

The First Rodeo in Texas (It Had Nothing To Do With Cattle)

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The term rodeo has had many meanings. Events now known as rodeos were called different names for many years. For this paper rodeo is defined as, "Organized competition involving spectators, prior publicity, valuable prizes, and one or several of these events: bronc busting, calf roping, bull riding, steer wrestling, fancy roping, and trick tiding. "

Historians of the sport generally agree that the first rodeo in America occurred in Sante Fe, New Mexico in 1847. They also concur that the rodeo consisted of the skills of the working cowboy and was a natural outgrowth of competition in those skills. It is the purpose of this paper to show that the first rodeo was actually held in the Republic of Texas in 1844, and that the skills were developed for military purposes long before the cattle industry or cowboy existed.

When the Army of Texas was disbanded following the revolution in 1836, the Legislature authorized a company of Rangers to protect the citizens against Mexican raids and Indian depredations. At first the Rangers were no match for their adversaries, particularly the fast riding Comanche. The man who changed this was John Coffee Hays, who in 1840 became captain of the most famous and successful Ranger company in Texas history. He recruited men of high quality and trained them as none had done before. Though the company was frequently disbanded, the leaders, Samuel Walker, John McMullen and W.A.A. "Big Foot" Wallace always returned to rejoin Hays. He immediately recognized the enormity of his task, and the need for men able to ride and shoot like their enemies. After months of practice a skilled force developed. They began winning more and more battles and willingly accepted friendly challenges to informal contests of horsemanship. Hays also began acquiring the innovative Colt 5-shooter revolvers which were ideal for fighting on horseback.

The combination of superior leadership, horsemanship, marksmanship and weaponry finally enabled the Rangers to prevail. Peaceful coexistence with the Mexicans developed and Comanche Chief Buffalo Hump agreed to a peace treaty in 1844. In celebration, the famed Riding Match of 1844, the first rodeo, was staged. Virtually the entire population of San Antonio gathered at San Pedro Springs to watch the competition among Rangers, Comanche braves, and Rancheros. Valuable prizes were awarded winners in trick riding and bronc busting.

Unfortunately, peace was short-lived, for news of Texas' annexation into the United States ignited the Mexican War. Fighting under General Zachary Taylor, Hays' men gained greater fame for skill and bravery.

Hays, Walker, Wallace, McMullen were the first living heroes of Texas, examples to be followed. Their skills, style, image were copied by subsequent groups of Rangers. This style also became the style of the first Texas cowboys, who had to perform many of the same

functions as the Rangers. In fact, many Rangers became cowboys, and vice versa. Ranger skills became cowboy skills, and their competitive traditions were carried along the cattle trails and into the developing sport of rodeo. The first rodeo in Texas was not a natural outcome of competition in the daily labors of the cowboy, but of the battle skills which enabled Hays' Texas Rangers to overcome the Rancheros and Comanche and bring peace to the Republic of Texas.