



From the rodeo news archives …

When the Gallup Ceremonial was started in 1922, it was seen as a program of traditional Indian dances as well as a showcase for Native arts and crafts. But the Fourth of July celebrations held in town since Mr. Gallup went on down the tracks, had also featured a variety of races and a few rodeo events.

The sport of rodeo was just getting national attention at the time and few towns had arenas with permanent bucking chutes, regular rules, and profession riders and ropers. In fact, they didn't have ropers at all. Who wanted to chase a frightened calf through the sagebrush?

For the most part the horses and steers—they hadn't discovered the excitement of the brahma bull yet—were thrown down in the arena, saddled and mounted, and then let loose. The cowboy rode until the animal quit bucking. Old photos document that rodeo used saddles on broncs, bulls and even buffalo.

All the local boys—and around here that included a few Indian reservations of vast acreage—wanted to take part and show off for their girlfriends. Standard events included wild horse races, wild cow milking, the hide race, the chicken pull, and bucking buffalos.

So important were events like the chicken pull that its name in Navajo, nahohai, was the word for rodeo. There wasn't one without the other. The chicken pull was just what it sounds like—pulling a rooster from the ground in the center of the arena.

A tough old rooster was buried in the sand and horsemen took turns riding by at a full gallop, reaching down with one hand, and trying to pull the rooster up by its neck. When Anglos found that a little too disconcerting because a liberated bird flapped its wings and made a screeching racket, they buried a bag of coins in the arena and the rider tried to get a grip on that.

The noise, excitement and horror of the event came when the successful cowboy tried to get his bird back across the finish line. There is no need to get more graphic than that. The sport originated with the Mongol Hordes in northern Asia, was picked up by the Arabs and taken to Spain during the Moorish occupation of that country.

The Spanish carried the event to the New World where many Indian tribes thought it looked like a lot of fun. Superb horsemanship is on display in this event. In the early days it was made even more difficult when other riders were allowed to lash the runner to drive the horse off course.

Other crowd pleases were more common at rodeos outside the Southwest. The hide race is a pretty simple event with few rules. All a team needed was a horse, a rope, a stiff cowhide, and somebody crazy enough to hang onto the hide no matter how much arena dust got in his eyes, ears, nose and mouth.

It was considered good form to stick on the hide while kneeling, rather than lying prone, but as long as the cowboy kept hold of the rope he could cross the finish line in pretty much any position. It was not uncommon to see a man lose his shirt during the run.

Wild cow milking was downright dangerous. This one took a three man team—a roper, a mugger and a milker. One man on horseback, one with a coke bottle in his hand, and one husky fellow to get the cow by the head and hold onto her.

The best cows for this purpose were range animals with horns. Many of them had never seen a man on foot before and they didn't like getting intimate like that with strangers. The rule was that when the milker staggered across the finish line at least one drop of milk had to drip from the bottle.

At Ceremonial, like many other early rodeos, the wagon race had all the thrills and excitement of NASCAR. Wagons pulled by a single team of horses raced around the arena. Sometimes there were added rules: In Calgary there are two extra men who load certain items into the "chuck wagon" before it can take off. They jump on their horses and race with the buckboard.

According to the newspaper, in 1935 there were one hundred and ten Navajo wagons in the parade. People still commonly came to town that way. The problem for the wagon race is the need for space. This year's Rodeo Director, Jerry Silver wants to bring back some of the old time events, but the wagon race is a problem.

"A lot of places use miniature wagons to get around the problem of space in the arena," he said. Events like that are hard to mount and can be expensive. "In the early days, enough wagons came to town to make the event possible." These days the wagons and teams would probably have to be trucked to the grounds.

One of Silver's ideas to make the classic rodeo events possible is to get the local chapter houses involved. "Get the chapter houses to compete with each other," he said. They would each absorb part of the cost. "Since they started using stock contractors it has been impossible to have events like the wild horse race of cow milking. Animals in those events can really only be used once."

Silver wants to add the chicken pull and the wild horse race. More old events will be added in future years. He pointed out that when Gallup Ceremonial started there weren't so many time restraints on the arena, which was a rather informal space anyway. "I've heard that for the first ceremonials they just boxed in the area with cars and turned on their lights."

Some of the old events, like the original horse race, or the moccasin race, can burn up a lot of time. Somebody else is always waiting to use the facilities. Jerry Silver has a lot of ideas percolating in his head, and he's very excited about making the rodeo the big draw it once was.

“I’d like to see the stands packed for every performance,” he said.

Jerry Silver grew up on a farm in Utah and when he came back to the area his command of Navajo was rather poor. He learned his own language with the help of his wife Margie, who hails from the Tohatchi area. As a young man he started out his rodeo career on steers and then bulls. Eventually he made saddle bronc his main event.

Today’s cowboys are more into fitness and less into partying and this is something Silver stresses at his saddle bronc camps run with Navajo rodeo legend J. R. Hunt Jr. Jerry is a three-time National Indian Finals Rodeo saddle bronc champion. He and Hunt both try to encourage their students to take the sport seriously and clean up their own lives, if necessary.

He is also past president of the Navajo Rodeo Cowboy’s Association. He has worked with Ceremonial Rodeo before, but this time he has some changes in mind. One thing that should add to the enjoyment of this year’s rodeo is the appearance of Montana rodeo clown Fritz Harris, who worked last year’s Indian National Finals. Harris is a Sioux who lives in Pocatello, Idaho.

The most amazing thing about the Ceremonial Rodeo is the fact that Jerry Silver, his co-producer Walter Hudson and the other rodeo personnel are all volunteers. They don’t get paid for their long hours of hard work. It is all done for the love of the sport, and Silver would like to see another generation of rodeo enthusiasts start filling the stands.

In 2014, the rodeo nearly went dark, and if wasn’t for Cowtown Feed & Livestock owner Dudley Byerley, last year could have marked the end of an era. Thank goodness it didn’t. And thanks to Dudley’s persistence, the rodeo has an event everyday of the Ceremonial, including Sunday, when most folks are making their way home. Stick around folks for some team roping action.