



CALGARY: City of Animals

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ISBN 978-1-55238-968-3

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outlaw horses & the

Unnamed grey horse, possibly Greasy Sal, performing as outlaw.
Souvenir postcard, 1928. Glenbow Archives, NA-2365-10, Calgary, AB.



susan nance

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true spirit of calgary in the automobile age

As a historian of animals and of live entertainment, I am always interested in what goes on behind the scenes, and what performers choose to display to the public as part of the show. My case study is the Calgary Stampede in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and the horses employed there as bucking stock. I use this case study to ask some larger questions about what stories we choose to tell about animals and ourselves, and which stories we prefer to hide. What do those choices say about what it is to be human in the modern world? What do they tell us about how transient animals shape urban cultures?

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In my research on animals, performance, and modernity in early twentieth-century cities I am especially interested in how Calgarians and others constructed a city marketing brand—the “spirit of Calgary,” as they would have said at the time—and how they imagined it could help the city invite investment and trade. Connected to this question of what Calgarian civic branding looked like is the issue of what modernity meant for horses and people in “the West.”

Founded in 1912, the Calgary Stampede is one of Canada’s oldest and most controversial public celebrations—“Cowtown’s sacred cow”—and constitutes a brand for the city of Calgary while serving internationally as a premier event in professional rodeo.²⁵ Juxtaposing old practices of ranch-based production and new modes of sports consumption in a highly stylized way, by the 1920s already these performances represented the globalized beef industry’s contribution to the world of entertainment, which rodeo people shaped in reference to the global economy’s Western-themed entertainments.

In Calgary, and beyond, people used rodeo competitions to define their communities by their particular relationships to perceived-Western animals and the landscapes they inhabited. Although today people think of the white cowboy hat as a sign of Stampede hospitality, the dynamic image of a bucking bronc with rider was an early icon of the Calgary Stampede, and the ostensible city spirit. Westerners claimed authority over those animals and spaces through competitive riding or roping of unbroken cattle and horses. Many urban Calgarians seemed to see the Stampede as an opportunity for self-exoticization by monopolizing particular for-profit performance opportunities only Westerners could claim. Here was a case of city people appropriating rural culture to their own advantage.

I am interested not only in the rodeo animal celebrities (Steamboat, Midnight, Tornado, Red Rock, or Bodacious) but the common rodeo animals whose experiences were more typical. So, I’ve gone in search of a long-forgotten grey mare whom people called Greasy Sal.

Her life was reflective of those of the hundreds of other horses who played a particular kind of “Western” horse in rodeo shows, namely the bronc outlaw. This equine character was produced at the intersection of wild horse behaviour, local business cultures, and the Western genre and seems to have appealed specifically to rodeo people and audiences living on the cusp of the post-equine era in North America (1910–1930), in which most people no longer employed horses for labour. That is, Greasy Sal as bronc outlaw

was a post-equine horse employed primarily for nostalgic entertainment purposes—just (and this is important, I think) as people were transitioning to the gasoline engine.

Early rodeos reflected the pragmatic (paradoxical?) agricultural values of their participants—wherein horses were at times beloved individuals, at times a perishable commodity, and the environment both helper and enemy of man—blended with the marketing goals of the local rodeo committee, newspapers, tourist magazines, the railways, hotel owners, and other parties looking to boost the local economy. This diverse group was loosely united around the goal of transforming decidedly unglamorous animal management work (like calf roping and horse breaking) and drunken ranch pastimes called “cowboy sports” (like bull riding) into news and entertainment that would somehow convey a personality for the city.

Looking back across a century, the real spirit of Calgary can still be difficult to pin down, as though to Calgarians the concept was so obvious no one needed to define it. Various amiable city editorials and histories have offered, for instance, “confidence [and] community spirit” (1923) or “brashness, optimism, and resilience” (1994) as definitions.²⁶ Why did prominent Calgarians imagine a rodeo competition loosely based on rural ranch life would effectively communicate this self-mythologizing concept?

Calgarians who endorsed the rodeo (and there was initially considerable debate about why a Wild West-style competition was appropriate for the city) would labour diligently to define themselves comprehensibly as Westerners and brand themselves with an attitude toward life that relished challenging labour, persevered in contexts in which others failed, and valued personal independence and self-sufficiency. The Stampede’s competitive events would perform these usually unspoken values, only vaguely encapsulated as the “cowboy spirit.” Rodeo events challenged humans against cattle and horses, whom viewers were encouraged to interpret as “Western” because they resisted human control. And, somehow, the collective fiction portrayed by competitive performances of human versus quasi-feral / “half-wild” animals came to symbolize the city’s modern business brand, perhaps because they performed a metaphorical moment symbolizing infinite possibility.

Consider also the broader anthrozoological context. Across the continent, an urbanizing public was increasingly alienated from holistic experiences of the livestock upon which they relied materially. Urbanites had the luxury of growing squeamish and sentimental about animals while still demanding steak on the plate as a key indicator of middle-class



LET 'ER
BUCK

SEPT. 2-7 1912
STAMPEDE

ALGARY

Let 'Er Buck , The dynamic image of bucking bronc with rider was always an icon of the Stampede.
Calgary Stampede Pennant, 1912. Glenbow Archives, C-7753, Calgary, AB.

status. Accordingly, rodeo people found themselves in a difficult position. They sought to define their region with representations of the labour that produced beef and gentle dude ranch horses before an audience of visitors unused to and potentially shocked by such things. At the same time, the urban Calgarians and rural Albertans who brought the event to life were themselves also consumers who experienced the contradiction of sentimentality and consumption. There were no dyads here but a number of overlapping moral economies as rodeo people worked out how to talk about horses and cattle to themselves and outsiders.

Early audiences also intervened, and that first decade, ticket sales, arena talk, and press reviews made it clear that spectators wanted to see rodeo sports that were difficult and violent, but not deadly. The balance of rodeo events (if we exclude team roping, pageants, parades, and contract acts) demonstrated “raw challenge and excitement,”²⁷ and dramatic, explosive action, not finesse. Wild horses drawn from rangelands in Alberta, Montana, and Wyoming bore the burden of living up to the ideals of bronc-ness that rodeo committees had invented. Regarding competitors from Montana who might invest in a trip to Stampede, for instance, Guy Weadick promised the secretary of the Montana State Fair in Helena: “For the bucking contest here, . . . I would say to you, that we are going to have [the] buckinest bucking horses that ever bucked a buck.”²⁸ Talk in the business often fetishized the “buck” as evidence of horses who, rodeo people argued, enjoyed struggling against a rider, who were mean cusses and born fighters, “real bad ones,” as the lore held.²⁹

From the beginning, the buckner—the “outlaw” bronc—dominated the show and its iconography, effectively demonstrating to viewers and participants how a “Western” animal behaved and reflected upon the character of Western people. Bronc riding, with its bounding, kicking horses, “wrecks,” and cowboy injuries, epitomized early rodeo as (what today we would call) an adrenalin sport. The practice also fostered breathless press and magazine publicity.

Hence, Greasy Sal, a grey mare from rural Alberta. She was a work-a-day Stampede bronc whose barely recorded life history exposes the backstage reality that facilitated the front region performances of outlaw buckner. The Stampede employed her in the Canadian saddle bronc competition for several years in the late 1920s, then briefly as a bareback riding horse until she disappeared from the historical record around 1931. Greasy Sal was among the twenty or so broncs owned for a time by the Calgary Industrial Exhibition Company. Out at the Stampede Ranch, as it would become known, staff

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managed a cache of horses, sometimes lending them out to other rodeos. They also rented horses from private individuals, sometimes a competitor who might have a couple of “bad ones” he brought to Stampede to defer costs, and a number of whom made a serious business of finding proven buckers and contracting them out. Although the cowboy persona may have served as the human face of the rodeo sports, the stock contractor was already an equally important producer behind “the show.” Local ranchers and rural people supplied the bulk of the Stampede’s horses, and plenty wrote letters to Guy Weadick offering and advocating for their stock to supplement income earned competing or working around the grounds for \$10 per day.

Greasy Sal had thusly been purchased in 1926 from a contractor named Jim McNab of Macleod (now Fort Macleod) Alberta, through the Stampede’s stockman, Clem Gardiner.³⁰ Typically, Greasy Sal performed for two or three of the seven days of the show along with many dozens of others, all indicated with a brand and a show name in the Stampede’s horse lists. She and the other rough stock horses were valued from \$100 to \$200 each.³¹ In 1927 Greasy Sal was one of 195 broncs employed at the Stampede,³² and one of the 267 bucked in 1929.³³ These totals give an indication how resource intensive Stampede managers found it to produce the kind of bucking performances riders and audiences demanded; the process demanded a sort of mass production of bucking.

In those days, rodeos also began limiting rough stock rides to a maximum of eight seconds, with chutes and grandstands arranged to provide spectators with the best view of the action. Judges awarded animal and rider points for the quality of the performance determined by particular criteria. This innovation saved equine energy while reducing the possibility of an animal losing the will to buck by inadvertently being broken while at the rodeo. As such, these equine performers became modern post-equine horses. One did not do more than get them halter-broken. One did not plow a field with or ride to church on such horses, nor drive such horses on hoof to the show. One hauled them in a pickup truck trailer or in a rail car. All their labour and value was focused on their behaviour in the arena.

To the horses scouted and reserved for rodeo use, the process of bucking was one in which they successfully freed themselves of a rider every time and learned just how to do so as quickly as possible. The modern bucking process essentially displayed the effects of operant conditioning on a horse, which rodeo people colloquially described as an innate “love” of bucking off a rider. In fact, the raw ingredients for the outlaw bronc were simply a horse who tended toward fighting and kicking (rather than running), un-

accustomed to riders, flanked in a chute, and rewarded for his or her bucking behaviour after eight seconds. Stampede officials and chute managers instituted these and other innovations to appease local critics who argued that the Stampede should present an ideal of Western life free of unacceptable animal suffering or egregious displays of obvious cruelty. So, after 1919, the Stampede excluded various traditional events that led reticent or inactive animals to bleed, pass out, break legs, or lose body parts (horns) before an audience (although all of these things happened occasionally anyway).³⁴

Living horses like Greasy Sal unknowingly played the outlaw bronc in a broader graphic and storytelling context in which “Western” stories featured shootouts, chases, and other dramatic action. The horses who could produce the fetishized “buck” (many failed to perform consistently and were weeded out of the bucking strings supplied to the Stampede) contributed to the rodeo-wide convention for presentation of horses as outlaw buckers in flight—not grazing on a remote hillside, or waiting in a paddock behind the arena, or being petted by a pretty girl dressed in fancy Western attire, but rather at their most explosively violent.

Why so? Rodeo committees had discovered early on that this icon and the corresponding horse behaviour sold tickets. The iconography of the outlaw bronc and cowboy offered a recognizable truth about Western horses and people, and so it was reproduced. In time, the bronc became the most dependable, consumer-friendly icon of the accepted/proposed truths about Calgary as a Western city, uniquely tied to nature yet ready for business. And Calgarians employed this horsey character to claim authority over this unexpected symbol of Western modernity to the extent that the horse who did not jump and buck in expected ways appeared to rodeo judges, riders, and audiences as substandard, and deserving of a low score or generating a re-ride for the cowboy or cowgirl in question.

Horse naming practices enhanced this tradition and added entertainment value to broncs by emphasizing the “buck,” the cowboy’s experience of the ride, and the acrobatics of preferred horses: Elevator, Jim Stink, Corkskrew, Zig Zag, Earthquake, Cyclone, Explosion, Flying Devil, Night Mare, Funeral Wagon, Calamity Ann.³⁵ Greasy Sal herself took a name that indicated riders would have a difficult time staying on her back. Other names integrated rodeo with broader continental cultural economies by endorsing audience knowledge of contemporary popular culture and trends, cinema, celebrities, or Wild West clichés: Alberta Kid, Sox (baseball), The Sheik (in 1927 in reference to the famous Valentino films), King Tut (whose relics had recently been discovered in Egypt),



CALGARY

ALBERTA
CANADA

EXHIBITION STAMPEDE



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Lindbergh (1927), and Dirty Dora (to lampoon the “Dumb Dora” comic strip). Horses marketed as such to rodeo audiences were consumer-oriented creatures, defined solely by their few minutes in the chute, and the ten or twenty seconds in the arena.

This was front stage information.

Indeed, audiences knew Greasy Sal only when she performed at Stampede each year between 1927 and 1930, as the arena announcer called out her name to the crowds each time she was ridden. Stampede records from 1927 also show that she was lent, leased, or sent to another (unnamed) rodeo in the care of Clem Gardiner, at which time Gardiner marked her on the back of his horse delivery list as out of the running there: “X in foal.”³⁶

This was decidedly backstage information.

In 1930, Greasy Sal foaled again at the Stampede Ranch. What happened to the first of these young horses is not apparent in Stampede records. But of the 1930 birth, in late May that year Dick Cosgrove reported to Guy Weadick: “Gray Mare branded D2 I think she is called Grizley Sal [*sic*] she had a colt two weeks ago and I killed it.”³⁷ Two other proven buckers, Baby Doll and Red Head, were also about to give birth but nonetheless bucked again at Stampede later that year, with no foals in tow bawling for their mothers and distracting these mares from the arena performance. In fact, Cosgrove had promised Weadick that the three would “be dry and in shape in time for the show.”³⁸

From a rodeo point of view, Greasy Sal and other mares were modern performers with a message to deliver, more valuable bucking than caring for a baby. Greasy Sal as mare (rather than outlaw bronc as she was presented to the public) would have grieved the loss of her foal, spent a period of days or weeks calling and pacing the pasture looking for him or her. That aspect of her existence is an element we must consider in order to have a more holistic understanding of her as a historical being with concerns beyond the bucking chute. That aspect of her life exposes the degree to which Westerners constructed themselves by shaping very particular public understandings of animals. Did Dick Cosgrove think about how his act of dispatching a newborn horse, which many consumers would have taken as symbolic of innocence, beauty, and optimism for the future, defied the claims Stampede participants made to have unique insight into and the authority over the West?

previous image
Stampede iconography featured the fetishized bronc “buck.” Detail from 1930 Calgary Stampede daily program sheet.
Weadick Fonds, Glenbow Archives, Calgary, AB.

By 1930, Greasy Sal was nearing the end of her tenure at Stampede. She was noted on one horse list in a group marked “These horses not very good,” soon to be weeded out of the bucking string.³⁹ Other horses—Alberta Kid, Sliptivity, Santa Claus, Honorable Patches, Tennessee, Big Smoke, Dirty Dora—seemed to still be bucking from Greasy Sal’s original 1926 cohort (while the rest were all of more recent vintage).⁴⁰ It appears that for most horses the average number of years at Stampede was perhaps three to five, which was about the average length of time cart horses spent hauling in cities when they were employed by the millions in the equine era.⁴¹ In some ways, the Stampede’s outlaw broncs were not so different from their turn-of-the-century urban workhorse kin, except that they were transients who passed through the city leaving only their images and hoof prints behind.

The Stampede’s meaning was infused with an ideology that rejected public talk of animal suffering in order to support the myth that broncs like Greasy Sal (or her foal?) were certainly not disposable but in fact enthusiastic participants in the adventure that was the interwar West.

Many rodeo people probably just took it for granted that to talk about events such as the killing of Greasy Sal’s foal was inappropriate. In modern Calgary, many people might have found themselves in a “confused state of mind” as they struggled to reconcile protective desires toward animals with humankind’s accelerating and clearly self-enriching manipulation and consumption of them. Modern animals like the outlaw bronc who hankers for a fight and “just loves to buck” were creatures Calgarians and their visitors—many of them increasingly alienated from holistic knowledge of work animals—employed to paper over this paradox while (somehow!) also branding the city with a can-do spirit that said: “We’re open for business!”⁴²

Greasy Sal’s job was to represent the hope that cowboys and Westerners had a unique hardiness and optimism, and could balance the contradictions inherent in modern life by being at once of nature and not of nature. People came to perceive bucking horses as representative of an authentically traditional “Western” cowboy spirit of individualism and perseverance (by representing the man’s struggle against the forces of nature), although they were in fact signs of the ways industrialization and mass consumerism were changing Alberta forever.