

Introduction

The idea for this book came as a result of the inaugural course on the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede (Calgary Stampede as of spring 2007) offered by the Faculty of Communication and Culture at the University of Calgary in the summer of 2004. This innovative course was based on guest lectures, many of which were delivered by members of the above faculty. At a get-together following the course there was general agreement among participants that the various lectures might serve a wider purpose if they were transformed into articles and made available to a larger audience. All of the contributors to this book either lectured or were the subjects of reference in the three Stampede courses offered in the summers of 2004, 2005, and 2006.

The course itself grew out of a growing awareness that the Stampede has evolved into a cultural phenomenon. Similar events are held annually throughout North America. Midways, rodeos, parades, performances, and agricultural and other exhibits are all part of an annual fairground tradition in countless cities and towns, yet none evokes reactions as does the Calgary Stampede. Growing up as a boy in Sydney, Australia, I visited the Royal Easter Show every year and was drawn in wonderment to scenes and events very similar to those I was to encounter later in another country and another city. Yet when I donned western garb to attend my first Stampede in 1964, feeling strange and out of place, I had already been imbued with the notion that I was now part of something special, a festive tradition unique to Calgary. In a way, my impression was valid. Unlike the Royal Easter Show, the Stampede was not simply attended; it was experienced. I learned my first and probably most important lesson about the Stampede that day: it had more to do with the act of participation than with offered opportunities. Paradoxically, it has been this capacity to embody a significance that transcends the sum of its various components that explains in part why the Stampede is held in such high and low regard.

The Calgary Stampede can claim many legitimacies. It hosts the premier event in a popular professional sport. In addition to being of significant economic worth to the city, the Stampede is based on a valid historic tradition that dates to the late nineteenth century and provides in many ways an interpretive window into the historical development of the prairie and foothills West. The Stampede has supported agriculture and the livestock industry for almost a century while promoting sports and western art and showcasing other events of cultural and social importance. Its capacity to solicit and organize phenomenal volunteer support is the envy of organizations worldwide.

And like it or not, the Calgary Stampede has become a world-class festival that spills out into the streets and carries its own messages within a spectrum of ritual, performance, celebration, and spectacle.

Yet as successful as the Stampede has been in attracting visitors and perpetuating its own popularity, it has also garnered considerable antipathy. Some criticize the Stampede for adhering to middle-class white Anglo-Saxon male values. Others view the Stampede as a money-making machine run by elites that exploits heritage in the interests of profit. A growing number protest the exploitation of animals. Some see the Stampede as little more than a giant hoax whereby illusions are cultivated, dressed up, packaged, and sold without shame. Still others wince at the folly of trying to embed a hokey, hackneyed event into the psyche and image of a dynamic city seeking global status.

Crucial in these allegiances and antipathies is the place of myth in the collective consciousness. Those who see the Stampede as a event during which fun and nostalgia mix freely do not recognize or care about myth. Similarly, those who appreciate myth, who see it as an agent for collective identification, a focus for the localization of universal values, or an entry point for personal interpretations, also have no difficulty accepting and participating in the Stampede cornucopia. Oppositely, it is the regenerating and exploitative capacity of this myth that draws the intense and largely recent criticism of the Stampede. Many cringe at its distortion of history, whereby fantasy is superimposed on fact with layers of glitz, bombast, and commercial hype. These critics see the Stampede as a giant hoax and an anachronism in an urban environment.

The following articles do not attempt to idealize or destroy this myth, nor is their intention to laud or denigrate the Stampede, although they do contain elements of all the above. With some overlapping, unavoidable in a collection of this type, the articles try to provide some perspectives of the enigma that is the Calgary Stampede. Collectively they attempt to answer several questions: What is the reality behind its origins and various components? What messages does the Stampede try to deliver? How did the Stampede go about cultivating its traditions? Where does the City of Calgary fit in? What can the Stampede tell us about First Nations and their treatment? Is the Stampede about more than rodeo, the midway, and artificiality? How can the rodeo and chuckwagon races be explained to urban and international audiences? Who is the cowboy? What are the Stampede organizers' visions for the future? The articles are wide-ranging in length, subject, tone, approach, and interpretation. Some focus on the Stampede and discuss it in a specific context. Others use the Stampede to explore pertinent themes. Together they furnish a heightened understanding and provide a useful forum for further discourse.

The opening article by Max Foran places the Stampede in its historical context and in effect sets the stage for the more focused articles to follow. He explains the Stampede's unusual composition and discusses its multiple origins. Foran emphasizes the Stampede's close relationship with agriculture and argues that it has been pivotal in ensuring Calgary's continuing importance as a livestock centre. He also feels that in order to appreciate the extent of the Stampede's contribution to Calgary, it is necessary to separate the ten-day July event from the larger year-round operations of its parent body.

Don Wetherell contends that the Stampede cultivated an invented tradition from the outset. He identifies the formative forces as the role of sport in ennobling manly characteristics, the legitimization of rodeo as a public spectator activity, and the ability of the inaugural Stampedes to inspire similar events elsewhere in the province. After 1923 the annual Exhibitions and Stampedes melded the values of the farmer and rancher with those of the rodeo performer to create both the iconic cowboy and the idealized sanitized virtues for which he stood. Wetherell locates this invented tradition within a risk-taking continuum. He also points out the exclusive place of risk-takers in the invented tradition paradigm. Minorities and the marginalized simply do not qualify.

The historic involvement of First Nations and the Stampede is documented by Hugh A. Dempsey, noted authority on the history of Plains Indians. Dempsey discusses the early involvement of First Nations people in Calgary fairs and traces their association with the Stampede to modern times. He deals extensively with the ongoing dispute with the Indian Affairs Department over the right of First Nations to participate in the Stampede, as well as conflicts between First Nations and Stampede administrators. However, while acknowledging the latter, Dempsey describes a mainly positive relationship and suggests that in many ways the Stampede acted to preserve First Nations traditions and artifacts.

Lorry Felske focuses on the parade that heralds the beginning of every Stampede. He discusses the importance of parades as statements of both diversity and homogeneity and examines the messages they embody. Most significantly, Felske argues that the first Stampede parade of 1912 did not begin a tradition, but rather was a continuing manifestation of a strong parading history in the city. In asserting that the inaugural Stampede parade simply built on existing practices, Felske locates an important dimension of the Calgary Stampede not in the tradition of the Wild West Shows and other vaudeville-type entertainment from which it grew, but in the daily life experiences and street culture of a small western Canadian urban community.

Noting the marginalized but important function of the midway, Fiona Angus sets the Stampede midway in historical and social context. She contends that despite its sanitization over the years, the midway's ambience has complemented the myth of the Stampede. Angus provides extensive details, both in the text and in endnotes, about the two major companies that have held the midway contracts for most of the Stampede's existence, describing the police investigation that led to the disappearance of Royal American Shows from Canada and the operations of its successor, Conklin Shows. Though she calls attention to the inherently exploitive nature of the relationship between the midway and its workforce, Angus also sees the midway as adaptable and flexible and credits Conklin with the ability to adjust to changing social mores, demands, and technologies.

In his article on the relationship between the City of Calgary and the Stampede, Max Foran dismisses the contention that the two were collusive. Instead, he argues that they were one and the same, which, he contends, explains their close co-operation. In a discussion of the two expansion issues, he also qualifies the popular perception that the city has consistently been a pawn of elitist Stampede interests. In an interesting speculation, Foran poses reasons why the two purposely keep their distance from each other: the Stampede because it does not want to be perceived as being an agent of the city, the city because it would prefer to see the Stampede take the brunt of public criticism over issues that involve them both.

Tamara Palmer Seiler examines the elusive identity of the Canadian cowboy. She locates him on a grid of influences characterized by values inherent in Canada's east-west nation-building processes, as opposed to those implicit in a continental north-south dynamic dominated by the United States. The Canadian cowboy necessarily emerges as a contradictory figure amenable to use and manipulation. In the Stampede he is at once an ideal marketing tool, a compatible ideological icon, and a personal embodiment of maverick Calgary and Alberta, while at the same time symbolizing that tantalizing "other" dimension that Canadians employ to distance themselves from Americans.

As its title suggests, Glen Mikkelsen's article takes the reader behind the chutes into the world of rodeo. He discusses the events and their rules and evokes the mystique of a sport that for all its excitement and danger is little understood by most spectators at the Calgary Stampede. Mikkelsen also probes rodeo at deeper levels. Elements of festival are captured in his discussion of rodeo clowns and the public tolerance of their socially unacceptable verbal exchanges. Mikkelsen's discussion of animal abuse issues underscores his major argument on the challenges facing rodeo. He speculates on how a

sport viewed as anachronistic by many, whose rules are difficult to follow and whose human performers have little presence outside the arena, can continue to command its premier position at the Calgary Stampede.

Aritha van Herk explores the world of chuckwagon racing, an event pioneered by and most identifiable with the Calgary Stampede. She describes the event's origins, rules, development, and controversial image. She views chuckwagon racing as an activity firmly tied to a sense of place, with a close-knit community of participants and a unique iconic ethos. She also sees its development as local and accidental and "almost shyly naive." To van Herk, chuckwagon racing is a metaphor for hope, one that anticipates the peace that follows danger. It also touches the essence of a past era, possibly more than anything else the Stampede has to offer.

In his discussion of public art and monuments in Calgary, Frits Pannekoek argues that the best artistic statements about the Stampede are confined to the Stampede grounds, the rural hinterland, and the airport. Elsewhere, Stampede images are most visible in gaudy commercial signage. Pannekoek concludes that to Calgary's guardians of culture, the Stampede embodies a specific myth contrived for commercial purposes. While public art elsewhere in the city embodies historical and socio-cultural themes, emerging issues, and more refined myths, it has little to do with the Stampede and its ram-bunctious version of the city's "official" past.

Brian Rusted explores the controversial topic of western art and its marginalization by contemporary art institutions. He sees its robust survival as fitting evidence of a legitimacy that belongs outside more formal prescriptions. He discusses the Stampede's contribution to western art through several historic phases and manifestations, including the highly popular Stampede Western Art Show. Yet the results have not been entirely positive. Rusted points out that the Stampede's current efforts to promote itself through spectator-oriented visual representations have resulted in a popularized view of the West and a virtual abandonment of its relationship to art and visual culture.

In their "reading" of selected Stampede posters, Robert M. Seiler and Tamara Palmer Seiler show how visual texts can be sites of meaning. They see the Stampede posters as emphasizing both nostalgia for the past and a belief in progress and technology. The cowboy is incorporated into both these contradictory themes and thus emerges as an ambiguous figure. Within this context the authors suggest that the Stampede posters are much more open texts than might be imagined, and that the various images of the cowboy are central to the complex struggle over the meaning of western Canadian experience.

The closing article deals with Stampede as seen through its own eyes. Stampede Chief Executive Officer Vern Kimball offers some of his thoughts on where the Stampede has been and where it is going. Kimball acknowledges the past in a tribute to Guy Weadick. He also outlines the Stampede's plans for the future within parameters defined by Calgary's changing demographic and the challenges of the twenty-first century. Kimball links the Stampede's future to its success in developing a permanent physical presence, universally amenable and supportive of a vibrant urban-built form. More significantly, Kimball sees the Stampede as an ideal vehicle through which respect for a locally-grounded tradition can be integrated with the active promotion of the values it embodies. Specifically, these include western hospitality, commitment to community, pride of place, and integrity.

The Calgary Stampede is anything but bland. Some see it as a "ten-day party," a Disneyesque sham, and a commercial rip-off. Others hail it as "the greatest outdoor show on earth," a destination event, and a world-class festival rivalling Mardi Gras, Carnivale, or Oktoberfest. Could it be that all perspectives contain valid elements? It is its capacity to conjure up a wide spectrum of emotions; to symbolize the good, the bad, and the crass; to be anything one wants it to be that in part explains the Stampede's durability and, paradoxically, its popular appeal and denigration. The editor and authors hope this volume will contribute to further discourse about the nature of Calgary's controversial icon.