

Texas Prison Rodeo History

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The Texas Prison Rodeo was launched in 1931 during the depression years, being first held at the baseball park outside the "Walls" Unit. The baseball park, located on the east side of the prison, was normally home to the Walls Tigers baseball team. The rodeo was the brainchild of Lee Simmons, General Manager of the Texas Prison System. Simmons envisioned it as entertainment for employees and inmates. Welfare Director Albert Moore headed up the organization and planning for the early rodeos along with Warden Walter Waid and livestock supervisor R. O. McFarland. The attendants included a small crowd of local citizens and prison. Simmons realized he had a winner on his hands. Two years later, over 15,000 fans traveled to Huntsville for the show. Soon, the Texas Prison Rodeo was drawing the largest crowds for a sporting event in the state of Texas. With a lifespan of more than 50 years, the Prison Rodeo became a Texas tradition, held every Sunday in October. Crowds grew to exceed 100,000 in some years.

Hard Money, Any Way You Look at It

Rodeo events included wild cow milking, calf belling, goat roping, wild mare milking and bull dogging as well as the standard rodeo events such as bull riding, saddle bronc and bareback bronc. Wild horse racing was added to the list in the early 1940's. A favorite event unique to the Texas Prison Rodeo was the Hard Money Event. Forty inmates with red shirts were turned into the arena with a raging wild bull with a Bull Durham tobacco sack tied between its horns. The object was for some brave inmate to get the sack and take it to the Judge. Fifty dollars had been placed in the sack but donations often ran the pay up, sometimes to \$1500. This became a very popular event for the inmates due to the amount of money involved and was one of the most dangerous ones as well. The fast action kept fans on the edge of their seats throughout the event.

No Rodeo, Not All on Sunday, Not All in Huntsville

The rodeo was not held in 1943 due to the war but when it returned in 1944, all profits from the "Victory" rodeo were invested in war bonds to contribute to the war effort. 1950 was the first and only time the show made a road appearance. It was held in Dallas in the early summer. A new structure made of concrete, steel, and brick was built to replace the old baseball stadium. Weekday rodeos were added to the regularly scheduled Sunday performances in some years and in one year, 1942, the rodeos were all held on Thursdays.

Stars and Barrs

Guest stars appeared in the 1951 rodeo including: Eddie Arnold, Guy Willis, Curley Fox and Texas Ruby. This started a yearly tradition which attracted such stars as Johnny Cash, Ernest Tubb, Johnny Rodriguez, Willie Nelson, Dolly Parton, George Strait, Tom T. Hall and the list goes on... Of course, inmate bands also provided a variety of musical entertainment at the rodeo. The most famous inmate performer and one who sometimes stole the show from the paid entertainers was inmate Juanita Phillips. She was better known in the "free world" as Candy Barr. The cowboys, clowns and entertainers of the Texas Prison Rodeo were composed of all types of inmates from all of the units within the Texas Department of Corrections. Some of these men had never been in a rodeo or ridden on an animal in their lives. But it was an honor and a status symbol to be among the cowboys selected to compete in the rodeo.

Close the Gates

The last rodeo was held on October 26, 1986. The fans, including several hundred inmates were entertained by the mother and daughter duo, The Judds. Following the day's performances, the chute gates were closed for good. Due to costly renovations that the prison system said were necessary to the arena stands, the rodeo was shut down after 1986. There have been discussions of resurrecting this event. However, it will most likely remain only a fond memory for those who participated in, attended, or worked at *The Wildest Show Behind Bars...*