AN OVERVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN RODEO

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Abstract: Impromptu roping, riding, and racing affairs and western pageantries whetted public appetites for a competitive cowboy sport. Despite its increasing popularity and types, American rodeo has received little attention from social scientists. This paper discusses seven different types of contemporary rodeo—professional, women's, collegiate, high school, senior, gay, and military—and their common historical origin. The popularity of rodeo in contemporary society is attributed to prevalent agrarian beliefs and the rural mystique among the public and to a long line of promoters and organizers who have increasingly commodified it.

Introduction

Rodeo is one of America's fastest growing sports. Because of its sociological and economic significance, rodeos have been held in all 50 states. Today, the PRCA is the most dominant association in rodeo, with nearly 10,000 members, including contestants, stock contractors, bullfighters, and other non-contestant members (PRCA Media Guide 1995). In 1994 the PRCA sanctioned 782 rodeos in 46 states and 4 Canadian Provinces, in which a total of 9,761 PRCA card holders and permit holders competed for $23,063,793 in prize money (PRCA Media Guide 1995). In 1990, according to Weisman (1991), the PRCA and the International Professional Rodeo Association (IPRA) together sanctioned 1,100 rodeos, which attracted 18 million spectators and produced $80 million in ticket sales. Like other professional sports, PRCA rodeo, and to a lesser degree IPRA rodeo, has become recognized in the athletic mainstream due to an increase in media exposure and major corporate sponsorship. However, many other rodeo associations hold thousands of rodeos each year of which social scientists know little about.

Contemporary American rodeo has many organizational types (i.e., professional, collegiate, high school, youth, women's, gay, black, Indian, senior, prison, military, ranch, and others). With the exception of LeCompte's (1989a, 1989b, 1990, 1993) studies on the Women's Professional Rodeo Association and Dubin's (1989) ethnography of Native American rodeo, types of rodeo other than PRCA rodeo have been ignored in the scientific literature. The types of rodeo examined here include: women's (Women's Professional Rodeo Association/Professional Women's Rodeo Association), collegiate (National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association), high school (National High School Rodeo Association), senior (National Senior Pro Rodeo Association), gay (International Gay Rodeo Association), and military (Military Rodeo Cowboys Association). These associations were selected for two reasons. Although each is the only national or international organization of its kind, none has been systematically studied. Also, the emergence of these associations appear to have paralleled important societal changes that have occurred since the turn of the century.

This paper extends work on rodeo begun by anthropologists. It identifies and describes the organization of different types of contemporary rodeo in terms of its participants, structure, and activities (Olsen 1968). It also examines the functions (i.e., the contributions rodeos make to the communities in which they are staged) and possible dysfunctions rodeos perform. The history of rodeo is discussed first, followed by an identification and description of the organization of various types of rodeo. Lastly, ideological, economic, and social functions of rodeo are discussed.

Data for this study were collected using archival and historical investigation, document analyses, and in-depth interviewing of representatives of selected rodeo associations and unique types of rodeo. Furthermore, community-level data (e.g., economic impact estimates) were obtained through telephone conversations with representatives of chambers of commerce and professional organizations in communities that conduct a rodeo association's finals or championship rodeo.

Origins of rodeo

Lawrence (1982) and Fredriksson (1985), among other rodeo writers, assert that the origin of rodeo and its contemporary types is rooted in a combination of elements traceable to two post-Civil War era activities: (1) the roping, riding, and racing exhibitions staged among working cowboys for entertainment, and (2) the wild west shows.

Rodeo evolved as a natural result of the cowboy's need for play and recreation (see Deaton 1952; Kegley 1942; Norbury 1993). After months of strenuous labor moving cattle throughout the country, cowboys would get together and celebrate. For amusement at the end of the trail, cowboys would gather and compare their roping and riding skills. These early celebrations were exhibitions; they were a place where cowboys could show off the skills they had acquired on the range. Soon afterwards, though, these exhibitions turned into competitive matches, staged among both intra-ranch and inter-ranch cowboys. Impromptu competitions became commonplace as cowboys competed for their share of the prize pot, or at other times simply "just for the hell or glory of it" (Durham and Jones 1965: 206). As Lawrence (1982) noted, these early contests were one element in the dual origin of American rodeo.

The other element in the genesis of American rodeo was the development of the wild west show. William F. Cody, better known as "Buffalo Bill," introduced the public to a new type of outdoor entertainment. After a decade as a

producer and star of Western melodramas, Cody returned to his hometown of North Platte, Nebraska, in 1882. Upon hearing that nothing was planned in observance of Independence Day, Cody arranged to hold an "Old Glory Blowout" on the Fourth of July. He persuaded local business owners to offer prizes for roping, shooting, riding, and bronco breaking exhibitions, and sent out 5,000 handbills inviting local cowboys to partake (Russell 1970). Cody projected that he might get 100 cowboy entrants; however, he got 10 times that number (Russell 1970). In May of the following year, Cody staged an even larger extravaganza in his home state at the Omaha Fair Grounds. This two-day Rocky Mountain and Prairie Exhibition attracted eight thousand spectators the first day and nine thousand the second (Fredriksson 1985). After his second successful performance, Cody decided to turn this new form of live entertainment into a commercial enterprise, and announced that he was taking his show on the road (Fredriksson 1985).

Cody sold his Wild West to U.S. and European audiences as an authentic representation of life as it existed on the vanishing American frontier. His show included a cast of Indians, homesteaders, skilled sharpshooters, stagecoach drivers, scouts, trick riders, rough riders, and a mounted cavalry. Audiences were thrilled with exciting exhibitions such as an attack on the Deadwood stagecoach, a Grand Hunt on the Plains, and the crowd pleasing "Cow-Boy Fun" events, the roping and riding exhibitions by daring cowboys (Harris 1986). Other entrepreneurs also saw economic advantage in staging similar shows. Such shows were aimed primarily at Eastern city dwellers and Europeans who were unfamiliar with the "cowboy culture" of the West. By 1885, the number of traveling shows totaled more than fifty (Fredriksson 1985). Russell (1970) identified 116 wild west shows that existed between 1883 and 1944, yet noted that his list might be incomplete.

Early informal cowboy exhibitions and contests and the wild west shows were closely related. Accordingly, Westermeier (1947: 37) asserted that "[t]he riders of those early shows were, or had been, working cowboys..." By the late 1880s, with changing practices in the range-cattle industry, many working cowboys were becoming seasonal ranch employees. During the winter months, out-of-work cowboys found employment as bartenders, butchers, or blacksmiths (Forbis 1973; Harris 1986). Others found employment with the traveling shows (Fredriksson 1985). For approximately forty years, until their demise after World War I, the wild west shows employed out-of-work cowboys.

Early organization

In the early 1900s, interest in the wild west shows began to wane. Conversely, at that time the popularity of rodeo exploded. The 1920s was a period of rapid growth for rodeo, as producers began staging contests in cities and towns throughout the country. With this tremendous expansion came a period of rampant disorganization. Fraudulent producers failed to pay the winning contestants; rules and events lacked uniformity. Furthermore, touring groups, complete with producers, announcers, livestock, and an assortment of cowboys and cowgirls, began staging fake rodeos, simply rotating the victories among themselves (LeCompte 1993). The combination of these elements quickly began to undermine the status of legitimate producers and rodeos. If rodeo was going to maintain its popularity, some type of organization and coordination among rodeo committees was necessary.

Historical data revealed that the sport of rodeo lacked centralized control throughout the early decades of the twentieth century. Each rodeo was conducted individually with its own rules and regulations, and there was no assurance beyond the spoken word of organizers that the winners would be paid. As a response to these and other extant concerns, rodeo managers formed in 1929 the Rodeo Association of America (RAA) to standardize rules and the conditions under which rodeos were held. Rodeo cowboys organized in 1936 the Cowboys Turtle Association (CTA) to further safeguard the interests of the contestants.[1] Through the efforts of both the Rodeo Association of America, which no longer exists, and the Cowboys Turtle Association, rodeo became solidly established. The CTA reorganized on March 15, 1945, and became known as the Rodeo Cowboys Association (RCA), which in 1975 changed its name to the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA).

Current rodeo

The efforts by the cowboys to protect themselves from fraudulent producers and promoters, to collectively represent their interests, and to improve their standard of living paralleled similar demands made by past American labor movements (Dulles 1949; Lieberman 1986; Rayback 1966; Taft 1964). Since the formation of the parent contestants' organization, various non-mainstream rodeo associations have formed on local, state, regional, national, and international levels. An analysis of the evolution of the various types of rodeo from an epigenetic perspective (Etzioni 1963) showed that each had functional elements that distinguished it from its mainstream professional counterpart (Theodori 1996). The "initiation" and institutionalization of each type of rodeo is marked by outward and visible signs closely resembling those of the women's movement (Deckard 1983; De Leon 1988; Howard 1974), the gay liberation movement (Adam 1995; De Leon 1988; Howard 1974; Marcus 1992), the senior or "gray" movement (De Leon 1988; Wallace and Williamson 1992), and the growth of recreation and leisure time in contemporary society (Dulles 1965; Rader 1990; Swanson and Spears 1995). Several types originated to combat the latent issues of age, racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination in early rodeo. Others developed to satisfy the urge to compete and/or encourage participation in the sport by particular groups in society.

Members of the Professional Women's Rodeo Association (PWRA) compete in 5 standard events which include

[1] *The cowboys called themselves "Turtles" because they were 'slow but sure' to organize.*

bareback bronc riding (6 second ride), bull or steer riding (6 second ride), breakaway calf roping, tie down calf roping, and team roping. Goat tying, steer undecorating, and steer stopping may be included in PWRA rodeos as optional events. The PWRA annually takes the top 15 point earners in each of the 5 standard events to the PWRA National Finals.

There are 9 standard events in National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association (NIRA) rodeo competition for which points are awarded—five men's events, three women's events, and one men's/women's event. Men's events include: bareback bronc riding (8 second ride), saddle bronc riding (8 second ride), bull riding (8 second ride), calf roping, and steer wrestling. Women's events include: barrel racing, breakaway calf roping, and goat tying. Team roping is the one event in which men and women can compete together. At the end of the school year, qualifying teams and individuals meet at the College National Finals Rodeo (CNFR) to determine national champions. In order to qualify for the team competition at the CNFR, teams must place either first or second in the final regional standings, based on the total points accumulated at the ten regional rodeos. Individuals also must have placed first or second in the final standings in an event or the all-around to qualify for the CNFR. Both team champions and individual champions are determined by points won at the CNFR. Currently, the NIRA is divided into 11 regions (Theodori 1996). At the end of the 1994-1995 academic year, individual student membership in the NIRA totaled 3,196, among 133 participating collegiate rodeo clubs. Basic membership requirements include: attending an accredited institution of post secondary education, enrollment in at least 12 credit hours each semester (9 of which must be academic credits), and maintaining at least a 2.0 grade point average. Students are eligible to purchase four NIRA membership cards over a six-year period from the date of their high school graduation.

There are 12 standard events in the National High School Rodeo Association (NHSRA)—five boys' events, five girls' events, and two coed events. Cowboys' events include: bareback bronc riding (8 second ride), saddle bronc riding (8 second ride), bull riding (8 second ride), calf roping, and steer wrestling. Cowgirls' events include: barrel racing, pole bending, goat tying, breakaway roping, and the queen contest. The coed events include team roping and cutting. The top four contestants in each event at the state or province level qualify for the National High School Finals Rodeo (NHSFR). In the queen contest, however, only one contestant from each state or province can qualify for the NHSFR. The NHSRA does not offer cash awards to event winners. Instead, students compete for scholarships and prizes donated by major corporate sponsors. Each year at the NHSFR, students compete for college scholarships totaling in excess of $106,000.

Senior rodeo contestants compete in 8 standard events—six of which are for men, one for women, and one for both men and women. Men's events include: bareback bronc riding (7 second ride), saddle bronc riding (7 second ride), bull riding (7 second ride), steer wrestling, calf roping, and team roping. Women compete in the ladies barrel race, and with men in ribbon roping. In the bareback bronc riding, saddle bronc riding, and bull riding events, all contestants compete in one age category, 40 and over, for the same prize money. Points, however, in those three riding events are awarded to the top six contestants in two age groups: 40-50 and 50 and over. Contestants in the steer wrestling event compete for prize money and points in two age groups, 40-50 and 50 and over. The remaining four events consist of three age categories: 40-50, 50-60, and 60 and older. Purse money is divided equally among the age groups, and points are awarded to the top six contestants in each category. At the end of each rodeo season, the National Senior Pro Rodeo Association (NSPRA) holds the National Senior Pro Rodeo Finals (NSPRF) to determine event champions and name a men's and women's all-around champion in each age category.[2] The top 30 contestants in the standings of each age category in the timed events, with the exception of steer wrestling which is limited to the top 20, and the combined top 20 contestants in the riding events are eligible to enter the finals, provided certain requirements have been met. Requirements include participation in at least five sanctioned rodeos and the accumulation of at least ten points over the course of the season.

A standard International Gay Rodeo Association (IGRA) rodeo includes 13 events divided into four categories—rough stock, roping, speed, and camp events. Rough stock events include: bull riding (6 second ride), steer riding (6 second ride), bareback bronc riding (6 second ride), and chute dogging. Roping events include: team roping, mounted breakaway calf roping, and calf roping on foot. Speed events include: barrel race, flag race, and pole bending. Camp events include: steer decorating, goat dressing, and wild drag race. Males and females compete together in all events. However, they are judged separately in all events except in team events, which includes the three camp events and team roping. At the end of the rodeo season, the top 5 contestants in each Division (Theodori 1996) in each event are invited to compete in the IGRA Rodeo Finals. Event champions and both the all-around cowboy and all-around cowgirl are determined based on points earned at the IGRA Rodeo Finals.

Contestants must be members of the Military Rodeo Cowboys Association (MRCA) and have active duty status, active reserve status, retired from active duty, or be a dependent of any active duty or retired member of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, National Guard, or Coast Guard to compete in a MRCA rodeo. Standard MRCA events include: bareback bronc riding (8 second ride), saddle bronc riding (8 second ride), bull riding (8 second ride), calf roping, steer wrestling, chute dogging, team tying, and barrel racing. Women can compete in all events; however, they generally participate only in barrel racing.

[2] *Points won by men in ribbon roping do not count towards the all-around title.*

Discussion

Ideological, economic, and social functions permeate contemporary American rodeo. The symbolic content of rodeo is embedded in an agrarian ideology rooted deeply in American culture. The dissemination and mobilization of the agrarian value system in America is credited to the writings of Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson's articulation of the agrarian creed nourished a belief system advocating that there is a morally virtuous quality attached to agriculture, and that *rural* life is the natural and good life (see Dalecki and Coughenour 1992). Although the United States has become increasingly urbanized throughout the twentieth century, the American public continues to identify with and endorse fundamental agrarian principles. Several studies (e.g., Buttel and Flinn 1975; Dalecki and Coughenour 1992; Flinn and Johnson 1974; Molnar and Wu 1989) have found that an agrarian ideology continues to be widespread among the American public.

In a study of popular images of rurality among Pennsylvania residents, Willits et al. (1990) concluded that people tend to associate positive images with rural life and reject negative images of rurality. They termed this imagery the *rural mystique* "because it involves an aura of treasured and almost sacred elements" (1990: 575). Rodeo is part of the "rural mystique" and serves to preserve America's rural Western narrative. To a degree, the rural rodeo meta-narrative symbolizes what the West was, and concomitantly what our contemporary urban, industrialized society idealistically and romantically wishes it could continue to be. As a ritual (see Stoeltje 1989, 1993), rodeo perpetuates the late nineteenth-century Western frontier ideology in contemporary American society. At a deeper level, symbolic themes, such as control and lack of control over nature and the conquest of the "wild" West by an industrializing culture, are manifest in rodeo (Boatright 1964; Errington 1990; Lawrence 1982).

What began as athletic exhibitions and contests of nineteenth-century range cowboys quickly became transformed into a marketable commodity. During the second half of the 1800s, as commodification occurred in grain, lumber, meat, and other trade goods (Cronon 1991), Buffalo Bill and other wild west capitalists commodified gloriously romantic and glamorous versions of the American frontier. These entrepreneurs packaged the culture of the nineteenth-century rural American West and sold their frontier-Americana fabrications, complete with longhorn cattle, savage Indians, and heroic cowboys, to ranchless metropolitan markets on the east coast and in Europe.

In the early 1900s, the popularity of this indigenous form of American entertainment began to decline. Factors such as vaudeville, Hollywood, and new forms of transportation contributed to the demise of the Wild West Shows (Johnson 1994). At the same time, interest in rodeo exploded. Cowboy contests were staged at Fourth of July celebrations and county and state agricultural fairs throughout the West. As industrial attributes from the East infiltrated and affected Western cow towns, rodeo, with its blend of fact and imagination, was one element that linked them to their cultural heritage in a rapidly changing society. By the early 1920s, rodeo surpassed the stage of being a small-time attraction in rural Western communities, as producers and promoters, driven by economic motives, removed the cowboy sport from its regional origins and, like the wild west entrepreneurs, wrapped the rural Western epic into a marketable commodity and sold it to eastern urbanites in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York.

Contemporary rodeo is big business. In fact, as early as 1936, the terms "Big-Time Business" and "Big-Time Sport" were applied to rodeo (see Clinton 1936). Professional contestants, contract personnel, arena workers, and concessionaires depended wholly or partially on rodeo for their earnings. Moreover, rodeo stimulates economic growth in other economic sectors (e.g., the western apparel and the Quarter Horse industries). While most organizers have not assessed the total economic impact of rodeos on their community, several communities that host a finals rodeo have estimated its economic impact. Las Vegas estimated in 1995 that the PRCA's National Finals Rodeo produced a $24.0 million economic impact, up slightly from a $23.4 million economic impact in 1994 (telephone conversation with Terry Jicinsky, Las Vegas Convention & Visitors Authority). In 1995, Oklahoma City estimated that the IPRA's International Finals Rodeo produced a $3.0 million economic impact (telephone conversation with Stanley Draper, Jr., Oklahoma City All Sports Association). The estimated economic impact of the 1995 College National Finals Rodeo on Bozeman, Montana, was between $1.5 million and $2.0 million (telephone conversation with Racene Friede, Chamber of Commerce, Bozeman, Montana). Obviously, not all communities that produce rodeos experience the level of economic impact associated with a finals rodeo.

The site for social action at a rodeo is the arena. Although the construction and location of arenas vary from community to community, they provide actors (i.e., participants, employees, and spectators) with a setting to perform actions and form associations (Parsons 1951). So what motivates people to attend a rodeo? Among numerous manifest reasons, the participants may be there for the sport or athletic competition, the employees may be there out of economic necessity, and the spectators may be there for the entertainment. On the other hand, rodeos serve several other functions. For example, rodeos allow people of different socioeconomic statuses to come together momentarily and collectively identify with each other. In short, although all rodeos share similar social functions such as sport/athletic competition, recreation/leisure, and entertainment, each type maintains a functional niche that distinguishes it from its mainstream professional counterpart.

Closing comments

Contemporary rural society is in a state of change. American rodeo, which evolved from the athletic exhibitions and contests of the nineteenth-century range cowboys and the wild west shows, is one institution that

fills the void in society created by the rural to urban transformation in the United States. Although the days of free riding, open ranges, great cattle drives, and unexplored frontiers have long past, positive images about agrarian values, rural living, and the cowboy lifestyle have maintained a firm grip upon the minds and emotions of the American public. What does this mean? What does the nostalgia of a supposedly simpler, more harmoniously, pastoral way of life say about present-day American society?

The challenge of the wild American West was once real. However, commodities such as dime novels, wild west shows, folk songs, western movies, dude ranches, and rodeos have contributed to the widespread acceptance and perpetuation of a rural American mystique. This mystique is embellished by contemporary rodeo which packages realistic notions and romantic sentiments of the Old West, and sells the "frontier ethos" in small rural towns and major urban centers across the country. The western frontier has ceased to exist, but cowboys and rodeos remain a vibrant part of the rural landscape.

In closing, the purpose of this paper has been to provide an overview of contemporary American rodeo. The foregoing analysis shed some insights into the structure, functions, and possible dysfunctions of the various types of rodeo. Nevertheless, many questions remain. A more thorough examination of the relationship between former societal movements and the institutionalization of the different types of rodeo should be conducted. Likewise, in-depth case studies would provide valuable information on the symbolic and functional utilities of each type.

Additional studies should also address such important sociological issues as the demographics of rodeo contestants, the socioeconomic characteristics of rodeo contestants, supporting participants (i.e., announcers, clowns, bullfighters, arena workers, specialty-act performers), and spectators. An overwhelming majority of people who participate in rodeo do so as hobbyists or part-time rodeo contestants. Surveys could collect data on place of residency (rural/urban), primary occupation, annual income, educational level, and motivation of rodeo participants and spectators. Furthermore, research addressing the publicity, attraction, and kind of corporate sponsorship and the influence that these sponsors have upon the decisions and choices of individuals in the rodeo marketplace is needed. Economic impact studies on rodeos other than finals rodeos could provide valuable community-level data regarding ways that rodeo contributes to the viability and sustainability of rural communities. Lastly, the specific manner and degree in which contemporary rodeo relates to fundamental agrarian attitudes and values in our society needs elaboration if rural sociologists are to more fully understand the symbolic meanings and mechanisms that the public attaches to the rural mystique.

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