking for that dogger! Those cowboys to the one loved Stranger like they could never love another horse.”⁴²⁵ Gilbert’s statement was not hyperbole, either; steer wrestlers of the time placed immense value on Stranger’s dedication to his job and the delight he found in it. In a 1969 poll of retired contestants, Stranger was overwhelmingly voted as the greatest bulldogging horse they ever rode.⁴²⁶

While timed event horses may have willingly or even joyfully cooperated with contestants, the balance of power in the contestant-horse relationship was not equal. Contestants ultimately decided which horses to train and the methods of that training, which horses to haul to rodeos, and when a horse would be retired or euthanized. Obviously, the humans in this

⁴²³ *Western Horseman*, January 1949, 9.

⁴²⁴ *Hoof and Horns*, August 1938, 12.

⁴²⁵ Estelle Gilbert to George Williams, May 16, 1977, Estelle Gilbert Papers, Box 1, Folder 6, Dickinson Research Center, National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

⁴²⁶ Paul Laune, *America’s Quarter Horses* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1973), 458.

particular human-animal relationship wielded an enormous amount of control and heavily regulated the lives of horses. It is also crucial to remember that every interpretation of a horse's devotion or enjoyment in their tasks is unavoidably filtered through a human perspective. Culturally constructed expectations of a good timed event horse obviously shaped the ways contestants and observers thought about and talked about these horses. Yet, the cowboy-horse relationship was an embodied, nuanced, complex relationship defined by more than cultural expectations or physical domination. Timed event horses exerted significant influence over their own material and social experiences, as well as the material and social experiences of their riders. In demonstrating an affinity for the tasks of a timed event horse, and in partnering with contestants to accomplish those tasks, these horses could effectively reshape the lives of both themselves and their riders.

The Contestant/Horse Relationship After the Arena

The close-knit bonds that contestants developed with their horses over multiple years of travelling and competing ended with collective expressions of grief and sorrow when their horses retired or passed away. Rodeo reporter and historian Williard Porter recalled how Troy Fort led his famous calf roping horse, Baldy, from the arena with "sorrow and humility" following the gelding's final rodeo. Fort "knew the end had come" when he looked up after tying the calf's legs and saw Baldy's forelegs buckling beneath his own weight. He turned Baldy out on a pasture on his New Mexico ranch to enjoy the rest of his days, but not alone. Fort made sure to visit his retired partner often, "putting his arm around the old horse's neck and scratching the

whites of his face, recalling the days when Baldy carried him and other professional cowboys to some of the highest purses in the country.”⁴²⁷

More than retirement, the death of a trusted equine companion was often a life-altering event for contestants, and their grief was shared by their friends and community. Following the passing of Mike Hasting’s horse Stranger in 1931, Hasting “gave him a real funeral with lovely flowers.” Attendees recalled that it seemed as if “every cowboy and cowgirl in Texas at the time attended the service, every Texas paper carried the story, and there were beautiful poems written about this little roan pony Stranger.”⁴²⁸ Rodeo promoter and historian Foghorn Clancy, who attended the funeral, described how Hastings “wept without restraint as his little pal pony was lowered into the grave.”⁴²⁹ Hastings’s display of emotion at Stranger’s funeral was not unusual among timed-event contestants in twentieth century rodeo. Willard Porter also remembered that when Jake McClure’s horses Silver and Legs died within a week of each other in 1937, he “was so heartbroken that he went to bed and stayed there for several days.”⁴³⁰

One particularly well-publicized horse funeral was that of the famous steer wrestling horse, Baby Doll. Owned by Willard Combs but ridden by dozens of top steer wrestlers, Baby Doll was known to quickly and consistently place her rider in the perfect position to drop down to the steer. The contestants who rode her won numerous championships and over half a million dollars, and viewed her as “not just a friend, but a business partner.”⁴³¹ Her success came to a sudden end, though, when she fell ill during a Kansas rodeo in 1960. After numerous fruitless

⁴²⁷ *Hoof and Horns*, March 1961, 18.

⁴²⁸ *Hoof and Horns*, December 1938, 12.

⁴²⁹ “The Corral,” *The Billboard*, May 25, 1929.

⁴³⁰ *Western Horseman*, November 1949, 19.

⁴³¹ “Cowboys’ Goodbye to Baby Doll,” *Life*, November 7, 1960, 63.

attempts to save her, Baby Doll died while a crying Combs held her head in his lap, surrounded by all of the bulldoggers who had ridden her earlier that day. At least eleven top bulldoggers, along with a reporter and photographer from *Life* magazine made the drive to Oklahoma to attend her funeral on Combs' ranch later that week.⁴³²

The construction of tombstones, plaques, and statues was often the final act in the horse/contestant relationship, and served to memorialize the bond between the two. Immediately following Baby Doll's death, Combs and his fellow bulldoggers began gathering donations to erect a memorial for the mare on his Oklahoma ranch. Although money was often scarce for rodeo contestants, the bulldoggers spared no cost for Baby Doll's monument, eventually gathering enough funds for "a statue by a good horse sculptor."⁴³³ Similarly, when Baldy died after six years of retirement, Troy Fort buried the horse in the center of his hometown arena in Lovington, New Mexico, and personally paid for a statue of the horse on the rodeo grounds. Like Baby Doll's funeral, the unveiling of Baldy's statue was a major event attended by several top ropers and recorded by numerous New Mexico newspapers.⁴³⁴

One keen follower of rodeo observed in 1939 that "the valiant cowboy pony, for the most part, never receives the praise he deserves. Without him rodeos could not be held. We say he is a dumb beast, not able to comprehend the meaning of praise which might be given him, but surely credit should be given where credit is due... When singing the praises of the cowboy, then, should we not also remember the important part his pony plays in winning the honor?"⁴³⁵

⁴³² "Cowboys' Goodbye to Baby Doll," *Life*, November 7, 1960, 63.

⁴³³ "The Lookout," *Eufaula Indian Journal*, November 3, 1960.

⁴³⁴ "Famed Horse Laid to Rest at Arena," *Lovington Daily Leader*, January 18, 1961.

⁴³⁵ *Hoof and Horns*, August 1939, 5.

There is certainly a wisdom in these words that historians should follow. Rodeo horses, both as cultural representations and as embodied members of social relationships, played significant roles in the lives of humans. As symbols of a mythic West, these horses helped define who was an authentic Western cowboy. As committed partners, they developed personal bonds that gave meaning to the lived experiences of contestants. As active historical agents, they could influence their own circumstances and shape the material and cultural lives of their riders.

While the previous chapter demonstrated the ways in which rodeo promoters have tended to tether human-animal conflict and symbols of man's conquest of nature to rodeo's perceived western authenticity, this chapter shows that rodeo is about much more than the clichéd struggle between cowboy and bronc or between roper and steer. Rodeo both encompasses and is historically defined by a variety of forms of human-animal relationships, especially the interpersonal, cooperative relationships between riders and their horses. The next and final chapter of this dissertation presents another perspective on the interconnections between horses and humans in rodeo, one that similarly disrupts the dominant man-versus-beast myth of rodeo: the role of humans in carefully selecting and shaping the bodies and behaviors of broncs.

Chapter 6

Bred to Buck: An Evolutionary History of Rodeo Livestock

On a rainy and warm July afternoon in 1968, John McBeth found himself speeding along Interstate 94 in a rental car between Minneapolis and Eau Claire, Wisconsin. The professional bronc rider, ranked third in the nation at the time, had just competed in a Missouri rodeo the previous evening. After catching an early morning flight, he was hoping to make the drive to the small Wisconsin rodeo in time for the saddle bronc riding. With a high-scoring ride, McBeth could significantly improve his chances of completing the season as the champion rider of the Rodeo Cowboys Association. He arrived at the arena just in time, and as McBeth unloaded his saddle and peered into the chute, his stomach may have flipped at his simultaneous luck and misfortune. The horse he had drawn, Sheep Mountain, had never been ridden for a full eight seconds. Nearly two dozen professional riders had attempted to stay aboard the bronc, but none had yet to complete a qualified ride. The horse's bucking ability was so notorious that just a few months earlier, the top contestants named him Saddle Bronc of the Year at the National Finals Rodeo. Yet, if McBeth were the first to earn a score on Sheep Mountain, he would almost certainly earn the highest score of the day, so he climbed aboard the bronc and nodded his head. The crowd of Midwesterners roared with excitement, as Sheep Mountain bucked and kicked, yawed and jumped across the arena. McBeth could only hang on for four seconds before he hit the ground, another victim of the bronc's sheer power and quickness. He picked himself up off the soft arena dirt, packed his saddle, and headed off to the next rodeo.⁴³⁶

⁴³⁶ "Top Bronc, Rider Have 4-Second Rendezvous," *The Eau Claire Leader*, July 17, 1968.

Contests between rider and bronc such as the one between John McBeth and Sheep Mountain are emblematic of rodeo and its appeal to American audiences. The image of a weathered cowhand atop the hurricane deck of a wild, sunfishing bucking horse is perhaps the most recognizable emblem of American frontier nostalgia. A significant amount of scholarly attention has been paid to the history of the rodeo cowboy as a symbol in shaping both the myth of the American West and notions of masculinity.⁴³⁷ As the first two chapters of this dissertation and several historians have demonstrated, the gendering of the bronc rider as a masculine icon played a critical role in the marginalization of women contestants from mainstream rodeo throughout the twentieth century.⁴³⁸ The consequences for cowgirl riders from the construction of the masculine bronc rider as the normative representation of the western myth that rodeo purports to represent are crucial aspects of rodeo's history. Yet, if our gaze shifts downward from the human to the horse, numerous crucial, new, and thought-provoking stories about human-animal relationships begin to emerge.

Sheep Mountain's overwhelming physical feat in that Wisconsin arena in 1968, for example, is illustrative of the ways in which human-led selective breeding of bucking horses resulted in a very particular cultural performance. The bronc's physical body and his actions in the arena were the calculated results of decades of selective breeding by stock contractor Feek

⁴³⁷ For more on the rodeo cowboy as masculine symbol, see Michael Allen, *Rodeo Cowboys in the North American Imagination* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1998); Mary-Ellen Kelm, *Wilder West: Rodeo in Western Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011); Mary-Ellen Kelm, "Manly Contests: Rodeo Masculinities at the Calgary Stampede," *Canadian Historical* 90 (Dec. 2009): 711-751; Tracey Owens Patton, and Sally Schedlock, *Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo: Breaking Away from the Ties of Sexism and Racism* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2012).

⁴³⁸ See Mary Lou LeCompte, *Cowgirls of the Rodeo: Pioneer Professional Athletes*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Michael Allen, "The Rise and Decline of the Early Rodeo Cowgirl: The Career of Mabel Strickland, 1916-1941," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, 83 (October, 1992), 122-127; Dee Marvin, *The Lady Rodeo Bucking Horses: The Story of Fannie Sperry Steele, Woman of the West* (Guilford, CT: The Globe Pequot Press, 2005); Jane Burnett Smith, *Hobbled Stirrups* (Caldwell, ID: Caxton Press, 2006).

Tooke. In the 1940s, Tooke purchased a registered Shire draft colt named Prince based solely on the horse's reputation for "sheer orneriness." Tooke recognized the value of Prince's foul disposition and bred him to the daughter of a well-known rodeo bronc, Snowflake. The offspring of that cross, General Custer, grew to the enormous size of seventeen hands tall and over 1,800 pounds, with surprising agility and a similarly nasty attitude. Tooke, seeking to continue the bloodline of massive, athletic, bad-tempered horses, bred General Custer to mares with similar traits. General Custer's progeny included some of the most infamous bucking horses of the 1960s and 1970s, including Sheep Mountain, Major Reno, Gray Wolf, and Timberline.⁴³⁹

Tooke's motivation for his carefully designed breeding strategy came from what anthropologist Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence argues is the fundamental purpose of the bronc riding event: "to express man's basic concern with the phenomenon of subduing that which is free, taming that which is wild, and measuring his own part in it."⁴⁴⁰ Since the earliest days of organized professional rodeo at the turn of the twentieth century, stock contractors understood the cultural appeal of the man-versus-nature aspect of bronc riding. They recognized the desire by producers and spectators for the wildest bucking horses possible, and they have sought to fulfill that desire through selective breeding programs. Consequently, the physical attributes and personalities of today's bucking horses are the results of decades of strategic breeding at the hands of rodeo stock contractors.

Directing our focus toward the broncs of rodeo rather than the riders offers a clearer perspective of the role of animals in shaping cultural norms and preferences, as well as human

⁴³⁹ Gavin Ehringer, "Pioneer of the Modern Bucking Horse," *The Ketch Pen*, publication date unknown, Feek Tooke file, Buster Ivory Research Materials, Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame & Museum, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

⁴⁴⁰ Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence, *Rodeo: An Anthropologist Looks at the Wild and the Tame* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1982), 132.

influence over the development of physical and behavioral characteristics in animals. Human-led adaptations and manipulations of rodeo livestock have been largely driven by cultural interest – by a desire to recreate an idealized performance that recalls a masculine and authentically Western image. Exploring this fact can help unveil the intertwined human-animal relationships of rodeo, and of the western past that rodeo claims to represent. If the bronc represents nature and the rider represents man’s dominion over it, then looking closely at the stories of human-led shaping of bronc bodies and behaviors effectively blurs that simplistic and romanticized interpretation of rodeo’s signature event.

As mentioned above, numerous rodeo historians have assessed the importance of the bronc rider as an important symbol of a masculine myth of the West. However, the recent works of two historians in particular, Jenneatte Vaught and Susan Nance, have gazed downward to examine the experiences and significance of the lives of rodeo livestock specifically. Vaught primarily looks at the efforts of those within rodeo since the 1970s to incorporate new technologies and scientific strategies of animal husbandry into rodeo’s claims of tradition and adherence to an idealized western past.⁴⁴¹ She traces, for example, how rodeo has effectively shifted along with changes in American imaginings of wild horses from simply capital to something to be cared for and preserved, but also rodeo’s difficulty in integrating animal cloning technology into its history. While this chapter deals with earlier reproductive advancements than the advent of cloning, it draws from Vaught’s analysis to show how stock contractors have

⁴⁴¹ Jeanette Vaught, “Science, Animals, and Profit-Making in the American Rodeo Arena,” PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 2015. See also Vaught, “A Question of Sex: Cloning, Culture, and Legitimacy Among American Quarter Horses.” *Humanimalia* 10, no. 1, Fall 2018.

attempted to defend their selective breeding strategies as consistent with rodeo's claims to a western past and authentically wild horses.

Nance similarly yet more deliberately centers the nonhuman animals of rodeo, including broncs, in order to explore what she describes as the stories their lives can tell “about the violence inherent in the sport and about how the common cultures of rodeo have mediated social and environmental change as rural and small-town westerners experienced it, and city people appropriated it”⁴⁴² She demonstrates how discarding the notion that the human perspective is and should be normative can expose otherwise unseen patterns and meanings in history, especially within an institution like rodeo that relies so heavily on animals. Nance's three chapters on broncs specifically trace many of the same steps as this chapter, including early strategies of locating broncs on ranches and farms as well as later approaches to selective breeding. While her observations and conclusions about the motivations and consequences of the history of broncs are largely congruent with those in this chapter, Nance does argue that rodeo reproduces and relies on a myth of animal consent, one form of which she says is the misguided contention from those within rodeo that some broncs “just love to buck.”⁴⁴³ This chapter, conversely, allows for the possibility that at least on an individual level, certain horses exhibited the proclivity for – and possibly even found joy in – throwing their rider from their back. Certainly not every bronc that has performed in a rodeo loved to buck, especially in the early twentieth century before stock contractors became more selective in adding to their herds, and when painful devices to encourage bucking were more prevalent. However, this chapter argues that some rodeo broncs,

⁴⁴² Susan Nance, *Rodeo: An Animal History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), 4.

⁴⁴³ Nance, *Rodeo*, 9.

especially those on the circuit since the 1960s after stock contractors implemented reproductive strategies to heighten this specific trait, do genuinely “love to buck.”

In addition to the insights offered by Vaught and Nance, this chapter draws from the methodologies of evolutionary history and animal studies.⁴⁴⁴ Both methodologies encourage us to think about humans and the natural world as intimately entangled. Evolutionary history specifically helps to illuminate the role of humans in steering the development of non-human species in intentional and unintentional ways, and encourages historians to think about biological organisms as workers and technology, in order to assess more fully the ways humans use the labor of animals to achieve their own wants and needs.⁴⁴⁵ This methodology is especially useful for examining the conscious, human-led adaptation or manipulation of animal bodies and behaviors as driven by economic interest.⁴⁴⁶ Animal history, for its part, can aid in understanding the ways in which animals can in turn act as agents of historical change, both as embodied beings and as cultural symbols.⁴⁴⁷ Viewing bucking horses through these lenses enables us to better understand them simultaneously as biotechnologies designed by humans to perform a specific

⁴⁴⁴ For a recent example of the potential in utilizing both methodologies simultaneously, see Joshua Specht, *Red Meat Republic: A Hoof-to-Table History of How Beef Changed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019) and “The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of the Texas Longhorn: An Evolutionary History,” *Environmental History* 21 (April 2016): 343–363.

⁴⁴⁵ Edmund Russell makes this argument in *Evolutionary History: Uniting History and Biology to Understand Life on Earth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and also in “Can Organisms Be Technology?” in *The Illusory Boundary: Environment and Technology in History*, ed. Martin Reuss and Stephen H. Cutcliffe (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 249-264, as well as in the introduction to Susan Schrepfer and Philip Scranton, *Industrializing Organisms: Introducing Evolutionary History* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁴⁴⁶ Some prominent examples include Ann Norton Greene, *Horses at Work: Harnessing Power in Industrial America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008); Philip Scranton and Susan R. Schrepfer, *Industrializing Organisms: Introducing Evolutionary History* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Sam White, “From Globalized Pig Breeds to Capitalist Pigs,” *Environmental History* 16, no. 1 (2011): 94-120.

⁴⁴⁷ In looking at animals as cultural symbols, this paper draws from Harriet Ritvo, *The Animal Estate* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

task in the rodeo arena, as powerful symbols of a masculine, mythic West, and as individual historical actors.⁴⁴⁸

Along with their exciting possibilities for new viewpoints and insights, both of these methodologies present challenging pitfalls to avoid. As environmental historian Joshua Specht has explained, evolutionary history has the potential to deny the individuality of animals, in that they “are no longer merely instinctive products of nature, but human productions.”⁴⁴⁹ With this potentiality in mind, this chapter consider the roles of bucking horses as individual beings, rather than simply as a collection of animals systematically shaped by human design. At the same time, Specht has warned of the drawbacks inherent in emphasizing the agency of non-human animals when examining their history. Doing so, he says, “risks obscuring the structural forces that constrain their actions and explain different actors’ historical marginality in the first place.”⁴⁵⁰ While bucking horses might have held the ability to reshape their worlds and make their own history, they were always restricted by the human-constructed systems within which they resided.

In order to fully assess the expectations of – and the cultural power within – the performance of a bucking bronc in the rodeo arena, an understanding of the origins of that performance is necessary. Horses have bucked and attempted to dislodge their riders for as long

⁴⁴⁸ The characterization of broncs as biotechnologies here is informed largely by the work of Vaught, as well as Donna Haraway, especially her discussion of biology as commerce in “Universal Donors in a Vampire Culture: It’s All in the Family: Biological Kinship Categories in the Twentieth-Century United States,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1996), 348-366, but also in *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). See also Kaushik Sunder Rajan, ed., *Experimental Futures: Lively Capital: Biotechnologies, Ethics, and Governance in Global Markets* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁴⁴⁹ Joshua Specht, “Animal History after Its Triumph: Unexpected Animals, Evolutionary Approaches, and the Animal Lens,” *History Compass* 14, no. 7 (2016): 326-336.

⁴⁵⁰ Specht, “Animal History after Its Triumph.”

as humans have attempted to ride them, yet the roots of rodeo bronc riding specifically can be found in the late nineteenth-century American West.⁴⁵¹ The cattle ranching industry grew rapidly in the American West following the Civil War, and ranchers needed men to care for their increasingly large herds year-round and – most importantly – drive them north to railheads once the cattle matured. A crucial component to the jobs of these “cowboys” was access to multiple well-trained horses to aid in the moving, branding, and management of the cattle. To fill this need, cowboys were often tasked with “breaking” young horses, meaning training them from relatively wild and untouched to reliable partners on a cattle drive or in a branding pen. The first step in this training process usually consisted of mounting the horse, which would often instinctually try to throw the rider from its back, until it stopped bucking. From there, the cowboy could begin teaching the horse to follow new commands.⁴⁵² Cowboys quickly realized that some horses bucked especially violently, and refused to stop, repeatedly throwing each rider to the ground. With their other entertainment options limited due to their distance from urban centers, cowboys began to gather and challenge one another to ride these unique broncs. Soon these “cowboy contests” gained popularity in western communities, and enterprising producers started organizing rodeos in nearby towns to attract the local population.⁴⁵³

⁴⁵¹ *Jinete de yegua*, an event performed by *charros* in *charreadas*, or Mexican rodeos, is similar to, and likely predates, the bareback bronc riding of American rodeo. This chapter, though, will focus specifically on the broncs of American rodeos. For more on *charreadas*, see Laura R. Barraclough, *Charros: How Mexican Cowboys Are Remapping Race and American Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

⁴⁵² Susan Nance describes the violence inherent in the breaking process on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century western ranches in more detail, especially within the full context of these horse’s lives, and the transformation of the bucking ranch horse into the outlaw rodeo bronc. See Nance, *Rodeo*, 55-65. Elizabeth Atwood Lawrence also explains that the method of “breaking” horses on nineteenth-century ranches was often a brutal exercise that included roping the horse around the neck, throwing it to the ground, and whipping it from its back, none of which is part of the bareback and saddle bronc riding events of twentieth-century rodeo. See Lawrence, *Rodeo*, 62-63.

⁴⁵³ For an examination of the fascination with Western folklore and the cowboy image by Easterners and newcomers to the West in the late nineteenth century, and of the influence of that fascination on the transition of rodeo from a

In addition to small local rodeos, large globetrotting Wild West shows at the turn of the twentieth century also incorporated bronc riding into their performances.⁴⁵⁴ Given that these were simply exhibitions rather than competitive events, though, show organizers and performers tended to seek out horses that would buck consistently yet as mildly as possible. For instance, when the famous bucking horse Midnight was purchased by Colonel Jim Eskew for his Wild West show in the late 1920s, the exhibition riders quickly “protested the bronc’s virtually unrideable style,” and Eskew quickly sold Midnight to a rodeo contractor.⁴⁵⁵ A horse that would assuredly throw its rider within a few jumps was no use for a show meant to demonstrate man’s domination over nature.

By the early 1920s, audiences grew tired of the overdramatized and artificial performances of the Wild West shows in favor of rodeo, which offered compelling competition between contestants who were not guaranteed a wage but instead earned their living by out-riding and out-roping one another.⁴⁵⁶ The procedure for determining a winner in the roughstock events necessitated a fair, consistent procedure for every ride, as well as some form of subjective scoring system, whereby volunteer or hired judges could assign a point value to each ride. In the early 1900s, riders regularly mounted a blindfolded and snubbed bronc in the middle of the arena, whipped it with a quirt to incite it to buck, and were judged by whatever scoring system

local custom to a popular ritual, see Beverly J. Stoeltje, “Rodeo: From Custom to Ritual,” *Western Folklore* 48, no. 3 (July 1989), 244-255.

⁴⁵⁴ For more on Wild West shows, Louis Warren, *Buffalo Bill’s America: William Cody and the Wild West Show* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005); Paul Reddin, *Wild West Shows* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Joy S. Kasson, *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West: Celebrity, Memory, and Popular History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).

⁴⁵⁵ Larry Pointer, “Midnight,” Articles on Rodeo, Box 5, Folder 5, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

⁴⁵⁶ The reasons for rodeo overtaking Wild West shows in popularity are examined in more detail in Clifford P. Westermeier, *Man, Beast, Dust: The Story of Rodeo* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1947).

the local rodeo committee and arena director preferred. By 1920, though, wooden or steel chutes had replaced snubbing, and the quirt was almost uniformly banned and replaced by a flank strap.⁴⁵⁷ Around the same time, nearly all professional rodeos presented the separate events of bareback and saddle bronc, and by the late 1930s, they adopted a standardized scoring system in which judges scored the horse and the rider separately, up to fifty points each.⁴⁵⁸

The Rodeo Cowboys Association judge's handbook, which has been the standard for professional rodeo since 1940, explained in detail the aspects of the horse's performance in the arena that judges should look for and consider when deciding the score. It specifically emphasized the athletic ability of the horse, as judges were instructed to "watch to see how high he is kicking and how he is jumping off the ground. The direction he is going and how snappy the animal is jumping and kicking should help to determine what to mark him. Compare the direction changes and mark for spinning, going straight away or turning in a circle." Judges were also warned not to be fooled by deceptive horses, but instead to focus on "how quick and strong he is jumping and kicking, to get an idea if he has power or is just floating."⁴⁵⁹ The structure of the standardized judging system in which the performance of the horse amounted to half of the point total incentivized specific physical attributes and behaviors in the horses for the riders and the stock contractors. Instead of the mild bucking horses that Wild West show riders preferred,

⁴⁵⁷ A flank strap is a soft sheepskin-lined strap of leather wrapped around the flank of the horse. It is pulled tight as the horse leaves the chute, and encourages it to kick its hind legs higher as it bucks.

⁴⁵⁸ The differences between saddle bronc and bareback riding are exactly as they sound. In the saddle bronc event, contestants ride in a regulation saddle with stirrups and hang on to a rein attached to the horse's halter. In the bareback event, contestants have no saddle or stirrups, and hang on to a "rigging," which is simply a handle made of a stiff material that is cinched to the horse.

⁴⁵⁹ Rodeo Cowboy Association, "Judges Handbook," 1983, Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame & Museum, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

rodeo contestants and contractors sought out the strongest, highest kicking, most extreme bucking horses.

During the first half of the twentieth century, stock contractors filled the demand for athletic broncs by seeking out and identifying abandoned and problematic horses from ranches and farms, of which there were many. As rodeo historian Larry Pointer put it, “the broncs at the dawn of the 20th-century seemed as limitless as the range they roamed.” They came from ranch remudas descended from horses brought north by Spanish conquistadors, from herds of hot-blooded Thoroughbreds developed by the Remount Service, and from cold blood draft horses like “the Percheron greys, the feather-legged Shires and Clydesdales, the Belgians; the French and German coach horses brought to the frontier by sodbusters.”⁴⁶⁰ Stock contractors searched for bucking horses from anywhere, regardless of their breed, and given the preponderance of farmers and ranchers who utilized working horses in the West, they were not difficult to find.

By the 1930s, stock contractors enjoyed a seemingly endless supply of bucking horse prospects. A succession of events including the collapse of the speculative wheat market following World War I, the Great Depression, and the Dust Bowl created a situation in which farmers from the Great Plains and West could no longer afford to maintain a large stable of work horses. As a result, destitute farmers sold thousands of Percherons, Shires, and other draft horses for pennies, most commonly to packing plants. An untold number were saved from slaughter by stock contractors seeking out additions to their bucking string.⁴⁶¹ With such a surplus of horses, though, contractors had to learn to be selective in the horses they purchased.

⁴⁶⁰ Larry Pointer, “Steamboat to Tipperary” in *Rodeo Quest*, Box 9, Folder 18, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

⁴⁶¹ Larry Pointer, “The Bronc Cult,” in *Rodeo Quest*, Box 9, Folder 18, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

The most successful contractors were those who collected horses with a very specific configuration of desired physical and behavioral characteristics. The process by which contractors evaluated prospective broncs was nearly completely absent of any kind of formal scientific method or language, and was instead full of colloquialisms and guided by intuition and long-held beliefs about connections between equine appearance and behavior. Nevertheless, their process regularly produced the desired results. Many contractors began their evaluation of a potential bronc at the feet. Deb Copenhaver, a world champion saddle bronc rider in the 1950s, compared bucking horses to race horses in terms of the importance of maintaining the health of their feet. He stressed that the “foot is the foundation of the horse – no foot, no horse.”⁴⁶² Bobby Kramer, who operated a stock contracting business with her husband Bud Kramer, similarly argued that a horse with solid feet is important. “Now a horse with split feet or bad feet...you don’t want that in a bucking horse. They’ve got to be built stout and strong. You look for strength in your bucking horses.” Aside from the feet, Kramer explained that “a good strong muscular horse is good...with a good neck on him. Of course I’ve seen a lot of bucking horses with a short neck, but a long neck kind of keeps them balanced.”⁴⁶³

As for personality and behavior, contractors generally sought out horses with a proclivity for “spooking” at the slightest provocation. Kramer argued that a horse “that’s a little narrow between the eyes is a good sign and a horse that’s snuffy...and if anybody kicks dirt at him or something, he’s apt to jump and kick at them. That’s an awful good indication that he don’t like

⁴⁶² Larry Pointer notes from interview with Deb Copenhaver, date unknown, Interviews on Rodeo, Box 12, Folder 17, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

⁴⁶³ Larry Pointer notes from interview with Bobby Kramer, date unknown, Interviews on Rodeo, Box 12, Folder 20, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

the human race very well.”⁴⁶⁴ Andy Jauregui, a former contestant who started his own stock contracting company in 1933, believed that “coarse-headed or thick-skulled horses, sometimes wild-eyed, usually have a bucking type disposition.”⁴⁶⁵ He argued that he could “usually tell a good bucking prospect by looking at his eyes and head. A horse with a wild look about him, a nervous or snuffy one, a snorter, with a thick skull might be a good one.”⁴⁶⁶

Above all else, stock contractors unanimously agreed that a horse’s inner desire to buck was the most crucial attribute in determining whether it would be a great bronc or not. As Feek Tooke’s son Ernest explained, “a bucking horse is a peculiar type of animal. He bucks because he wants to. You can’t train a horse to buck in a rodeo string, and you can’t make a horse buck if he doesn’t want to. On the other hand, if a horse wants to buck, he is going to buck if given the opportunity.”⁴⁶⁷ Lynn Beutler of the Beutler and Sons stock contracting company complained that “some folks think all you need for a good buckin’ horse is a jerk flank and a diet of oats. But it just ain’t so. A horse must want to buck or he isn’t a good rodeo horse.”⁴⁶⁸ Harry Knight, a former bronc rider who operated one of the largest stock contracting companies of the 1950s and 1960s, vehemently maintained that the only good broncs were those who had an inner distaste for a human on their back. He claimed that “it all depends on a horse’s opinion. If he has a strong

⁴⁶⁴ Larry Pointer notes from interview with Bobby Kramer, date unknown, Interviews on Rodeo, Box 12, Folder 20, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

⁴⁶⁵ Ann M. Caldwell, “Andy Jauregui, Stock Contractor,” *Western Horseman*, September 1966, 53.

⁴⁶⁶ Andy Jauregui file, Buster Ivory research materials, Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame & Museum, Colorado Springs, Colorado.

⁴⁶⁷ Ernest Tooke, “The Bucking Horse, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” unpublished, Articles on Rodeo, Box 5, Folder 5, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

⁴⁶⁸ Mark Bearwald, “Beutler Brothers, World’s Biggest Rodeo Producers,” *Empire Magazine*, Jan. 9, 1966.

opinion that he shouldn't be ridden, he'll try harder to unload a rider... He bucks from resentment at being ridden."⁴⁶⁹

Contractors and contestants regularly described broncs that consistently maintained that resentment for years as having "heart." Knight stated that "a bucking horse has got to have a big heart or he'll quit. A horse that keeps bucking good and getting stronger all the time, being hauled all over the country with cowboys trying to ride them, has got to have heart to go on. He's got to have a determination all his own." As an example, Knight cited the performance of his horse Big John, who was voted by professional riders as the bucking horse of the year in 1962 and 1963. Knight described Big John as "a big, stout, honest horse that will do his best every time. When Big John hurt his shoulder on the third jump out of the chutes at Casper in 1962, he just kept on bucking with three legs until he heard the whistle. I think that won him the title. Most of the cowboys who voted that year were there, and saw him do it. They admired his heart."⁴⁷⁰ It is impossible to know if Big John continued bucking despite his injury during that singular performance in Casper out of instinct, fear, or an innate love of bucking and a rare determination to unseat his rider. On the whole, though, through their observations of thousands of horses, many of which refused to buck in the arena despite inducements like a flank strap and spurs, stock contractors grew convinced that certain horses possessed an intrinsic desire to buck.⁴⁷¹

⁴⁶⁹ "One Man Check Animals' Performance in Frontier Days Rodeo – He Owns Them," *Denver Post*, July 24, 1962.

⁴⁷⁰ M.L. Collett, "Bucking Horse Man," *Western Horseman*, July 1967.

⁴⁷¹ This conviction by stock contractors is in part what Susan Nance refers to as the "myth of animal consent," the idea that broncs were "knowing partners in competition." Nance draws a connection between this myth and the settler-colonial foundations of rodeo's popular appeal and relationship to western identity. See Nance, *Rodeo*, 9-10, 89-93.

When contractors acquired new horses that displayed all of the desired characteristics such as a strong, muscled body, a nasty disposition, and the “heart” to buck consistently, producers eagerly presented stories of the “discovery” of the horses in rodeo promotions. Rather than portraying the animals as former ranch or farm horses that had become relatively accustomed to human interaction, producers instead described them as fresh from the wild western range. One reporter covering the 1910 Cheyenne Frontier Days excitedly relayed the news from the rodeo committee of a “newly discovered outlaw horse” that was surely “the most vicious beast that has ever roamed the plains of the west.”⁴⁷² Another reporter, in advance of the Helena, Montana, rodeo in 1930, announced the arrival of “a recently discovered horse that has a peculiar style of bucking...He has not been ridden.”⁴⁷³ These accounts, along with the performances of the horses in the arena, solidified for spectators that the bronc riding events represented a nostalgic recreation of life on the American frontier.

Following World War II, stock contractors recognized that two developments were quickly triggering a sudden dearth in the number of quality bucking horses: the broad adoption of mechanized agriculture and the success of selective breeding for docile saddle horses. Ernest Tooke explained:

By the time the mid part of the 1950s rolled around, the availability of bucking horse prospects began to dwindle. The machine age of farming was upon us, and people still using teams wanted them to be gentle. Horse breeders were breeding saddle horses to be gentle with a head full of cow sense. It was no longer economical to have older unbroken horses running on the place eating grass and not paying their way, so these horses were being sold off. Today the horse breeders have to a degree bred the buck out of saddle horses. The work teams are big gentle Clydes and Belgians, and the unbroken older horses have been for the most part cleaned out. While this provides the average horse

⁴⁷² 1910 newspaper article, publication unknown, Newspaper Articles/Clippings, Box 8, Folder 1, J.S. Palen Collection, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

⁴⁷³ “Businessmen of Townsend Complete Plans for Rodeo,” *The Helena Daily Independent*, June 30, 1930.

user with a large supply of good using horses to pick from, the rodeo stock contractor is finding it harder each year to find suitable bucking horses.⁴⁷⁴

Other contractors such as Harry Vold similarly lamented that “throughout the country everyone has gone to raising gentle saddle horses and they have bred all the meanness and buck out of horses.”⁴⁷⁵

The solution to the sudden scarcity of wily ranch and farm horses, some proposed, was to selectively breed for the physical and behavioral characteristics contractors had always sought in bucking horses. Selectively breeding for desired traits in livestock was certainly common in the horse and cattle industries long before the twentieth century. Whether or not an organized breeding program was possible for broncs, both in terms of success in producing quality bucking horses and its cost effectiveness, was a major debate within the rodeo community through the 1950s. Jerry Armstrong, the author of the “Collegiate Cowboy” column in *Western Horseman*, summarized the dilemma facing contractors and his opinion of how to address it:

The majority of modern ranchers have done away with the old hit-or-miss horse breeding program that might produce any caliber of horse, including a few, now and then, of the rough strong stripe. But could a bronky stud horse and a bucking mare combination be depended upon to produce colts that, in the main, would be natural buckers? Would it be possible and practical for a breeding ranch setup to successfully concentrate on producing bucking horses in the same manner that a hundred breeding ranches around the country can consistently produce good cow horses or running horses? I think that one could successfully breed bucking horses.⁴⁷⁶

Armstrong interviewed several contractors, who all agreed that not only was breeding bucking horses possible, it would be necessary for roughstock events to continue as part of rodeo. For instance, Gene Rambo stated his belief that “bucking horses can be bred up just like any other

⁴⁷⁴ Ernest Tooke, “The Bucking Horse, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” unpublished, Articles on Rodeo, Box 5, Folder 5, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

⁴⁷⁵ “Meanness Key to New Breed, *Denver Post*, July 1, 1974.

⁴⁷⁶ Jerry Armstrong, “The Collegiate Cowboy,” *Western Horseman*, March 1955.

kind of a horse. Leo Cramer and I talked this over lots of times and we both agreed that it would eventually have to be done.”⁴⁷⁷ Larry Pointer summarized the opinion of most contractors when he argued that “if it can be demonstrated that gentleness can be bred into a line of horses, then a quirk of perversity also should be able to pass through the branches of the equine family tree.”⁴⁷⁸

Some contractors agreed that breeding bucking horses would eventually be necessary but were skeptical of the argument that simply selecting stallions and mares with the desired traits would produce quality buckers. They argued that a successful breeding program would require particular circumstances, a significant investment of money and time, and even then, the offspring would require a certain amount of “spoiling” from humans. Deb Copenhaver agreed that it was “very possible to breed” bucking horses, but only if a contractor had “an ideal situation” with “a lot of country” where they could be raised, tried as a two year old, and left alone until they matured enough to haul across the country. According to Copenhaver, the circumstances of their raising was crucial, as the “accumulation of mistakes” during the first two or three years of their lives could ruin an otherwise great bucking horse.”⁴⁷⁹ Numerous contractors echoed Copenhaver’s observations that breeding broncs was possible and necessary, but lamented the enormous amount of grazing land and the years of maturing time required to produce a consistently performing horse.⁴⁸⁰ Vern Elliott, the former owner of Midnight, was more hesitant, stating that “maybe a fellow could, if he thought he could make some money, cross breed some horses. Then he’d have to have some men spoil ‘em when they were young to

⁴⁷⁷ Armstrong, “The Collegiate Cowboy.”

⁴⁷⁸ Larry Pointer, “Caballo Diablo” in *Rodeo Quest*, Box 10, Folder 1, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

⁴⁷⁹ Larry Pointer notes from interview with Deb Copenhaver, date unknown, Interviews on Rodeo, Box 12, Folder 17, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

⁴⁸⁰ “Broncs Backbone of Rodeo,” *Colorado Springs Gazette Telegraph*, July 31, 1979.

make buckers. I wouldn't want to gamble on it myself. I'm about out of the business and I'm glad."⁴⁸¹

Despite the skeptics, by the 1950s Feek Tooke had already demonstrated the potential for success in a carefully designed breeding program and served as a model for other stock contractors. His son Ernest recalled how Feek fortunately stumbled upon his cross breeding strategy. During the 1920s, a ranch foreman with whom Tooke was acquainted "acquired a Shire stud and started breeding him to a nice looking set of hot-blood mares. His intentions were to raise big, strong, quick-footed saddle horses with enough stamina to pack a cowboy on day-long circles." The foals grew to the desired size, but the foreman discovered that they all "bucked like scalded dogs; with their size and power they were very hard to ride, and they wouldn't quit bucking. No matter how hard they were ridden, every horse would blow up whenever he had a chance."⁴⁸² After hearing about the wooly progeny, Tooke purchased his own Shire stud and leased the foreman's mares for breeding. When that cross also produced a significant number of quality bucking horses, Tooke knew he had the foundation for an effective bucking horse breeding program.

The particular physical and behavioral characteristics that Tooke selectively bred for – and that his horses generally passed from one generation to the next – echoed the same characteristics that contractors had always desired in horses they purchased from farms and ranches. General Custer, one of the first foals from Tooke's program and the sire of multiple successful broncs including Sheep Mountain, was prized for his athletic ability. As Tooke put it,

⁴⁸¹ John M. Bruner, "Vern Elliott Deplores Lack of Fighting Broncs," *Greeley Tribune*, April 8, 1957.

⁴⁸² Ernest Tooke, "Feek Tooke's Rodeo Broncs," *Western Horseman*, May 1988.

“the action and agility of this huge animal was amazing, his power was awesome.” Just as important was General Custer’s “terrible disposition. Any little thing would touch him off.”⁴⁸³

This combination of physicality and temperament made General Custer an ideal rodeo bronc, but his greatest value came from his consistency in passing along these traits to his offspring.

Other contractors recognized Tooke’s success in crossing large draft horses with hot blooded breeds, especially Thoroughbreds, and sought to replicate it. Bud Kramer, for instance, argued that the best results came from “Thoroughbred mares crossed to a heavier Percheron stud. The smaller mare will maintain longer. A thirteen or fourteen-hundred pound stud crossed to a thousand pound mare would produce twelve-hundred pound offspring, And good buckers.”⁴⁸⁴ Ken Roberts initiated his successful breeding program in the 1950s “using a nasty dispositioned Thoroughbred stud and Percheron bucking mares.”⁴⁸⁵ Marvin Brookman similarly bred former farm horses of primarily Percheron descent to Thoroughbreds. He explained that he preferred “to cross the horses, especially with each other. The work horse gives the size and the Thoroughbred blood gives them more fight and they hold up better.” According to bronc rider Mike Anderson, Brookman’s horses were respected because they all consistently “bucked hard, had a lot of drop, swoop and sway, and oftentimes humbled a man.”⁴⁸⁶

Most contractors argued that the crossing of hot to cold bloodlines produced a horse that was specifically well-suited for rodeo in the late twentieth century. Larry Pointer, who interviewed numerous contractors about their breeding programs in the late 1970s, explained that

⁴⁸³ Ernest Tooke, “The Bucking Horse, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” unpublished, Articles on Rodeo, Box 5, Folder 5, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

⁴⁸⁴ Larry Pointer, “Caballo Diablo” in *Rodeo Quest*, Box 10, Folder 1, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

⁴⁸⁵ Jerry Armstrong, “The Collegiate Cowboy,” *Western Horseman*, March 1955.

⁴⁸⁶ Geri Pursley, “The Man Behind Some of the PRCA’s Greatest Broncs,” *Hi-Line Express*, December 12, 1991.

“the heavy, cold-blood draft animals that were introduced to rodeo four decades ago most probably wouldn’t stand the miles of trucking between rodeos. Crossbreeding between cold and hot blood lines has produced the most consistent results.”⁴⁸⁷ In looking forward to the last two decades of the twentieth century, Pointer predicted that crossbred bucking horses would be the only ones that could maintain all of the physical and behavioral characteristics that contractors looked for in a bronc:

The 1200 pound light draft animal will be seen more and more frequently as the breeding program begins to pay off. The draft animal contributes muscle, a thick hide, heavy frame, leg bones that can take the strain, and a large hoof of thicker shell. The cold blood line also can contribute a stubborn nature and, frankly, a wit that’s perhaps not intelligent enough to think of quitting in the middle of the fray. The hot blooded animal donates a fiery cunning with determination and stamina to match. In a word, heart. The thoroughly bred lines are renowned for their athletic ability. The line also tends to temper the draft animal’s tendency toward flat, splay feet that can spread, or worse, crack and split.⁴⁸⁸

As Deb Copenhaver and Vern Elliott predicted, breeding horses for roughstock events – even with ideal circumstances and a significant investment – was essentially a gamble. Ernest Tooke explained that “breeding bucking horses is not an easy thing to do. The biggest obstacle to overcome when starting a bucking horse breeding program is finding the right bloodline. I suppose our bloodline has produced over 1500 bucking horses. We have raised some great bucking horses, some average, and also some horses that were complete duds.”⁴⁸⁹ Contractors quickly realized that even full brothers and sisters of the rankest, most consistent buckers might refuse to buck altogether. Zone Along, a Tooke horse that won Canadian Saddle Bronc of the

⁴⁸⁷ Larry Pointer, “Caballo Diablo” in *Rodeo Quest*, Box 10, Folder 1, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

⁴⁸⁸ Larry Pointer, “Caballo Diablo” in *Rodeo Quest*, Box 10, Folder 1, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

⁴⁸⁹ Ernest Tooke, “The Bucking Horse, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” unpublished, Articles on Rodeo, Box 5, Folder 5, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

Year in the 1960s, had a full sister who never saw the inside of an arena. Ernest Tooke clarified that “it isn’t that she can’t, she just doesn’t want to.”⁴⁹⁰ Ken Roberts, a contractor who started a breeding program in the 1950s with a Thoroughbred stud and Percheron mares, similarly described the financial investment and potential losses that contractors endured:

The percentage of good, honest buckers that you get is not great, no matter how carefully you select breeding stock, and the cost is almost prohibitive. As a rule, you can never really know how good a bucker you have raised till the horse is around five years old, and in some cases it takes even longer. Now, by that time you have quite a sum invested in the horse, unless you happen to have a lot of cheap grazing land; and this, in most sections of the country, is almost a thing of the past.⁴⁹¹

Despite the insistence by many contractors that draft and Thoroughbred were the best two breeds to produce bucking progeny, hot and cold blood crosses were not the only successful bucking horses on the professional rodeo circuit post-World War II. Descent was a palomino with both Quarter Horse and Thoroughbred bloodlines. War Paint was an unregistered paint horse from an Indian reservation. Angel Sings was a registered Quarter Horse, with a pedigree that would suggest a docile saddle horse. All three of those horses won the Rodeo Cowboys Association Bucking Horse of the Year award multiple times. As contractor Bob Bamby explained, “many folks think a bucking horse is some kind of poor, low quality animal that got the wrong start in life and the only thing he can do is buck. This is not the case at all, for animals with a long history of bucking come from all types of backgrounds and bloodlines. They just seem to enjoy bucking.”⁴⁹²

⁴⁹⁰ Ernest Tooke, “The Bucking Horse, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,” unpublished, Articles on Rodeo, Box 5, Folder 5, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

⁴⁹¹ Jerry Armstrong, “The Collegiate Cowboy,” *Western Horseman*, March 1955.

⁴⁹² Larry Keenan, “Rodeo Stock Breeder,” *Western Horseman*, December 1967, 64-65.

The continued variety of breeds and backstories of broncs in professional rodeo, along with the concerns about success rate and profitability from contractors like Ernest Tooke and Ken Roberts, suggests that the selective breeding of broncs remained an inexact science well through the second half of the twentieth century. Stock contractors seemed to understand the types of crosses with the highest probability to produce a bucking horse, and they understood which behavioral aspects were more likely to pass from one generation to another, but even by the early 1980s they were not close to a high success rate. Yet, they had collectively succeeded in resolving the sudden shortage of bucking horses that they faced following World War II.

Beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, stock contractors openly discussed the possibilities offered by new technologies such as artificial insemination, sperm banks, and embryo transplants. They understood the advances those methods were bringing to the cattle and saddle horse industry, but viewed them as too costly and futuristic for the bucking horse industry.⁴⁹³ Today, contractors are using those technologies and others, such as parentage testing as well as genetic variation and DNA analysis, to increasingly improve the rate of producing quality bucking horses that consistently perform as desired.⁴⁹⁴ As a result, the broncs found in rodeo arenas today are essentially biotechnologies, crafted over decades by humans to labor not solely for an economic end, but primarily a cultural one. Rodeo stock contractors have fundamentally succeeded in creating a variety of horses whose purpose is to reconstruct an idealized performance that recalls a masculine and authentically Western image.

⁴⁹³ Larry Pointer, "Caballo Diablo" in *Rodeo Quest*, Box 10, Folder 1, Larry Pointer Papers, American Heritage Center, University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming.

⁴⁹⁴ Jennifer Denison, "Bronc Registry Boosts Rough-stock Value," *Western Horseman*, November 2018.

Conclusion

In December of 2020, for the first time in its more than six decade-long history, the National Finals Rodeo featured a second women's event: breakaway roping.⁴⁹⁵ Organizers scheduled the event to take place early each day, to serve as a sort of matinee rather than as a full part of the main evening performance.⁴⁹⁶ Despite their exclusion from the primary rodeo, breakaway contestants viewed it as “our opportunity to showcase our talents on the biggest stage in the sport of rodeo.”⁴⁹⁷ Simply earning recognition from the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, and at least semi-inclusion in the largest, richest, and most-watched rodeo in the world, served as a momentous victory in what top roper Lari Dee Guy described as a decades-long “battle for our chance.”⁴⁹⁸ After the final round, Jackie Crawford, who happened to be six months pregnant at the time, won the title of champion and a total of \$18,278. In an interview following her win, Crawford alluded to the excitement within the women's rodeo community, saying “the women right now get credited for being trailblazers. I just want everyone to understand, we might get that credit, but we know that we're just placed in a line of trailblazers.”⁴⁹⁹

⁴⁹⁵ Breakaway roping is similar to the traditional rodeo event of calf roping, but with a rope that breaks away from the saddle when it comes tight around the calf's neck, rather than a rope that is securely attached to the saddle horn. As chapter four briefly touched on, breakaway roping has been included in some rodeos since at least the 1920s as a more humane alternative to calf roping and steer roping. Since the 1980s, the event has gained popularity among women contestants, because it does not require the roper to dismount and physically handle a calf, which usually weighs upwards of 200 pounds.

⁴⁹⁶ Chelsea Shaffer, “Wrangler National Finals of Breakaway Roping to Pay \$200,000; Run in Conjunction with NFR at Globe Life Field,” *The Breakaway Roping Journal*, September 2020.

⁴⁹⁷ Lari Dee Guy, “This is the Time We've Been Waiting For,” *The Breakaway Roping Journal*, October 2020.

⁴⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁹ Chelsea Shaffer, “Crawford Crowned WPRC World Champion Breakaway Roper,” *The Breakaway Roping Journal*, December 2020.

The stories I presented within the first section of this dissertation share Crawford's objective, to recognize and bring the stories of women trailblazers to the forefront of rodeo's history, because under the weight of the dominant myth of rodeo, women contestants who work against their marginalization from the arena tend to become just one more in a long line of trailblazers. They constantly march forward, each generation forging a new path, but as long as the perception of rodeo as the realm of men remains entrenched, and as long as the history of women in rodeo remains on the margins, then the blazed trail is continuously brushed over, obscured for future generations. Without knowing about Fern Sawyer's feats on the back of a bull at the 1947 Tri-State Fair, Maggie Parker's ride at the 2012 Bennington rodeo appears nearly inconceivable. Without knowing about the successful struggle to earn equal money for barrel racers at the National Finals Rodeo in the 1980s, the efforts of Jackie Crawford and other breakaway ropers to earn a fully equal role at future NFRs seems nearly futile.

Within the same interview following her championship, Crawford also made a point to effusively praise her horse T-boy, and to explain the value of their interdependent relationship. "Man... that horse has taken care of me for 10 years," Crawford said. "There's not a horse in the world that would have taken care of me like he did... I know he'll never know how much I appreciate him, but I appreciate that horse."⁵⁰⁰ The perception of rodeo as a symbolic reproduction of man's bout with the wild beasts of the western frontier – fostered over a century by those who sell rodeo performances – similarly obscures crucial human-animal partnerships like that between Crawford and T-boy. The stories within the second section of this dissertation demonstrate the importance of other forms of interspecific relationships beyond the stereotypical

⁵⁰⁰ Ibid.

cowboy-versus-animal struggle in rodeo's history. Stories about relationships like Troy Fort's emotional bond with his horse Baldy, and like Feek Tooke's carefully guided breeding program for broncs, disrupt the deep-rooted notion that rodeo is at its core a contest between man and animal, and by extension the myth of the arena as the realm of masculine men.

In my introduction I promised that this dissertation would contend with the ahistorical assumptions of rodeo's normative masculinity and human-animal conflict, two distinct yet interconnected aspects of mainstream rodeo that rodeo producers have embraced throughout the twentieth century. When I began thinking about this dissertation almost eight years ago, that seemed like a much more revolutionary proposition than it does now. Over the past few years, though, the relatively narrow field of rodeo history has been more active than a herd of cooped-up broncs released onto a lush grassy pasture. Historians such as Renee Laegreid, Susan Nance, Rebecca Scofield, Tracey Hanshew, and Elyssa Ford have all written insightful works on gender, race, sexuality, and animal history in rodeo.⁵⁰¹ As is clearly evident from the abundance of citations to their contributions in the preceding chapters, these scholars have guided not only this dissertation but the field of rodeo history in an exciting direction. Scofield and Ford in particular have demonstrated the ways in which race- and group-specific rodeos serve as crucial sites of identity formation, where marginalized people have staked a claim to authentic westernness,

⁵⁰¹ The works of these historians are cited many, many times throughout this dissertation. The most crucial ones I am referring to here, though, are Renee Laegreid, *Riding Pretty: Rodeo Royalty in the American West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006); Susan Nance, *Rodeo: An Animal History* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019); Rebecca Scofield, *Outriders: Rodeo at the Fringes of the American West* (Seattle: University of Nevada Press, 2019); Tracey Hanshew, "Cowgirls, Rodeo, and Rural Feminism, 1890-1935" (PhD diss., Oklahoma State University, 2017); Elyssa Ford, *Rodeo as Refuge, Rodeo as Rebellion: Gender, Race, and Identity in the American Rodeo* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2020).

remembering and promoting their historical roles in the western United States.⁵⁰² I have offered a similar analysis of just one specific marginalized group not only within group-specific rodeos, but within mainstream rodeos as well. Women riders, ropers, and barrel racers have laid claim to a space in the arena – and by extension a space in the past rodeo purports to symbolize – through their struggle for equality in mainstream rodeo.

I hope that this dissertation, when read alongside the other recent works on rodeo history, demonstrates the value in exploring the history of marginalized groups and their fight for inclusion within mainstream rodeo in particular. While Scofield and Ford (among many others) offer invaluable analyses of group-specific rodeos, the historiography of rodeo currently includes frustratingly little on the stories of LGBTQ, Black, Mexican American, Native American, and other minorities and their experiences within mainstream rodeo.⁵⁰³ Even the slightest scratch at the surface shows that numerous contestants who do not match the idealized white, straight, masculine cowboy have competed and succeeded on the mainstream rodeo tour throughout the last century. Prominent figures that immediately come to mind include Juan Salinas, a Mexican American roper who consistently won top rodeos during the 1930s and 1940s, and Charles Sampson, the first African American cowboy to win a PRCA championship in 1982, as well as recent top Navajo team ropers Derrick Begay, Aaron Tsinigine, and Erich Rogers. Numerous other contestants from marginalized groups have staked a claim to western authenticity and

⁵⁰² In addition to Scofield and Ford's recent works, other valuable histories of group-specific rodeos include Allison Fuss Mellis, *Riding Buffaloes and Broncos: Rodeo and Native Traditions in the Northern Great Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003) and Laura Barraclough, *Charros: How Mexican Cowboys Are Remapping Race and American Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

⁵⁰³ A key exception is Tracey Owens Patton and Sally Schedlock, *Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo: Breaking Away from the Ties of Sexism and Racism* (New York: Lexington Press, 2011).

inclusion in the history of the West that rodeo represents through their participation not only in group-specific rodeos, but in mainstream rodeo as well, and their stories need to be told.

Beyond rodeo historiography specifically, I also hope that this dissertation illustrates the value of considering rodeo's role within a variety of subjects of historical inquiry. Historians of gender in the American West should pay close attention to the ways in which rodeo contestants have reinforced, celebrated, or disrupted traditional gender norms through their performances. Historians of feminist movements throughout the twentieth century should incorporate analyses of women like Fox Hastings, Fern Sawyer, and Sharon Camarillo in their works, in order to better understand how those who traditionally do not fit within a movement's contours – or who outright reject the movement – can and do still contribute to its larger objectives. Historians of evolutionary history should consider the rodeo's broncs and bulls, in order to better understand the ways in which gender norms and cultural motivations can influence the human-led changes in animals. Historians who examine the influence of the mythology of the American West abroad should include the role of international rodeos in their analysis of the exportation of western icons, values, and norms. From the outside looking in rodeo's cultural sway may seem limited, but the breadth and consistency of its influence on the western United States, how the history of the region is remembered, and who is included in that remembering, should not be underestimated.

As I explained in the introduction, the overarching structure and driving motivation of this dissertation was guided in large part by the example offered by Susan Lee Johnson's *Roaring Camp*. In the epilogue of that work, Johnson lists several "sites of countermemory," stories, murals, parks, and other places that work against the dominant narratives of the Gold

Rush. As Johnson explains, these sites “offer a past in which all are repositioned; at the same time, they embody a hope for a more just and equitable future.”⁵⁰⁴ The recent progress of women in rodeo such as Jackie Crawford offers a similar hope, but their work must be recognized within the context of the long history of women in mainstream rodeo. In addition to cowgirls, we should reposition those who do not fit the normative white masculine cowboy of rodeo from the margins to the center of the story. In doing so, perhaps we may see a more diverse and inclusive rodeo of the future, a rodeo that more accurately represents the past it purports to celebrate.

⁵⁰⁴ Susan Lee Johnson, *Roaring Camp: The Social World of the California Gold Rush* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 344.

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