

Colonel William Thomas Johnson, Premier Rodeo Producer of the 1930s

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The Great Depression of the 1930s was one of the most traumatic periods in American history. The human suffering caused by the Stock Market crash, and the business failures that followed took a toll which has never been fully calculated. Yet through all of the hardships, some business did thrive. (Susan Ware, *Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s*, Boston: Twayne, 1982, ix-5, ff.; Fredrick Lewis Allen, *Since Yesterday: The 1930s in America*, New York: Bantam, 1965). One sport which prospered during the Depression was rodeo. Its big-time circuit grew enormously during the 1930s, and incomes of contestants and producers increased as well. (Foghorn Clancy, *My Fifty Years in Rodeo*, San Antonio: Naylor Company, 1952, 184-210; *Hoofs and Horns*, 1932-1940; *The Billboard*, 1928-1940).

Much of the credit for this must go to Col. William Taylor Johnson of San Antonio, Texas. Johnson became a rodeo producer in 1928, and by the mid-thirties had taken over the prestigious Madison Square Garden Rodeo and created a viable eastern circuit which ushered in a new era of rodeo history. The eastern contests paid excellent prizes and extended the season, so that many cowboys and cowgirls did exceptionally well for those troubled times. During the Depression, average incomes for rodeo professionals on the big-time circuit averaged from one to three thousand dollars annually, while top champions earned from ten to twelve thousand dollars a year. (For a more detailed discussion of the athletes' financial success during the Depression see: Mary Lou LeCompte, "Home on the Range: Women in Professional Rodeo, 1929-1947," *Journal of Sport History* 17, Winter 1990: 327-28). By 1934, every rodeo which Johnson produced had set attendance records, and the eastern circuit was an integral part of rodeo. ("The Story of *The Billboard*, and Col. W. T. Johnson's Rodeos," *The Billboard*, 29 October 1934, 75). In spite of his many contributions, Johnson is honored by no rodeo Hall of Fame, and has never been nominated. How could such a major figure be ignored?

The answer is that Johnson himself was the target of a 1936 strike by sixty-one cowboys at his Boston Garden Rodeo. Protesting his policies and finances, and what they felt was an unacceptably low purse, the men refused to ride. Despite his best efforts, Johnson faced the dilemma of having to give in to the strikers or cancel the rodeo, and he chose the former. The men had taken a huge risk by striking. In alienating Johnson they stood the chance of being locked out of all of his rodeos.

Their gamble did pay off, as Johnson ultimately raised the purse, but a few months after the Boston strike, he sold his rodeo company to Texas. The cowboys were so pleased with their achievement that they formed the Cowboy's Turtle Association (CTA), now the powerful Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA). As the target of the strike he launched the PRCA, Johnson remains a pariah to the rodeo profession, and notably absent from their shrines and publications.

Research into Johnson's life and background has revealed several key factors which contributed to his being singled out for the famous strike. At the same time, many more of his achievements have

come to light. This paper will examine the life and career of Col. W. T. Johnson, as well as differing accounts of the 1936 strike, in an effort to ascertain nature and significance of his contributions to rodeo, and why a man who had done so much for the sport and its participants was ultimately the object of their wrath. It also seeks to determine whether he has been unduly vilified on the basis of a single incident and really deserves to be honored as a major figure in the history of the sport. The thesis is that while the prize money was the "official" explanation for the 1936 strike, the real target was Col. Johnson himself. Several things including his wealth and background, his response to a romance between his daughter and a rodeo champion, and his apparent aloofness, created the animosity between the Colonel and the cowboys. Because he owned his rodeo company and personally reaped the profits of its success, the cowboys also perceived that Johnson was getting rich at their expense.

He certainly contributed much more to the sport than merely having been the target of the strike that launched the PRCA. He introduced many modern features which streamlined production and also helped increase the sport's popularity. As a consequence of his success, rodeo enjoyed its greatest geographical distribution. When all of his accomplishments are evaluated, it is evident that he did far more for the sport than such Hall of Fame producers as Everett Colburn and C. B. Irwin. After fifty-six years, it is time for Col. William Taylor Johnson to be recognized for his contributions as one of the leading producers in the business, and to be honored by a rodeo hall of fame.