

Rodeo was a family affair

Written by Gallupsun Staff
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When Gallup Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial was born it took on much of the excitement and fun that was found at fairs and Fourth of July celebrations all over the Southwest. Many of these activities were open to everybody.

In the late 1800s some cowboys in either Arizona or West Texas, or both, decided to hold a contest to see which cattle outfit had the best group of hands. It is said that the events were patterned after actual cowboy activities, but what ranch actually made their men ride bucking steers? Every small town in the West soon had its own rodeo.

The contestants in these contests were not professionals who did nothing but rodeo, but working men who got together once a year to have a good time. Besides the manly events, there was a variety of activities just for fun. There were lots of races, on foot and on horseback, for men, women and children.

At Ceremonial one of the favorite events was the tug-o-war. There was a woman's version, a men's version, and now and then they would challenge one another. The women were able to hold their own, muscular from activities like wood chopping. That was a contest too. Dressed in their velvet finery, women were given an axe and a log. Once the log was cut they had to build a fire using primitive methods.

Since many of the events took strength and skill, the organizers needed some events that took neither. Just the will to compete. One of these was the hide race. Neither of the team members had to have special training. One man on a horse tied his rope to the rail of a dried cow hide, tough and stiff as a board.

The other man sat on the hide. Sometimes they were allowed to hold the rope, sometimes just the edges of the stiff leather. From the starting line the horseman whipped up his pony to top

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speed, heading for the finish line. In some places the route was circular, making it harder to hold on.

The rules varied, but mostly the man on the hide just had to hold on for dear life. In some contests there was no rule about staying upright, so the hide rider would sometimes end up underneath the stinky skin. In either case he ate a lot of dust mixed with horse biscuits. Anybody could join.

A favorite that took a little more skill and a lot of toughness was the wild cow milking. Range cows would be bunched in the arena on one end. A two or three man team started on the opposite end. The first task was to run down and rope one of these wild cows. Some of them had wicked horns.

Two of the men would try to hold the cow still while the third tried to milk her into a pop bottle. Once they had the milk the milker ran back to the starting line. The usual rule was that at least one drop had to come out of the bottle into the judge's hand.

Another rough and tumble event was the wild horse race. Again, some range stock, wild and wooly and unriden, was held at one end of the arena. A two or three man team ran down and roped one of the wild horses. In a three man team the roper tried to choke the horse into submission while his helper "eared" the bronco by twisting an ear—which the horse didn't like very much.

The third man, who had carried the saddle down the arena, had to put the rig on the horse, get on board, and try to ride the wild animal back to the starting line. I have seen riders who thought they could save time by holding the cinch tight in one hand. That usually didn't work too well.

There weren't a lot of contestants who came across the finish line in this one, but the audience had a good time.

A popular event was the "Pony Express" race. The contestant would have three or four horses

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at certain intervals around the track, usually a quarter mile. On the first horse he raced for the second mount. He would jump off, unsaddle his horse, slap the saddle on the second one, and head out again at a gallop. He would repeat this several times on his circuit around the arena.

A really challenging event was the “Moccasin Race.” A group of men would put their cowboy boots, shoes, or moccasins on a saddle blanket. From the other end of the field they would race down to the blanket. They would jump off their horse, but they had to hold onto the reins because they had to ride back again if they completed the hard part.

The hard part was to find your own footwear and put them on, get back on the horse and race back to the starting line. The real challenge in this one came with the special rule. Each contestant was expected to pick up any boot or shoe that wasn't his and throw it as far as possible. Obviously the first man to the blanket had a big advantage. The other contestants would also try to spook your horse away from you in the melee.

There were contests for the women, like some pony races and the events already mentioned. There was never a woman competing who wasn't wearing the full, pleated, traditional dresses with layers of petticoats.

There were races for the kids too. Plus ribbon pulling, goat tying, and wooly riding. To a five-year-old kid the back of a bucking sheep was just as scary at a bull was to his dad.

This year the rodeo is re-introducing some of those old events and that should offer plenty of fun. Of course the professional cowboys wouldn't be caught dead in a wild horse race.