

Cowboy Heroes!

Written by By Jim Olsen
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The Arviso clan from the Crownpoint, New Mexico area has a long and interesting history. For example, Jesus Arviso, whose family came from Spain and then settled in Sonora, Mexico, was once traded for a horse.

In the mid-1800s, young Jesus's family was raided by a band of Apaches; he was taken. Years later the Apache who had Jesus traded him to a Navajo man for a beautiful black stallion. Jesus finished growing up as a Navajo and eventually married into the tribe. As a result of his unique experiences, he now spoke fluent Spanish, Apache and Navajo. Those talents came in handy, as he became a key translator, and important figure, in treaty negotiations between the U.S. Government and the Indians during the 1860s. Two generations later, his grandson, Paul W. Arviso Sr. was instrumental in popularizing the sport of rodeo on the Navajo reservation.

Paul was born many miles west of Crownpoint during 1920 into a family of stockmen. His grandfather Jesus had done well serving as an interpreter and was rewarded with much livestock. Paul's dad was a great stockman and also had been a horse racing jockey. Out with the herd from his earliest memories, this was where young Paul learned about stock. Riding burros and mules while chasing cattle, goats and several thousand head of sheep, made him a

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superb stockman. Living out on the range as they did, he also grew up tough. He and his brothers even used to ride “Billy” goats and rams around the corrals just for fun. Those corrals were the earliest “arenas” for what was to later become “a legend” of Native American Rodeo.

Paul was about fourteen when the family moved closer to town. He was then entered into a boarding school for the first time, making him quite old for a first grader. But even though he did not spend many years in school, he was well educated in livestock and the common sense department. In his later years, he continually speaks at meetings and community events to inspire and motivate young people. He emphasizes the importance of education. “I didn’t have the opportunity for a formal education, but you do, so go after it. Education is valuable and will go a long way,” he advises.

It was also 1934 when he discovered rodeo.

The group commonly given credit as having the first organized rodeos on the reservation was called the “Rough Riders Rodeo Club Association.” Paul was one of its earliest members. Paul and other members of the club set up bucking chutes, holding corrals and a timed event chute. Then families would come from miles around in wagons and cars, forming a semi-circle to be used as the arena fence. Those old-time rodeos were more than just competitions; they were a celebration, bringing members of the Navajo nation (and eventually other tribes as well) together. It was during this time Paul developed a life-long love of rodeo.

Paul dedicated his life to rodeo at a young age and was serious about it. He trained physically and mentally (before that was common) and practiced regularly to hone his already great stockman skills into that of a rodeo cowboy.

Paul competed at just about every rodeo you can name across the Southwest and Four-corners region at one time or another. He was a regular All Around Cowboy winner as he competed successfully in most every event including bareback, saddle bronc, bull riding, wild horse racing, wild cow milking, team tying, steer wrestling, calf roping and even an event known as the original chicken pull. For those who have never heard of “the original chicken pull,” it involves uncanny horsemanship skills and daring. To start with, a chicken was buried in the soft sand of the arena with just his head and neck exposed. Riders came down the arena at a full gallop, leaned over and plucked the chicken out of the ground. The fastest time won, and, as you can imagine, it was a big hit with the crowd.

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As another testament to his all around skills, Paul was both header and heeler in the team tying (later team roping) event and both a “dogger” and hazer in steer wrestling. Sometimes he also worked in the capacity of judge, flagger and even rodeo clown! He did it all when it came to rodeo. Paul says, “Rodeo is more than just a sport, it’s a way of life.”

In 1942, Paul was drafted into the U.S. Army and did his duty during World War II. While stationed in Burma, India, a group of guys got together and staged a rodeo as a form of entertainment. Paul entered the bareback and saddle bronc riding...they used pack mules for the rodeo stock. He wound up winning first in both events. His prize money was a box of cigars in one event and a case of beer in the other. Paul laughs and says, “After the show, we really had a party.”

Back home, over the next several years, rodeo gained in popularity on the reservation. Then, in 1958, a group of guys decided to form an official association - the All Indian Rodeo Cowboys Association (AIRCA). Paul served as the first vice president.

He was actually asked to be the first President of the AIRCA, but declined in favor of letting someone with a little more education take on those duties. He wanted only the best for the association and selflessly put any thoughts of personal gain aside. Paul’s nephew Roy Spencer honorably served as President.

During those early years, men such as Paul and his long-time friend, Sonny Jim, (another well-known name in Native American Rodeo) were the ones who showed the world that an Indian could also be a cowboy...and a good one at that. These were the group of men who paved the way for today’s Native American Rodeo Cowboys to become what they have.

In a magazine interview for the 4th of July & PRCA Rodeo Celebration at Window Rock, Arizona, Paul once said, “I’m always praying for them to get somebody up there in Las Vegas some of these days.” It was always his dream for the younger generation to compete successfully in the Pro-Rodeo circuit and represent the Indian Nations.

Paul did not realize it at the time, but along the way, he became a hero to a whole new

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generation of guys. Many time Indian National Finals Rodeo qualifier and champion, Lucius Sells, once told the Navajo Times, "I'd like to mention my (grandfather) from Crownpoint, Paul Arviso Sr.. Being around him when he was roping...it's a talent I got. It's just a gift from God that he gave to me. I guess they would say it's in the blood."

Just like most of those old-time rodeo cowboys from that generation, Paul was tough. Back in the day, he hauled his horse in the bed of his truck, then later on, in a self-made one-horse trailer. Also, back then most of the roads across the Reservation were not paved, so if it was raining, you were likely to get stuck in the mud on the way to rodeos, then spend several hours digging out. At the rodeo, Paul and his family often camped in tents or outside on the ground, but they had a ton of fun.

As he grew older, Paul moved on to competing in "the old-timer's rodeo association" where he continued his winning ways, adding events like breakaway, ribbon roping and his all-time favorite, steer riding, to his resume. He has fond memories of competing with many men who have "now gone home" - Paul's words for what most call death.

Paul taught his own kids (nine of them) and many other youth the basics of horsemanship and how to care for a horse. One of his own favorite competition horses was named "Rawley." That horse was an all-around champion as well, being used in many different events during a rodeo. Paul said, "Respect the horse. Take care of your horses and they will take care of you."

In 2003, the Navajo Nation Fair and Rodeo honored Paul by bestowing the title of "Legendary Cowboy" on him. He received a beautiful custom saddle and a plaque for that. Now in his 90s, Paul still enjoys the sport of rodeo as a spectator and is constantly amazed at the talent of the younger generation. He is, in part, responsible for that talent as he served as mentor, inspiration and role model to many of today's rodeo cowboy.

Along with his many memories of competing with some of the all-time great Native cowboys, Paul is especially proud of the fact that the younger generation is now stepping it up a bit and competing "...up there in Las Vegas."

Men like Derrick Begay, Erich Rogers and Spud Jones who now qualify for the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo have the likes of Paul W. Arviso Sr. to thank for exciting the reservation

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about rodeo and paving the way by letting the world know that the Indian can also be one heck of a cowboy!