

A Good Ride: Arts and Traditions of the Attica Rodeo

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CASTELLANI
ART MUSEUM
OF NIAGARA UNIVERSITY

Rodeo as Artistic Display

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Regionalism in America is a geographical designation, but even more, it is a sort of mental shorthand we use to ascribe character to place. In the imagination of the Midwest, where I grew up, the state of New York is part of a bustling urban Northeast. But the state, like the region, is not such an easily characterized monolith.

When I first moved to Buffalo in the summer of 2011, I was delighted by the prevalence of Western imagery, being welcomed to the city by a herd of bronze bison grazing along the New York State Thruway. Throughout the area, country line dancing is popular, horse culture is prevalent, and rodeo is a long-standing tradition.

Much of the United States is, and has long been, captivated by a romanticized American West. Somehow, the local affinity displayed in Western New York seems more appropriate than it does in some other places. This area, after all, is another frontier, the Niagara Frontier, a once wild land dominated by dramatic landscapes.

An abiding interest in the American West has left its mark across the United States, producing a far-reaching rodeo circuit, as well as a vibrant sub-culture. As the study of folk arts reveals, even widespread traditions respond to localized tastes, histories, and populations. Rodeo may have originated in the West and spread nationally, but individual shows, like the annual rodeo held in Attica, New York,

also reflect the particular places where they occur.

The Folk Arts Program of the Castellani Art Museum celebrates, in part, the very local, exploring Western New York for what sets it apart. We are proud to host *A Good Ride*, an exhibition that honors the creativity and hard work of local people—rodeo organizers and

participants, as well as the perceptive scholars who take their talents seriously.

Folklorists, few as we are, represent a tight network of colleagues who collaborate when we can to accomplish the ambitious task of uncovering the overlooked in our midst. Folklorists Karen Canning and Claire Aubrey, working with the Arts Council for Wyoming County, share with us their fine research, and by extension, introduce us to a community of rodeo experts and connoisseurs living in a small corner of Western New York.

Like the other forms of artistic expression displayed in our museum, the art of rodeo adheres to a set of aesthetic guidelines that may not be immediately apparent to viewers. From the handmade costumes of a trick rider to the well-delivered banter of the rodeo announcer, the individuals documented in this exhibition are invested in perfecting their craft, and importantly, displaying it for the approval of an audience who will appraise its quality. Through this exhibition, we hope visitors will come to understand how

excellence is judged within the Attica rodeo.

Carrie Hertz Curator of Folk Arts



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Jason Runfola, Saddle Bronc Rider, 2005

“Sold to the boys in the white T-shirts!”

In 1957, an auctioneer shouted out this winning bid on four horses, and four teenage boys from the newly-formed Attica and Chaffee Rodeo Club loaded them up and took them home in hopes of staging their first rodeo. Growing up in the rolling hills of Wyoming County, New York, they had a working knowledge of dairy farming and livestock. A regional equine culture fed their interest in trail riding and horsemanship, as well as the popularity of the American West in the entertainment culture of the day. Spurred on with the help of adult mentors and families, the boys and their friends held the rodeo that year little knowing their show would continue and grow into a multigenerational endeavor for the next 56 years—and counting.

I first attended the Attica Rodeo in the 1970s with my grandparents on a hot August afternoon, where it evoked memories of our trip together to the western states. I didn't think about the rodeo again until much later, when my work brought me back to it in 2005 as the Attica Rodeo and Show Association was preparing for its 50th anniversary. Folklorist Claire Aubrey and I started working with the Association to document their experiences and history, conducting interviews and gathering together

photos, posters, and other ephemera from over the decades. We traveled across the state to talk to cowboys and cowgirls and attend other rodeos, and we were thrilled when the Association graciously allowed us to camp out on the Attica grounds with longtime rodeo organizers and families during subsequent years.

What we learned over the next several years wasn't only about a weekend event, but also an equine culture and community that is active throughout the year. It includes rodeo organizers, contestants, fans, local families, stock contractors, performers, announcers, clowns, and traditional craftsmen, like leatherworkers and blacksmiths. They in turn are connected to a similar national rodeo community that holds Attica in high regard for both its professionalism and hometown atmosphere. The Attica Rodeo owes its success to broad support, being a town-wide event involving sponsors and volunteers from many commercial, charitable, religious, and fraternal organizations. It is also fully sanctioned by professional rodeo associations, attracting championship competitors and quality livestock. Like many regional rodeo sponsors, the Association remains a volunteer-run, non-profit entity. It shares the benefits of maintaining a rodeo with its

Bull Rider, Not Making 8 Seconds?, 2008



surrounding community by donating money and time to community groups, as well as use of the arena grounds to various equestrian clubs.

As I learned how the rodeo network reaches far beyond Attica's boundaries and started to understand the intricate and layered meanings it holds for its members, I was also continuously reminded of how very localized our traditions can be. In talking to friends and colleagues about the rodeo, I was often met with surprise that such a thing existed

here—even from lifelong residents of our area. If you are not a bull rider or barrel racer or one of the eight thousand people who attend the rodeo each year, you might never encounter it, despite its very public presence. Like many communal traditions, validation of rodeo-related knowledge, skills, and talents do not necessarily depend on recognition from outsiders, but rather acquire meaning and worth within the rodeo community through the continuation of shared experience.

A shared experience doesn't mean a homogenous one. Rodeo is at once an evocation of a nostalgic American past and a complex staging of athletes, animals, and entertainers. An afternoon's fun is supported by hundreds of volunteer hours in food tents, ticket booths, arena maintenance, and cleanup crews. A rodeo cowboy embodies ideals of patriotism, independence and ranch life. He also drives through the night to compete in three rodeos in as many days. Female trick riders swap fabric and remake hand-me-down costumes, while bronc and bull riders spend hours customizing gloves, riggings, and ropes to achieve a precisely individualized fit. Clowns perform rehearsed and improvised routines with announcers, and then may face off with a bull to distract him from a fallen cowboy. Nearly

every participant speaks of a partnership with the horses and stock with whom they work. Each relationship is a unique blend of skills, experience, and personalities.

A barrel racer works for years to train her horse, while

a bronc rider may have just eight seconds to achieve success with his equine co-competitor.

At the 50th Attica Rodeo in 2007, Claire Aubrey and I installed a historical display using the resources we had gathered during our research. We organized demonstrations of bareback riding techniques, roping, leatherworking, and clowning. We also

hosted a storytelling session for people to share their rodeo memories. The enthusiastic response from participants and the wealth of information that we collected led to the idea of sharing the Attica Rodeo story with a wider audience. The next step seemed logical: an exhibit! Brody Wheeler, official Attica rodeo photographer since 1990 and attendee since childhood, offered the use of his extensive photo archive. Attica Rodeo members, friends, and fans pitched in, loaning equipment and memorabilia to bring the exhibit to life.

A Good Ride: Arts and Traditions of the Attica Rodeo is the result of this collaborative project between the Arts Council for Wyoming County, the Attica Rodeo and Show Association, and the extended family of the Rodeo. It represents

our efforts to take you beyond the arena and into the chutes, stalls, campers, trailers, meeting rooms and living rooms of the rodeo's many participants. Through the words, images, tools, and arts of Attica's cowboys and cowgirls, we invite you to learn about their unique talents and experiences. And perhaps, like we did, you will find some of your own story in the tradition of rodeo.

Karen Canning Traditional Arts Program Director
Arts Council for Wyoming County



2010 Attica Rodeo and Show Officers and Directors, 2010

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*Trick Rider Loretta Pemberton,
Liberty Stand, 2006*



An Overview of American Rodeo

The roots of contemporary American rodeo can be traced to the turn of the 20th century when multiple cultures, historical data, and popular legends were combining to form both the reality and the idea of the American West. The most repeated story places the beginnings of rodeo with the long cattle drives of the 1860s to 1880s, now considered to be the golden age of the American cowboy, when cow hands would hold informal contests of roping, riding, and other work-related skills. The first “cowboy contest” presented to the public is hard to pinpoint, but documentation suggests either 1842 in Santa Fe, (New) Mexico or 1869 in Deer Trail, Colorado. Towns claiming to host the longest running rodeos include Pecos, Texas (1883), Payson, Arizona (1884) and Prescott, Arizona (1888) with an event still held on July 4th—a favorite date for rodeo competitions.

Early American rodeo traditions were significantly influenced by the presence of Spanish ranchers in the New World, especially the area now considered the American southwest. Historical research describes public contests known as *charreadas* that the ranchers hosted from the time of their arrival in the 16th century. These events, incorporated within a larger fiesta, featured feats of daring with bulls, riding wild horses, racing, roping, and other equestrian games. Mexican and Anglo versions in the late 19th century certainly took inspiration from these early models and from each other. The word “rodeo” likely derives from the Spanish verb *rodear*, meaning to encircle or go around, perhaps alluding to the “round up” of cattle.

Yet another contributing factor to rodeo development was the hugely popular success of traveling Wild West Shows, like the first and most famous one started by William “Buffalo Bill” Cody in 1882. Cody’s cast of hundreds included cowboys recruited from ranches, Mexican *vaqueros*, Native Americans, sharp shooters, and live buffalo, elk, and cattle. Traveling throughout the United States, it presented the recent past of frontier life through dramatic reenactments of “Indian attacks” and stagecoach robberies, riding and shooting exhibitions, staged races,

and sideshows. These shows did much to establish a near mythical ethos and nostalgic image of the American West which persists in our national consciousness today. Folklorist Beverly Stoeltje further notes that, “they cultivated the fascination of the general public with the cowboy, contributing significantly to the definition of the cowboy as folk hero.”

By the 1920s, Wild West shows had become too expensive to sustain and western dramatizations had shifted to

radio and movies. Rodeo, however, continued to grow and maintained many of the Wild West show elements such as contests of skill and entertainment. Ranching and horsemanship abilities were joined by trick riding and roping, steer wrestling, bull riding, clowning and humor, and trained animal acts. By the 1940s, both cowboy participants and rodeo producers organized regional associations to set standards and regulations for rodeo competition and presentation, and establish a national championship

system. With this development a whole new kind of athlete emerged: the professional cowboys and cowgirls who make their living as rodeo contestants.

We can say in broad terms that between the 1940s and the 1970s rodeo transitioned from being mainly local competitions, featuring working ranch hands and entertainers, into a nationally linked web of sanctioned shows utilizing professional cowboys and cowgirls. As a result, competitors exhibited an increasing degree of skills specialization, and the types and order of events became standardized. Over the last 30 years, rodeo has reached the status of a professional sport. At the most visible, and perhaps commercial, level, rodeo now includes star athletes, international promotion, and corporate endorsements, particularly for the bull riding event. Individual rodeos, however, still occupy a range of size and scope, from locally produced annual events, like the Attica Rodeo, to nationally celebrated competitions. *A Good Ride* offers visitors a rare glimpse inside the world of community rodeo, its ongoing traditions, arts, and stories, and the people who make it all happen.

—Karen Canning



Dick Cory, Performer and Announcer, 2007

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Photography by Brody Wheeler.



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