

# ABNER DOUBLEDAY RIDES AGAIN!

## The First American Rodeo Never Happened

MARY LOU LECOMPTE

University of Texas at Austin

For the past thirty five years, sport historians, rodeo historians, and writers of scholarly works have contended that the first American rodeo took place in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in June of 1847. The sole source for this information is a letter, allegedly written by nineteenth-century novelist, Captain Mayne Reid, to Samuel Arnold in Ireland.

The letter is from a quaint town of Spanish-style building, where there are millions of cows browsing on ranges that reach from horizon to horizon. There, . . . the cowmen have what is called a round-up, when the fat beasts are selected to be driven to a fair hundreds of miles away . . . they contest each other for the best roping and throwing . . . and at night . . . there is much dancing on the streets.”

Only two writers claim to have seen Reid’s actual letter. Most subsequent writers have referred to Westermeir’s 1947 rodeo history, *Man, Beast, Dust*, for both the text and interpretation of the letter. Hence, all have stated that the letter describes Santa Fe, New Mexico, although there is no indication that the words New Mexico appear anywhere on the manuscript.

Numerous errors and inconsistencies regarding this letter lead to a complete investigation of both its contents and its writer, Mayne Reid. This research was facilitated by the fact that in 1847, the United States was in the midst of war with Mexico. Both Reid and Santa Fe, New Mexico were directly involved in the war, and a great deal of relevant material was written by participants in the conflict. The results of this research indicate that Reid’s letter has been taken out of context, and that the origins of American rodeo have yet to be determined.

In June of 1847, Santa Fe, New Mexico was under martial law, occupied by United States troops. The population, which until August 1846 had been citizens of Mexico, was over ninety percent Spanish-speaking. There was no cattle ranching business, and no grass. The nearest grazing land was over twenty miles from town.

Mayne Reid was a lieutenant in the Second Regiment of New York Volunteers in the United States Army. Since March 1847, he had been in Mexico and was

involved in numerous battles between March and August of 1847. In order for Reid to have been in Santa Fe, New Mexico in June of 1847, he would have to have been AWOL from the Army. However, nothing in his writing indicates he made such a trip. His military record is a heroic one; he received two promotions and a citation from General Winfield Scott for “Conspicuous Bravery” as a result of his actions in the Mexican War.

None of Reid’s or other writers’ descriptions of Santa Fe, New Mexico resemble in any way the scenes and events described in the letter to Samuel Arnold. However, descriptions of Santa Fe, Mexico, near Vera Cruz are quite similar to descriptions in the letter. Unlike Santa Fe, New Mexico, Santa Fe, Mexico was in a major cattle ranching area.

Unless Reid’s letter can be located, any explanations will be tentative. However, all of the evidence reviewed leads to the same conclusions. There was no rodeo in Santa Fe, New Mexico in June 1847, and Mayne Reid’s letter to Samuel Arnold was written from Old Mexico and is not a significant document in American Sport history.