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“Yippee-Ki-Yay”: The Mystique of The Houston Rodeo

“Rodeo is a lifestyle, the cowboy’s pathway to the American Dream”¹

It seems quite ridiculous when you think about how many people in this country, let alone the world, dream of becoming a cowboy. While figures like John Wayne and Clint Eastwood generally come to mind when you think “cowboy,” there is a huge unsuspecting community of anonymous dreamers desperately dreaming to become a world champion cowboy or cowgirl. They could be sitting now on their grandparents farm in a small town in Weatherford, TX, or walking along the streets in the bustling city of Sao Paulo, Brazil. You may not be one to sit and think “ah yes professional cowboy” when you’re asked that nausea inducing question of “so what do you want to do with your life,” (usually at a family dining table). But strangely enough, there are far more cases of this than you might think.

“To the casual spectator, rodeo can seem like a secret fraternity, one with its own rules, lingo, dress, and conduct. And it’s true that underneath the cowboy hat are individuals that have somehow remained apart from society as a whole.”²

Growing up in Houston has always been a little side quest of my twenty two years of life in my head. In some ways, it never really felt *real* to me. Like so much of my time there exists as distant video-like reels in the back of my brain. Those memories are coated in the wonderful sweet filter of youthful nostalgia, as some of my earliest happy memories are from Houston. Most of my identity revolves around my British birth place and dual citizenship, but many do not know about these connections I have to the south as well. My parents are both from Houston, and I briefly lived there for about four years from the age of two through six.

¹ Wooden, Wayne S., and Gavin Ehringer. *Rodeo in America : Wranglers, Roughstock & Paydirt*. University Press of Kansas, 1996.

² Ibid.

I can distantly remember getting my very first pair of boots. It had been a long, hot, day in the humid disgusting heat of Houston. It was strangely warm that March, as we suddenly had to start bracing for the deathly hot sun of approaching Summer. I had had a half day in Kindergarten and my mother picked me up in her 2003 Volvo sedan. I must have been maybe five years old. We drove along the busy two lane road onto Kirby drive. Pulling up on Stella Link St, she pulled the car in park in front of a now long gone children's clothing store. I got all my red tartan uniforms for school here. But I wasn't here for that. I can't tell you the reason for us being there, but I can still see the pale little five year old with the bright blonde ringlets tugging on my mother's shorts pointing directly at a pair of shoes. No, not any shoes, the pale pink Jasper's children's cowgirl boots with the butterfly detailing along the top. Those were the boots of my dreams, and for this little Carly there was no way she was leaving without MY boots. I've always felt some kind of heart thumping response to seeing anything pink, but also it's clear my deep down undercover cowgirl has never quite disappeared either. It's all in the boot.

"Scratch Houston and you will find—underneath each of the oil people, refiners, pipeliners, space scientists, retailers, real estate moguls, politicians, manufacturers, cotton merchants, seafarers, whomever—there's always the heart of a cowboy."³

One of the very formative memories about my time in Texas that has lasted is going to the famous Houston Rodeo. Whether this came from my parents making mention of the rodeo every spring and their desire to go or not is debatable. Regardless, the western glamor of going to see a show of purebred horses and heartbreaker cowboys is something hard to forget. I still have family out in South Texas, so I also got the reminder through my very southern grandfather on the holidays. This incredible phenomenon – known as the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, or HLSR for short -- is not only a spectacle and show, but also one of the biggest annual philanthropic endeavors in the state of Texas. The official board boasts that they have raised

³ Saye, Jim. "SHOW AND RODEO: The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo A Historical Perspective." *Houston History*, vol. 7, no. 1, Fall 2009, pp. 2–15. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ahl&AN=47523450&site=eds-live.

over \$500 million in grants and scholarships for Texas students. Organizations like 4H or Future Farmers of America have paired with the HLSR for at least the last forty, inspiring youth to take an interest in agriculture. However, like most big events there are its caveats too: it is also a huge money making machine for those at the top, as well as potentially fatal to those participating. But, looking beyond the gruesome and capitalistic elements, this rodeo at its heart is about celebrating southern comfort. February through March every single year, NRG Reliant Park hosts bull riding, mutton busting, prize winning cows, country music performers and thousands upon thousands of beautiful cowboy boots.

“This remarkable spectacle is an outpouring of a suppressed cowboy spirit on a scale that is all-encompassing . . . and authentic Texan to the bone.”⁴

For a brief history lesson on the Houston Rodeo, it all starts in 1836 at Houston’s founding. A few years after the Texas war for Independence, the city began to be set up as a prime land for raising cattle, accounting for the abundance of longhorns and cows in the surrounding ranches and farms of the city.⁵ Soon Harris County, the greater Houston area, became the highest producer of cattle in all the state of Texas. These humble beginnings established Houston as a land of ranches and the oh so familiar cowboy. Flash forward to 1932, businessman James W. Sartwell founded the Houston Fat Stock Show and Livestock Exposition. A scheme under the guise of “competition” to convince farmers to produce higher quality “prize winning” cattle.⁶ There was no barrel racing or bucking yet but nevertheless the annual show was born. With the exception of the years 1938 and 2020, the rodeo has been running every year since- albeit changing the location once or twice. Once in the infamous astrodome, the event now finds itself encroaching on the entire NRG Reliant park, the home of

⁴ Saye, Jim. “SHOW AND RODEO: The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo A Historical Perspective.” *Houston History*, vol. 7, no. 1, Fall 2009, pp. 2–15.

EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=ahl&AN=47523450&site=eds-live.

⁵ “History of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo.” *Houstonia Magazine*, Houstonia Magazine, 17 Feb. 2022, <https://www.houstoniamag.com/news-and-city-life/houston-rodeo-history-a-ten-gallon-tale-february-2014>.

⁶ Ibid.

the Houston Texans football team. This complex of buildings covers 350 acres of land and consists of four venues: NRG Stadium, NRG Center, NRG Arena and the NRG Astrodome. The Center, Arena and Astrodome host the livestock showings from farmers all over the nation. From 8am to 5pm throughout the month of February and March you can hear cheers intermingled with moos, oinks and whinneys. Beyond these venues, the walkways are lined with booths filled with southern couture, concession stands, and even artisanal wine gardens. I am not embarrassed when I tell you I spent a hefty \$100 on a brand new cowboy hat just to fit in with the crowd. Next to that at least 60 acres are filled with a pop up carnival ground. Visitors can buy day passes just to roam the grounds, or a premium ticket to include the stadium order of events. Only until night time does the stadium let the rodeo-goers pour in the doors, crack open millions of beer caps, and rake the sharp sand and clay for the evening's spectacle.

The rodeo show events include competition, performance and just flat out entertainment. Millions of dollars are won in these competitive events of tie down roping, bareback riding, team roping, saddle bronc, steer wrestling, barrel racing, bull riding, and breakaway roping. Each category boasts professional rodeo athletes, some taking years of practice and competing to even get to a rodeo with the prestige of Houston. As well as the competition, the full ticket holders are treated to racing wagons, high school students scrambling to catch a calf, and the grand finale of a performer, driven by truck (or horseback if they so choose) to a wheeled out 360 degree mobile texas star shaped stage.

Beyond being a spectator to this monster of an event, it is easy to forget that there are real people behind the western get up. These are very real people making very important choices, all for the chance to compete at an event as notorious as the HLSR. Leighton Berry is the 2023 champion for bareback riding, winning \$57,375 in the championship shootout in March. He may be a Houston Rodeo champion, but to him, he is no more special than the guy next door. Berry grew up in a humble ranching family in Weatherford Texas, population 30,000.

He was around cattle and horses his whole life, so it was only natural that he found his way to the rodeo's grand stage.

This bareback rider walks into the bright fluorescent stadium light and into the chute. The buzz and cheers of the 80 thousand plus crowd is almost deafening, creating a sort of silence for the champion. Swinging his leg over the unbroken horse, the gate starts rattling as he feels resistance from the bronc underneath him. Tightening his glove arranged in a single riveted handhold or "suitcase handle." The air gets tense and the announcers brace for the release of the bronco and his challenger. The bullfighters standing on either side of the gate look to Berry for the look, the nod that says "let's do this shit." As he leaves the chute, the battle has begun. The contestant's free hand must not touch the animal, the rigging, or the contestant's own body. The seconds painfully drag on as the rider is whipped every which way praying to stay on for those golden eight seconds. Any one of these seconds you could easily be flung to the ground, only to be crushed by a 1500 pound horse. Why would Leighton Barry risk his life in eight measly seconds? Like many other event champions, rodeo is just in his blood.

"I have been ranching and rodeoing my whole life...I've competed in every rough riding event but I grew up roping calves before latching onto bareback riding." says Leighton Berry. Sitting down and talking with the champion, it's clear that he hasn't lost sight of his humble beginnings or his Christian values. But what is it about Houston, of all the rodeos he's competed in?

"Houston is an incredible rodeo to compete at. The atmosphere is unmatched, the competition is elite, as are the bucking horses and the money is obviously huge. But what is most important to me is that we are the only event in the country that has the national anthem along with a prayer at each and every single rodeo across the country. I've never been to any...that didn't begin the event without those two things." I pressed him a little further about the extrinsic values of rodeos, asking if it's just a shiny display for those who spectate.

Simply put, Berry replies, *“Rodeo is family. Family is true. It’s a legacy I hope goes on forever, especially in a world we live in today.”* I wondered why he did it. Why and how do you just decide to become a professional cowboy? Obviously, winning \$50,000 has its perks but why these events, why risk your life?

“Everyday I get to wake up and be exactly what I want to be. A cowboy. I get to praise God, be surrounded by good hearted people, and compete in an event that is unlike anything else... I’m very blessed to do what I do.” Berry puts his faith in God, praying each time he steps into an arena that today won’t be his last ride. Doesn’t get more western than that.

This past March, I went to the Houston rodeo for the first time in over a decade. It was my spring break of my junior year of college, a trip that I desperately wanted to take since the year prior. I had been planning my outfits for the rodeo for over a year, and counted down the days til I would be back at NRG stadium. We were going for two nights, mainly to see the two country performers at the end of the daily events, but I knew I was gonna have to really enjoy and take in the experience like no other. I had spent summers in Houston before, and I was fully aware that it was one of the fourth biggest cities in the nation. Quite far from the cowboy heaven most think Texans to be. But this was different. This was Rodeo. It was yee haw or go home. We now own a small town home in Braeswood Heights, a small subdivision of inner city Houston. While a far cry from the suburban neighborhood we lived in in the early 2000s, it so happens to be a little over a mile from Reliant Park. In an attempt to avoid the insanity of trying to park at the stadium, and to my displeasure, we walked.

My boots were stomping on the hot pavement, and my forehead was prickling with sweat underneath my cowboy hat. I had mistakenly forgotten my trusty brown grippy brown boot socks. I knew of all the days to wear my favorite boots, it was the day. I had spent at least 45 minutes deciding between my outfits, not being able to choose what best fit the rodeo “aesthetic.” Finally, I traded my southern belle “suitable for church” dress to a more grungy

I-love-america-pseudo-cattle-rancher 'fit of black denim shorts, fringe jacket, bandana and THE boots. My thrifted, shiny bright red ropers. My mother boasts of owning the exact pair when she was a senior in high school. We still joke that they may be the same pair. These are the see and be seen boots. The 'it girl' boots. Yes I had seven other pairs of cowboy boots to pick from, but nothing quite gave "deep in the heart of Texas" like these babies. But I had made the mistake of forgetting those damn boot socks. I was starting to feel the top lining of the boot rubbing the back of my calves- a blister was forming. I had a twenty minute walk in the balmy spring Houston air, and already these boots were giving me grief. What is it about cowboy boots that you somehow find a kind of peace with the pain. I had somehow forgiven the no arch support, tight soles, and, now, blisters. But I couldn't (and wouldn't) be caught dead without my leather legends on my feet. Not here, not at the Houston Rodeo. The power is in the boot. You are not a cowboy without a cowboy boot. If you were one of the flies on the hay covered floors in the confines of the indoor stockyard there would be nothing in your eyesight except swarms of brown, cream, black, and the occasional glitter pink boots. But don't worry if God forbid you deign to wear sneakers, there are at least fifty country store stalls in a mile radius for you to buy some boots. You might face the insane costs, but hey you can't be a proper cowboy without those boots.

What comes to mind when you think about rodeo, or I guess just "cowboy"?

"Oh god, I don't know honestly I just see some dude in assless chaps on a black horse and they've got that wild and free spirit thing going."

My best friend Gabby is from Staten Island, NY. She comes from a very Italian family, and is by no means southern. Hearing her parents on the phone even brings me joy from the way they emphasize their vowels or Rs. "How awhr my cowgahrIs?" her mother Joanne chuckled on the phone our first night in Houston. Bringing her with me to the Rodeo was a completely hilarious experience. I knew that she'd have her thoughts about the whole ordeal

given she didn't have the same background as me, but it was almost as if she had full blown culture shock. I interviewed her a few weeks after we had gone.

What do you think the strangest part of the whole ordeal was? What shocked you the most?

"The seriousness of it all. The fact that there were fully over 80,000 people in one stadium in boots and hats, cheering for horses under a spotlight."

She's referring to the horse's salute. An event at the end of the night where two presenters boom over the loudspeaker about the value of horses while a mare and her foal canter under a spotlight in the middle of the stadium. Yes, seriously.

"I mean the events just got weirder and weirder. I saw grown men ride bulls, highschoolers tackle calves, and preschoolers hold onto mutton for dear life. But the worst part of it all? I loved every minute of it."

"When visitors, especially those from the East, come to Houston...they will interpose—

"Yeah, well, but where are the cowboys? They're here.. They're at the rodeo."⁷

Is there anything problematic about rodeo? For example, taking part in events?

"Well obviously animal abuse. It may be second nature for those 15 year olds to push a baby cow to the floor and harness them up, but it was quite uncomfortable to watch despite the inability to not cheer them on."

What about from the participant's side? There's definitely a risk involved there.

"Bull riding also immediately comes to mind. Everyone has a choice, risking getting crushed by a bull any second is an active choice that they're making- I mean watching the bull riding and being completely entertained might be unethical, but I guess that's just me."

To an outsider, like my friend Gabby, rodeo does come across as an unethical event. I mean what do we get out of watching men and women on horses and bulls, besides a great fear

⁷Saye, Jim. "SHOW AND RODEO: The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo A Historical Perspective." Houston History, vol. 7, no. 1, Fall 2009, pp. 2–15.
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that PETA may shut down the events any moment. Beyond the competition and consumerism, Rodeo Houston inspires some of our nation's youth to care about agriculture, rearing cattle and ultimately education.

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Since the scholarship and educational program support began in 1957, more than \$235 million has been committed to Texas students for their education. Currently, 1,934 students are furthering their education with the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo scholarships. Enrolled students are attending eighty-eight different Texas colleges and universities.⁸ Organizations that are commonly supported include high school members of Future Farmers of America or FFA.

“FFA is not what people really think. FFA is a lot more than farm kids doing farm things.”⁹

College student Callie Hargrove, who is in her third year at Texas A&M University, was among the FFA members supported by The HLSR in her high school career:

“I grew up in a very rural ranching community in West Texas, and it was the kind of county where there's more cows than people. My family has a cow-calf operation, which means we raise beef cattle. Growing up on our ranch has always been a huge part of my life.”

Given her rural upbringing and experience around animals, agriculture was second nature to Callie. This ultimately led to her involvement in Future Farmers:

“I went to a very small school...the only school in the county. At Borden County, you had a choice of two electives- agriculture or business classes. 99% of the students enrolled in ag classes are also members of our FFA chapter.”

What the heck does FFA do, besides farm?

⁸ L'Heureux, as cited in Ibid.

⁹ Callie Hargrove 2023.

“There are two types of competition events- Leadership Development Events (LDEs), and Career Development Events (CDEs), which are “judging” events such as livestock judging, meat judging, wool judging, homesite evaluation.”

So what in particular impacted you by being a part of FFA?

“I began learning how to share my passion for the agriculture industry. It taught me a lot about how to convey my passion and educate others who do not know about the importance of producing food, fuel and fiber. You also get to be a part of livestock events, in fact my younger brother was an exhibitor at HLSR this year.”

To those not surrounded by farming or agriculture, there’s this notion that those involved are still living in 1880s America. Even a club about future farmers seems comical to an outsider, even myself sometimes. But FFA is working to bridge a gap, as well as continues to foster a care for our chain of production.

“I think a lot of people against agriculture just haven’t ever really seen it firsthand. In my opinion, a lot of the arguments against agriculture come from a pure lack of information. Because of my experience in FFA, I know how to share my story, and FFA continues to teach members that, which is becoming increasingly important.”

While Leighton Barry is winning a grand cash prize, a struggling agriculture student is being given a scholarship. Beyond the prestige I felt wearing my boots, petting farm animals, and singing along to country songs, there is something far deeper occurring too. I gasped and cheered for a small blonde female FFA member when she finally tackled a calf, properly harnessed him and dragged him to the center of the stadium. Little did I know she just won \$1750 for a future in agriculture. Since the calf scramble’s inception in 1942, approximately \$19.8 million in certificates and awards has been distributed to more than 23,600 students.¹⁰

¹⁰ Caffey, Amanda. “Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo Wraps an Unforgettable 2023 Show with a Star-Studded Lineup and a New Addition to the Star Trail of Fame.” *Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo*, Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, 20 Mar. 2023,

I think the beauty and true value of the Houston rodeo lies in whatever you make of it. Tourists like myself and Gabby may just bask in the absurdity of the entire western affair, a family may be slaving all year to rear a prize winning cow, or a young bull rider is risking the chance to pay rent or live another day. Regardless of those contexts, Rodeo Houston holds a sentimental and important place for all its visitors, or at least I believe they do. My east coast best friend experienced something like no other, and I got my fill of childhood nostalgia. I intend to go back, even if just to wear my red ropers on Texas soil for one more night.

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