

CHAPTER 2

Making Tradition: The Calgary Stampede, 1912–1939

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The Big Four seen in this group of ranching elite: (far left) Archie McLean, A. E. Cross; (centre) the Prince of Wales (wearing jodhpurs) with George Lane and Pat Burns beside him.

Between 1912 and 1939 the Calgary Stampede increasingly influenced how Calgarians constructed their identity, and by the eve of Second World War the Stampede had become a permanent feature of Calgary life. Although the Stampede expanded and evolved after Second World War as part of the general reshaping of North American life in the wake of the war and Alberta's transformation by the oil boom, it had by the late 1930s already assumed many essential characteristics that have endured until the present.

The Stampedes of 1912 and 1919 were organized in Calgary as one-time events that served local commemorative and social needs. In contrast, the rodeo that was an entertainment feature of the Calgary Exhibition in 1923 and subsequent years created a different historical trajectory. While the 1912 and 1919 Stampedes provided historical legitimacy for those after 1923, the later Stampedes were also framed by their general cultural, economic, and historical context and by changing patterns in communications, transportation, mass entertainment, and sports. These Stampedes were also shaped by the economic benefits they offered Calgary, especially from an emerging tourism industry. Within this context, the annual Stampede gained popular acceptance as an expression of authentic local traditions and values. Whatever the merit of this view, the intersecting forces that gave the Stampede legitimacy in Calgary and Alberta meant that rodeo and a particular take on western history came to be accepted as a part of the city's self-definition.

The Calgary Stampede is, in historian Eric Hobsbawm's terms, an example of an invented tradition. The concept of invented tradition arose from Hobsbawm's inquiry into the ways that European countries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had responded to the rapid changes demanded by the Industrial Revolution and the emergence of new states. When Hobsbawm looked at these societies experiencing extraordinary change, he realized that many of the events identified as ancient traditions, festivals, and rituals were, in fact, very recent.¹

Invented traditions – activities that are actually recent but are accepted by the public as having a particularly long and resonant history and as representing something essential about a nation's character, values, and identity – arose from a widespread effort to justify the nation state, royal dynasties, and national boundaries by linking them, often tenuously and sometimes even falsely, with the past. These invented traditions often emerged fairly quickly and were accepted (or sometimes rejected) equally quickly by the population at large. Hobsbawm observed that invented traditions could be counted on to occur regularly because repetition implied continuity with the past.

Even so, invented traditions could not logically serve as the basis for the customs of everyday life because the social and economic links with the past that they supposedly represented had been irreparably severed by social, technological, and economic change. Nonetheless, these traditions were accepted as genuine expressions of how people viewed themselves and their place in the world. The invention of a tradition was not random. While the precise reasons why one tradition found public acceptance and another did not is not always clear, it is evident that traditions gained social sanction within certain parameters. Believability, for example, could only be secured by appealing to widely accepted interpretations – accurate or not – of history. Also, an event that challenged accepted social mores and attitudes or local political and social power was unlikely to be adopted.

To understand how invented traditions arise, it is important to attempt to isolate the stages through which an event evolves into a tradition. The Calgary Stampede moved through at least three stages towards being accepted as a legitimate and largely unquestioned part of Calgary's history and life. The process of entrenchment of this invented tradition can be further judged by the way it was imitated and reproduced elsewhere in the province.

The first stage in the invention of the tradition of the Calgary Stampede was a preparatory period from the late 1880s until 1912. During these two decades, crucial developments took place as rodeo emerged as a popular activity that was relevant, in part at least, to local conditions. Building on several decades of cowboy sports in southern Alberta, prototypes of the Calgary Stampede were enacted in 1912 and 1919, which marked a second stage in the evolution of an ideology that sustained the Stampede in Calgary and shaped its future development. The 1912 Stampede was very quickly replicated in other parts of the province, showing that its appeal was not merely a product of local idiosyncrasies. As well, while the 1912 and 1919 Stampedes promoted the social legitimacy of rodeo, they included elements that required amendment to achieve full social acceptability. The last stage in the Stampede's invention as a local tradition began in 1923, when it was first held in conjunction with the Calgary Exhibition as a formalized event that would be repeated without fail in subsequent years.

The Calgary Stampede was entrenched in Calgary's civic life by the late 1920s, and thus emerged relatively quickly as an invented tradition. Like the 1912 and 1919 Stampedes, those after 1923 offered a vision of ranching life and methods of production that had in fact existed for only a limited time in the province's history and now had little connection with contemporary social and economic systems, even in rural areas. Nevertheless, its believability and

its public acceptance were sanctioned by a history of cowboy sports in southern Alberta, by the ongoing involvement of the Calgary elite in sponsoring the event, by its promise of economic benefit, by its appeal to a history that people wanted to have even if they personally did not, and by the entertainment that it offered the public, who faithfully crowded onto the Stampede grounds each year.

Making Rodeo Popular and Respectable

The development of ranching in southern Alberta began tentatively in the 1870s but grew significantly after the arrival of the railway in 1883. The Calgary Stampedes of 1923 and subsequent years were built on about forty years of cowboy sporting events in southern Alberta. As Canadian rodeo historian Claire Eamer notes, these events were the “simple contests among working men who had few other amusements.” These were not rodeos – formal events with well-understood rules and competitive standards – but were informal and essentially disorganized.² Nevertheless, they spread quickly from the ranches and into the broader culture to create a public taste for cowboy sports that would ultimately take the form of rodeos. Local ranchers, for example, were heavily involved in the horse races held in conjunction with the Fort Macleod fair in 1886, and in addition to participating in the conventional races, they put on what was called a “cowboy race” between the first and second heats of the meet. This mile and a half race drew seven or eight contestants, and “the regulations required that this race be ridden in full cowboy costume.” It was designed only as entertainment to break the tension of the real heats – the ones on which money was seriously wagered – and it was clearly secondary to the conventional races.³

This cowboy event was, however, significant in that it integrated local custom and history into the traditional Anglo-Canadian race meet and agricultural fair. The same pattern was seen at the week-long Calgary exhibition of 1894. As the *Edmonton Bulletin* reported, “the best drawing cards of the whole exhibition” were the bucking and roping contests. These events were still marginal to the more conventional aspects of the fair and each drew only six or seven contestants and lasted about one hour. The contestants divided naturally into two opposing groups, one from the north (Calgary and High River) and the other from the more southern areas around Fort Macleod. The lavish \$100 prize for the roping contest indicates that a network of local fans was emerging. John Ware of High River was the star of the roping contests and drew “an enthusiastic crowd,” many of whom had been present the year

before when he broke “the best previous record” at the fair. Fans had by now begun to bet extensively on both the roping and bucking horse events; one of them wagered an extraordinary \$300 on the northern group in the bucking contest. The betting, the large prizes, and the fact that some people remembered and kept track of local records of accomplishment were all signs that cowboy competitions were becoming locally entrenched as sporting events.⁴

The growing public appeal of cowboy events was further revealed by the fact that they were showing up at fairs, horse races, and sports days, and even as stand-alone events. Rodeos, which consisted only of cowboy contests, were not long in appearing. Raymond, Alberta, for example, claims that a “stampede” held on its main street in 1901 or 1902 was the first formal rodeo in Canada.⁵ While such events drew upon regional ranching traditions, the popularity of cowboy sports was stimulated in a major way by other elements as well, especially commercial Wild West shows. The most famous of these were mounted by Buffalo Bill Cody beginning in 1882. When Cody gave up the business at the turn of the century, his imitators had made Wild West shows generic events, with troupes of actors travelling the continent putting on performances. Popular shows in Alberta included the Miller Brothers Wild West Show that brought riding and roping acts and dramatizations of the “Old West” to Calgary in 1908 and the Oklahoma Wild West Show that visited Red Deer in 1913. Travelling vaudeville shows also often included fancy roping, horse tricks, or other “cowboy” features.⁶ Such shows doubtless stimulated popular interest in rodeo and helped legitimize local contests as fashionable and attractive mass entertainment.

Even so, the occasional lapse into vulgarity at these events confirmed a view that they were only marginally respectable. Respectability was a vague but powerful concept that shaped sporting life and reflected a complex mix of gendered and class attitudes about character, physical hardiness, social responsibility, and self-control.⁷ When animals were involved in sport, the picture was further complicated by notions about the proper relationship between people and animals. An “alleged ‘bucking contest’ in the [town] square” in Fort Macleod in 1911, for example, prompted the local newspaper to argue that “when unwilling beasts have to be goaded and frightened into action, and are ridden about with blood from the spurs dripping from their flanks, the whole outfit responsible for the ‘show’ should be hauled up for cruelty to animals.” The “days of the ‘Wild West’ are past,” said the editor, “and the ‘bucking contest’ is a relic of barbarism.”⁸ Much the same reaction arose relative to the “cowboy sports,” probably put on by travelling showmen, in Victoria Park (the site of the annual Calgary agricultural exhibition)

in 1905. About a thousand spectators showed up, a significant number for a city with a population of around ten thousand, but the occasion was not without controversy and elicited a demand that cowboy sports conform to the etiquette and definitions of respectability acceptable to the community's leaders. An event in which "a huge cowboy grabs a steer by the nose with his teeth and throws the animal to the ground" drew particular outrage from the pulpit and the *Calgary Herald*. Indeed, the *Herald* reported that this spectacle had been seen previously and had aroused widespread feelings of "disgust." This negative reaction, noted the *Herald*, was "to the credit of the Calgary public," for "clean sports are liberally patronized in Calgary" and the city had no room for offensive displays. "Local colour can be introduced into these cowboy exhibitions without this sort of thing," warned the *Herald*, and "when a man is permitted to make an exhibition of this character in the presence of women and children, the finer sensibilities are outraged."⁹ Such devotion to "clean sports" clearly trumped the value of "local colour," which seems to have been acceptable as a memento of place and historical moment, but not as a basis for civic life. Indeed, the episode demonstrated local determination to discard the uncouthness of the frontier, to prove that Calgary was a respectable town. It may have been new, but it had standards of social taste and civic life as high as those of more developed parts of Canada.

Interwoven into such concerns was a commonly expressed fear that recreational events and leisure time could be socially dangerous and must be managed in order to uphold and reinforce social conventions. In Canada, as in Britain and the United States, it was commonly argued that inappropriate use of leisure time would lead to social decay and would erode the central place of work in social life. This view held that recreation should be a re-creation of the individual for work. Since fun and play were necessary for a full life and for productive labour, "good" recreation could be defined as that which stimulated the mind and body and improved character, while "bad" recreation diverted people from work and led to dissipation or frivolousness.¹⁰

In hierarchies that ranked recreational activities by their social worth and utility, sport almost always met with approval. Sport built character, improved health through physical activity, and taught important lessons about the importance of good manners and how to be a graceful winner and a gracious loser. Team sports built character by teaching camaraderie, group loyalty, and obedience, while individual sports tested character and resourcefulness in combination with physical and mental skill. These virtues were also said to contribute to nation building and often evoked "Britishness," since Britain's success as an imperial power with a stable social order

was attributed in part to its sporting traditions. A complementary notion held that amateur sports – sports played without monetary reward – were superior to those sullied by money. Although professional stars performed on the rodeo circuit, rodeo retained the aura of an amateur sport because many participants were local men and women who entered the contest for the glory of it. While participation was most important, spectatorship was also socially useful because those watching were given concrete evidence about how both winners and losers conducted themselves and how people could interact in a competitive environment.¹¹

As a sport, however, rodeo was complicated because of its use of animals. Blood sports had been outlawed in Canada in 1870, but concerns about other forms of cruelty to animals had emerged by the late nineteenth century.¹² While these concerns influenced the way rodeo was practised, rodeo also tested horsemanship and livestock handling. In measuring and enhancing skills in these respects, it embodied many popular attitudes towards domestic animals – about controlling them, about being challenged by them, about dominating them, and about using them in the service of humans.

The Stampedes of 1912 and 1919

By 1912 Calgary was in the midst of a massive building boom, land prices were high, and economic forecasts were optimistic. It seemed that rodeo was well on the way to being purged of cruelty and vulgarity and becoming a socially legitimate and useful sport that could be popularized as part of the city's historical tradition. Over two decades of cowboy sports in southern Alberta and the development of a committed spectator audience further paved the way for the first Stampedes in Calgary in 1912 and 1919. The event also gained social and political legitimacy through its sponsors. Under the prompting of Guy Weadick, an American promoter and cowboy vaudeville performer, the 1912 Stampede was endorsed and bankrolled by leaders of the local elite, the so-called Big Four: George Lane, owner of the Bar U Ranch and Calgary businesses; Pat Burns, meat packer and owner of other businesses; A.E. Cross; rancher and owner of the Calgary Brewing and Malt- ing Company; and Archie McLean, a rancher and provincial politician. Such sponsorship made the Stampede socially respectable. Ethnic background and class status were also relevant. The Big Four were apparently convinced that the Stampede would promote the history of British-Canadian ranching in southern Alberta and help the ranching elite confirm its legitimacy by appealing to a history that cast it as a local aristocracy and a founding group in the city.¹³

Preceded by a major marketing campaign, the 1912 Stampede ran for four days and offered an ambitious schedule of events that included a huge street parade of First Nations people, cowboys and cowgirls, floats, and various representatives of Calgary society. The rodeo events were relatively limited in comparison to those of later Stampedes: bronco riding, steer roping, and bulldogging, as well as various vaudeville-type acts such as fancy roping and trick riding.¹⁴ A number of cowgirls participated in the competitions, reflecting that in Canada as in the United States, rodeo cowgirls were “pioneer professional athletes.”¹⁵ Weadick also managed to attract star visitors when he incorporated a scheduled visit to Calgary by the Governor General, the Duke of Connaught, into the Stampede. Purses that Weadick later claimed were “five times in excess of any that had been offered anywhere in the world up to that time” drew top contestants from across North America. The Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) offered special half-fare excursion rates, and a reported forty thousand people from as far away as Winnipeg took advantage of them. Others drove from Fort Macleod and other centres in southern Alberta to take in the spectacle.

Local businesses found the arrival of thousands of out-of-town visitors a major boost to trade, but there were problems as well. As historian James Gray notes, the public grumbled that admission prices were too high and that the Stampede organizers had been lax about delivering value for money. Moreover, organizational problems, bad weather, and poor equipment and infrastructure (such as the lack of saddling chutes for the bucking horses) added to the confusion that dominated some events. Many observers objected to a gory display when “the bulldozed long-horn bulls spewed blood in all directions when the cowboys, wrestling them to the earth, tore their horns out by the roots.”¹⁶ While the Stampede’s sponsorship and connection with the local elite, the quality of participants, and its advertising and marketing showed that the event had potential, its organizational and public relations problems indicated that it was not yet ready for incorporation into Calgary’s life and mores. Thus, despite discussion about making it an annual event, a repeat Stampede was ruled out. The First World War soon followed, and war efforts precluded the possibility of another Stampede until 1919. Again bankrolled by the Big Four and managed by Guy Weadick, the second Stampede was designed as a “Great Victory Entertainment” to raise money for charities supporting veterans and children orphaned by the war.¹⁷ While it was better organized and managed than the 1912 event, the 1919 Stampede sold only 57,456 admissions, not enough to cover expenses,¹⁸ due to worrisome economic times, social uncertainty, and high gate prices.

Both the 1912 and 1919 Stampedes were considered successful, however, and they established a prototype that would be applied in the future. Both Stampedes offered the outline and content of an emerging invented tradition, a vision of the ranching and settlement years as a better time, the values of which continued to inspire society. In the hands of tourism promoters and others, this nostalgia soon led to a conflation of present and past that could be marketed as authentic and relevant. Yet, while ranching still dominated parts of the country around Calgary by the First World War and the city remained an important stock centre, most livestock operations no longer owed much to the open-range ranching tradition celebrated by the Stampede. After about 1906, the livestock industry began shifting towards feedlot and controlled production practices that in many ways owed more to industrial patterns of organization than to the history of open-range ranching.¹⁹ By 1912 Calgary was a railway town that owed only a small part of its growth and wealth to ranching, although a family's ranching pedigree apparently conferred social status, especially when ranching money was combined with wealth earned from urban real estate, business, manufacturing, or transportation.²⁰ Calgary owed its growth as a major prairie city to its location on the CPR and its service to grain and irrigated farms in southern Alberta and mining and timbering areas in Alberta and the British Columbia interior.

While the 1912 and 1919 Stampedes were preludes to an invented Calgary tradition, they contributed materially to the emergence of such a tradition elsewhere as well. This seems to have been the case in Medicine Hat, where the first rodeo was held in 1917, but the history of the rodeo at Bruce, Alberta, which now advertises itself as "the biggest one-day rodeo in Canada," provides an even clearer illustration of this phenomenon.

Bruce is located slightly north of Camrose. The town was established in 1908, and every year beginning in 1909 it has held a sports day to celebrate its founding. In 1912 local men who had attended the Stampede in Calgary proposed that Bruce should add rodeo events to the annual sports day. This was in part simply the adoption of a successful event held elsewhere, but as with the Calgary Stampede in 1912, local conditions were in place to legitimize the event. Although mixed farming prevailed in the district, around 1912 drought in southern Alberta forced ranchers to drive their stock north to graze in the open land around Bruce. Cowboys who moved north with the cattle brought with them their recreational traditions.²¹

Thus, by 1913, factors that led to staging a rodeo in Bruce included local interest in the 1912 Calgary event and the cowboy culture of the men who accompanied the cattle from the south. There seems to have been some

competition between the southern Alberta cowboys and local men, perhaps a story of outsider and insider that is always potent in small towns. As the local history of Bruce phrases it, “the ranch hands of the south were eager for some competition with the local cowboys.” In this description it is interesting to note that the locals were the “cowboys” and presumably of higher standing than the outsiders who were mere “ranch hands.”

The first Bruce rodeo was held on the fairgrounds. There were no bleachers, fences, or saddling chutes, and the loading pens at the railway station were used to hold the stock. The main feature of the day was a bucking horse competition. As at Calgary in 1912, there was no time limit and the rider just stayed on as long as possible. Prizes were paid to the top riders from a collection taken among the spectators. At first, these cowboy contests took place in conjunction with those customarily held at the sports day, such as baseball, but soon the cowboy contests took over and the event became a rodeo. In 1919 it was still called the Bruce Sports Day, but by 1920 it had become known as the Bruce Stampede, and although ball games continued for a few years to be a feature of the day, they disappeared in the late 1920s, leaving the event dominated by rodeo.

As Bruce’s rodeo demonstrates, the Calgary Stampede of 1912 had sparked imitators, indicating that rodeo was becoming part of a more diffused tradition in Alberta. The 1912 Stampede was not yet an invented tradition, however; it was only the prelude to one because it lacked the continuity that could frame its ideology and give it consistent expression in local life.

Beyond Spectacle: The Calgary Stampede, 1923–1939

While the Stampedes of 1912 and 1919 inspired rodeos in other parts of Alberta and confirmed the social and sporting legitimacy of rodeo, the 1923 Stampede gained further legitimacy by tapping into the historical traditions of agricultural fairs in Canada. This elevated it beyond mere spectacle enacted for the enjoyment of a crowd and the promotion of immediate local needs into an activity intimately connected with a venerable and deeply symbolic tradition in Canadian rural life.

Agricultural fairs were organized in most parts of Alberta as part of the culture transplanted by Anglo-Canadian settlers. Beginning in 1885, and with few interruptions, annual fairs were a feature of summer life in Calgary and surrounding areas. Fairs symbolized ideals of rural collective purpose, sociability, and community. Mounted by local agricultural societies, they were officially seen as opportunities for farmers to meet, show their livestock and grain,

compare experiences, and learn about efficient farming techniques and the improvement and reform of rural society.²² As such, agricultural fairs merited the support of the state, and the federal government, as well as the territorial and later the provincial governments, provided grants to support them.

Beyond such objectives, the fairs clearly offered fun and diversion at the midway, sports events, and grandstand show. Keeping educational and entertainment functions in appropriate balance was sometimes a matter of public concern. Some critics contended that while fairs should be enjoyable, they should above all be useful. Cowboy contests were a distraction – no different from a midway or a horse race – luring people away from sober recreations that would leave them better prepared to work. As H.A. Craig, the superintendent of fairs and institutes for Alberta, remarked in 1908, government grants were justified because “the agricultural fair is an educational institution.” And, he warned, it was important that this character be preserved and that the fair not be an occasion when “things relevant to agriculture are side-tracked, and horse races, fakirs’ shows, ball matches etc. take their place.”²³

At the same time, pragmatism forced everyone to recognize that entertainment at fairs had to be tolerated because it attracted visitors who might benefit from the more serious objectives of the fair. While government grants were important, fair boards knew that a fair could not survive without substantial gate receipts. Such pragmatism became even more important in the early 1920s, when the provincial government reduced the amounts it paid in grants to agricultural fairs. In the case of the Calgary Exhibition Association, the grant for 1923 fell from \$10,000 to \$8,000. Given the losses the Exhibition had chalked up between 1920 and 1922, its board of directors realized that the fair had to bring in more people or be abandoned due to falling attendance and rising debts. The Exhibition Association had featured trick riding and roping in its 1921 spring horse show to increase its audience, and public enthusiasm led to the expansion of these features in the following year. This, along with the precedents of the 1912 and 1919 Stampedes, persuaded the directors that if they added “a really outstanding stampede as an exhibition attraction, we could recoup our losses and build up an institution which would be as important in building up Alberta as the Canadian National Exhibition is in Eastern Canada.”²⁴

The Stampede held in 1923 in conjunction with the agricultural fair was so successful that attendance increased dramatically. Indeed, the fair association soon began to remake its identity by calling itself the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede. In 1922 the Calgary Exhibition had attracted about 97,000

people. In 1923, the first year it included the Stampede, it drew nearly 138,000. The course was set; in subsequent years attendance continued to increase, reaching 223,425 by 1938. Further cuts in government funding in the late 1920s and suspension of all grants for a few years in the early 1930s made rodeo entertainment essential to the survival of the fair as a profitable event.²⁵

As a means of enhancing the popularity and profits of the Calgary Exhibition, the 1923 Calgary Stampede emerged from a different context and rationale than had the 1912 and 1919 Stampedes. The Stampedes of 1923 and subsequent years could be smoothly integrated with the traditions of an agricultural fair. The inclusion of cowboy performances did not challenge the ideal of the fair as an educational event that promoted social good and the health of the farming community. Indeed, while clearly entertainment, rodeo had recognizable connections to rural life, and while these connections may have been overdrawn, they legitimized rodeo within the traditions and functions of prairie agricultural fairs.

Rodeo had become a familiar and welcomed public sport by the early 1920s. And it was truly a sport. It involved physical exertion, it measured skill against standards of performance, it was competitive, and it applied uniform rules (at first only locally), all within a recreational framework. To be sure, the Stampede blurred the lines between amateur and professional sport, but rodeo contests had long presented an amiable mix of working cowboys and cowgirls and professional rodeo stars who travelled the North American rodeo circuit. In any case, the lines defining professional and amateur in sport were beginning to blur in the 1920s as North American sports became more professionalized and commercialized, with a star system, monetary and/or professional rewards, and accurate historical standards of competitive excellence. Indeed, as cultural historian Karen Wall has noted, an important theme in the history of Canadian sport after the First World War is that traditional sports such as cowboy contests that were local, often spontaneous, and unorganized were regularized into scheduled and predictable events.²⁶

In the case of the annual Calgary Stampedes after 1923, such regularization also contributed to a framework within which the Stampede could become part of an invented tradition. With its elevation to a regular, rather than occasional, sporting event, the Stampede after 1923 transcended the more limited traditions of cowboy sports, local rodeos, and the Stampedes of 1912 and 1919. Moreover, the regularization of the event allowed the Stampede to become an accepted part of civic life. As sociologist Eric Dunning comments, sports spectators construct not only personal identities but also

communal ones by forming bonds with other spectators that articulate their interdependence. Indeed, Dunning notes, sport “has come to be important in the identification of individuals with the collectivities to which they belong.”²⁷ When annualized and formalized, such conditions are intensified, and although they are most apparent in team sports, an annual sporting event itself – especially when always held in the same place, such as the Calgary Stampede – creates a similar set of relationships. In other words, an event and the competitions it contains can contribute equally to civic identity.

The Calgary Stampede management’s policies, whether by accident or design, reinforced these characteristics of organized sporting events. The Stampede’s management carefully guarded the high quality of the rodeo programs. Cash prizes were reduced from those that had been offered in 1912 and 1919 to save money, but perhaps also to reflect respect for the Anglo-Canadian traditions of amateur sport. While cash was still offered, championship titles and prizes such as saddles, buckles, and other items donated by famous people such as the Prince of Wales and Mary Pickford and by local businesses were also given to reward success.²⁸ E.L. Richardson, the general manager, recalled that although many people had been “sceptical” that public interest in rodeo events would last, “the secret of its success is that it is not a show put on by paid performers, but is a real competition” located in Calgary, “the ranching centre of Alberta,” and drawing contestants from Canada and the United States. The cowboys, he noted, “know that it is conducted on the level” and see the Stampede’s trophies as honours in their own right. In keeping with this sporting ideal, the management of the Stampede ensured that the best judges were hired and provided excellent quality stock and horses.²⁹

Even so, the characterization of the rodeo events at the Calgary Stampede as national and international was, in some respects, self-referential. Until 1929 each rodeo was independent and had its own rules; no centralized records were kept. While terms such as “World Championship” were commonly used, they were largely meaningless. The major rodeos in North America, such as at Calgary and Cheyenne, were important enough that their claims to represent important championships were recognized by rodeo contestants and the public alike, but this did not equate to comparative measurement of skill or recording of accomplishment. In 1929, however, the creation of the Rodeo Association of America made it possible to regulate events and establish greater uniformity across different venues.³⁰ This trend was rapidly confirmed in the next few years through the creation of similar organizations that dealt with regulations, qualifications, and rules, such as

the Cowboy's Insurance Association in 1944 (later called the Cowboy's Protective Association and now the Canadian Professional Rodeo Association) and, shortly afterwards, the Canadian Stampede Managers' Association.³¹ As a result, by the late 1940s the Calgary Stampede could rightfully be ranked as one of the great sporting events in North America.³²

The regularization of the Stampede and its linkages to past rodeos, the traditions of the prairie agricultural fair, and the evolving world of sport helped create conditions favourable to its emergence as an invented tradition. Success was also assured by hiring Guy Weadick as manager of the Stampede. Compliance of the local elite was guaranteed, and impartiality and fairness ensured, by recruiting the Big Four who had backed the 1912 and 1919 Stampedes as rodeo judges along with the president of the Western Stock Growers' Association, the head of the Alberta Stockyards, and four members of the Calgary Exhibition Association board of directors.³³ Mindful of complaints in 1912 and 1919 that the Stampede had been something of an expensive and deceitful shill, Stampede organizers were determined to keep the event affordable and honest. Advertisements for the 1923 event promised "Positively No Advance In Hotel Or Restaurant Rates. No Sting Attached To This Celebration."³⁴ The Calgary Auto Club offered free camping for visitors, while a free accommodation bureau helped others find rooms. Free events were always featured on the Stampede grounds, and admission fees were kept at reasonable levels. In 1927 admission to the grounds and a reserved seat at the grandstand enclosure could be had for \$1, which gave rise to the claim that "nowhere in the world can such a wonderful programme be seen for five times this price."³⁵

The traditional fair programs – livestock shows and displays of grain, farm produce, and industrial materials – were maintained and in some cases enhanced in order to keep the event dynamic and community oriented. For example, a livestock review before a grandstand audience was instituted and children's programs, such as school spelling bees, were incorporated into the fair. A lavish street parade launched the Stampede, while the rodeo program included the same range of events that had been staged in 1912, such as bucking horses, roping, and steer riding, but in greater number and variety. Many additions reiterated traditional rodeo events; others were simply invented but came to be accepted as representing a genuine "tradition" of the Old West. The chuckwagon race, the most famous of these invented events, has come to define the Stampede's public image as representing the vigour, manliness, and danger of western life.³⁶ So too, the re-gendering of rodeo into a male preserve was another transformation, albeit not unique to the Calgary

Stampede. By the Second World War, cowgirls' participation in rodeo had almost entirely disappeared due to forces that included the Hollywood image of the range as a male preserve and the disdain of most professional rodeo associations towards women's participation.³⁷



Blanche McCoughey, Bertha Blanchett, and Dolly Mullens competed in the 1912 Stampede.

The Stampede of 1923, like that of 1912, was dominated by a self-conscious nostalgia for past times. Stampedes of the interwar years refined this nostalgia into a pursuit of identity through a critique of modernity, perhaps expressing a search for authenticity and certainty in a time of rapid social and technological change. Such reactions were not unique; they had been expressed with varying intensity throughout Western Europe and North America since the nineteenth century and had given rise to the invention of many traditions. As Ian McKay demonstrates in his study of the construction of new identities in Nova Scotia in the interwar years, appeals to local folk customs and practices served various social objectives and economic interests, including the tourism industry.³⁸ Although there were many variants – concerns for early architecture, folk songs and practices, and handicrafts – nostalgia found its expression in the Calgary Stampede through an appeal to simpler times

with better values and higher social purposes than those found in industrialized society. Subtling the event as an “Old Timers’ Re-Union and Pioneer Jollification,” the advertising for the 1923 Stampede set a pattern that would be followed for many years.³⁹ As an article in the *Farm and Ranch Review* (a farm journal published in Calgary) claimed,

First of all, there is no place in the West that has the natural location, with such scenic embellishments, right at its door, the historical data to work upon, such as the Hudson’s Bay Company frontier activities, the honoured traditions of the Royal North West Mounted Police, the native reservations practically at the city limits, the cowmen in their picturesque work, and last, but not least, the great number of old-timers, both men and women, who still live in the vicinity; men and women who are the actual pioneers of this Last Best West whose untiring efforts and strenuous undertakings in a primitive country are the real cause of the wonderful development that has been attained in the country in comparatively few short years.⁴⁰

What this meant in practical terms was illustrated in various ways, all linked by a particular view of the role of history in contemporary civic life. Weadick persuaded Calgarians to dress in western clothing and to decorate the streets and storefronts of downtown Calgary with planks and other “pioneer” materials. The fairgrounds featured an Indian Village set up and staffed by local First Nations people dressed in colourful and elaborate costumes, but while First Nations provided colour, the history that the Stampede referenced was always the Euro-Canadian conquest of the land. The effective erasure of the Aboriginal past by its relegation to spectacle was central in the historical interpretations and traditions that the Stampede promoted. Such presentations helped to link the Calgary Stampede to an often imagined regional past that was seen as romantic and colourful. Euro-Canadian history was focused in part on the Old Timers’ Cabin located near the Indian Village and maintained by the Southern Alberta Old Timers’ Association, where pioneers could gather and reminisce. More directly, the parades often featured historical floats and references, and that of 1925 was one of the most elaborate in this respect. The parade of riders, floats, bands, and dignitaries took an hour and forty minutes to pass one point. At its core



A cowboy cooks breakfast on a downtown street in 1923.

were thirty floats that “pictured the romantic story of the West” and “made many a heart throb and long for some magic wand to turn back the clock of time.” But the parade was more about the present than the past. It asserted the triumph of the Euro-Canadian settler and the celebration of the present through a sentimentality in which “color, romance, glamour was there aplenty, with pathos, humor and a hundred memories tender and stern for the men and women who have made this city grow since the days of old Fort Calgary.” The floats were organized in an equally presentist fashion – the first portrayed the West before the arrival of whites, while the remaining twenty-nine celebrated in rough chronological order the achievements of Euro-Canadians. All the predictable themes were there: “the explorers,” the North-West Mounted Police, the Hudson’s Bay Company (which in fact had only a minor presence in southern Alberta), missionaries, whiskey traders, Fort Calgary, and the signing of the treaties. Other floats dealt with the CPR, land surveyors, early retail operations, transportation, newspapers, town councils, and, among others, the Turner Valley oil field. The parade ended triumphantly with a float on the theme of “Calgary today.” As further evidence of the demands and standards of the present, the parade

was led by Guy Weadick and Hoot Gibson, the Hollywood cowboy movie star, and was filmed so that it could be included in one of Gibson's films.⁴¹

Hoot Gibson was no less a part of an invented tradition than was the Stampede's vision of the past, but he represented an enduring pattern in which the Stampede celebrated famous personalities or powerful individuals and the structures that buttressed Anglo-Canadian order. Parade themes or special events were identified to create a unique identity for each Stampede and maintain a particular view of Calgary's history. Themes included the sixtieth anniversary of confederation in 1927, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and the founding of Fort Calgary. Pat Burns was honoured in 1931 on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday, and in 1939 the theme was set as the "British Empire" in honour of the visit of King George and Queen Elizabeth to Canada.

Such evolving themes not only served to reinforce a particular view of past and present, but also helped to keep the Stampede dynamic in order to encourage repeat visits year after year by locals and outsiders alike. Despite their sentimentality about earlier times, the Stampede of 1923 and those that followed were made possible by the technology that they implicitly decried. The presentations of Calgary's history as one of authentic colour and romance had wide appeal and could be marketed effectively because, as was noted in 1924, "Calgary is a Western town and proud of it." The city welcomed thousands each year to the Stampede and entertained them "in a true Western manner, and her very location and history prove that Calgary is about the one place in the Canadian Northwest that can properly indulge in such a Western holiday."⁴² An important part of twentieth-century tourism has been a quest for authenticity, for "genuine" experiences that reveal "true" local conditions. The achievement of such experiences involves complex undertakings on the part of hosts and visitors alike, and many critics have argued that the pursuit is inherently futile.⁴³

Whatever the case, many tourists, like local residents, apparently accepted the Stampede as representing an authentic, or at least attractive, experience. While statistics about the origins of visitors to the Stampede are unavailable, the Stampede rapidly became a regular part of many Albertans' vacation plans. By 1931 the Stampede attracted about 198,000 admissions, and after declining in the next two years because of the Depression, the number reached almost 215,000 in 1936. In 1939 more than 240,000 people were admitted to the Stampede grounds. Since the population of Calgary in the 1930s was approximately 85,000, these attendance figures greatly exceeded the city's population. While some of the admissions represent repeat visits,

they nonetheless indicate that a large number of outsiders came to the city for the event.⁴⁴ By 1927 the Crowsnest Pass area, for example, contributed as usual “a heavy quota of visitors” who travelled to the Stampede by train or by car, and people from other nearby points, such as Claresholm, were making a visit to the Stampede an annual event.⁴⁵

The Stampede also attracted visitors from further away. The CPR offered special passenger fares between Calgary and all points in Saskatchewan, Alberta, and eastern British Columbia. Visitors from other points were able to take advantage of the CPR’s special summer tourist fares to Banff and Lake Louise, which included stopover privileges in Calgary during the Stampede. By 1939 a hard-surfaced road from the U.S. border via Waterton connected American tourists to Calgary and Banff and Lake Louise, Canada’s “famous mountain playground.”⁴⁶ In their tourist promotions, Stampede organizers eagerly seized on the fortuitous proximity of Banff. As E.L. Richardson, the Stampede’s general manger, told Premier Brownlee in 1927,

Each year the number of tourists [visiting the Stampede] increases considerably and they come from greater distances. The business at the Kananaskis gate of the Banff National Park during and immediately following our annual Exhibition dates is phenomenal and is increasing very rapidly every year. We have had on our grounds at one time automobiles with licenses from as many as fifteen states and five provinces. The tourist business is now recognized as of such great value that Alberta cannot afford to miss an opportunity to try for her full share of that traffic ... The marvellous mountains at Calgary’s door give us an opportunity unexcelled by other cities on the continent.⁴⁷

As with the Stampede of 1912, one measure of the success of the 1923 and subsequent Stampedes was the imitators they inspired. By 1946 thirty-eight district Stampedes were held in western Canada, of which well over half took place in Alberta, many of them no doubt inspired by the increased popularization of rodeo at the Calgary Stampede.⁴⁸ As illustrated by one rodeo in the Peace River Country, these events also represented the intersections of local culture and place with contemporary attitudes and needs. A rodeo begun in Teepee Creek (northeast of Grande Prairie) in the early 1930s developed into one of the most attractive summer events in the southern part of the region.

Bucking horses, horse racing, and pulling contests were the central events, but baseball, boxing, tug-of-war, bathing beauty contests (sometimes featuring men's and women's events), drinking, and a dance helped draw crowds and competitors from near and far. One resident humorously recalled the story of one of these outside competitors:

“All of us poor old farmers around here had on work boots and patched coveralls, but we were having a real good time. Then this great big, slim, would-be cowboy stepped up. He was from Calgary and he was going to show the locals how to ride. He was all dressed up fit to kill, and bragged around to everybody how he could ride. Now Burns had an old work horse at the time, and that horse could buck! He'd just bawl and paw when he hit the ground. Anyway, they got that horse all saddled up and that cowboy aboard and let him buck. Well, that horse went up once and the horse came down, but the cowboy kept on going up and up. When he finally came down, he landed just the way he had been on the horse – and he landed hard. He picked himself up and he left and after a hearty laugh, the local riders kept on with the show.”⁴⁹

In this recollection it is notable that while the local rodeo owed its popularity to the precedent of Calgary's stampede, it transcended these origins to express local sensibilities and attitudes. The Calgary cowboy – Alberta's new version of a city slicker – was no match for rural wiles or traditions; farmers were the salt of the earth and thus would survive, while the city boy's fancy gear and smart talk only hid incompetence. This old story confirmed the superiority of rural honesty, and perhaps rural guile, but it was also another demonstration that the forms events took had different meanings in different locations and contexts and that invented traditions could be reworked by others to serve their own particular needs.

Such adaptability reveals the strength of the myth of the cowboy that rodeo promoted. Even so, no rodeo in Alberta was as successful as Calgary's was in defining place and history and the meaning of time. The Stampede of 1923 was the first in a series that has continued to the present day. While it built on a long history of cowboy sports in southern Alberta and the precedents of the 1912 and 1919 Stampedes, the 1923 event was the true beginning of the institutionalization of the Stampede as a part of Calgary's myth about

itself. This myth was a flexible one, but its core was and remains the myth of the frontier and of the figures who supposedly made it. In this sense, the Stampede conflated farming and ranching pioneers into a common story of struggle and success. That each group was bitterly opposed to the other in the nineteenth century, and that each group saw itself as part of a cultural vanguard and its opponents as regressive forces, has not restricted the myth making that smoothed over these divisions and joined historically opposing groups within a common story of struggle and triumph.



The tradition of preparing pancake breakfasts continues on.

Contemporary virtues of hard work, individual success or failure, and risk taking can be lauded by appealing to a sanitized past, a world of unquestioned and peaceful social relations, meaningful and inspiring community cohesiveness, sociability, straightforwardness, and pragmatism. Such myths have become central tenets for a society trying to adapt to almost continuous technological and social change while also attempting to establish its own presence and identity. In times of flux, myths of constancy, of a presence on the land and continuity with what came before, and of successful engagement with an often hostile climate, retain their potency. Such myths can also nicely accommodate the power relations in society. The myth of the pioneer, especially of the pioneer as risk taker, remains a central part of Calgary's and Alberta's view of itself. It is remarkable how slight a shift has been required to extend an appreciation of the homesteaders' perceived rural character and

perseverance into a justification of the activities of Calgary capitalists. The notion of risk has now become central in the idealization of the Stampede. The contestants are described as fearless risk takers and the Stampede's history itself as proof of the virtues of high-powered marketing, good management, and the well calculated risk taken by the Exhibition managers in 1923.⁵⁰

The invented traditions that the Stampede promoted and described as full of pathos and tears missed the true pathos and the truly important questions about Alberta's history. In contemporary Alberta, pioneering – in whatever form – connotes the victory of Euro-Canadians. The invented past of the Stampede portrayed Indians as a source of colour, but not humanity or inspiration. It posited that rodeo represented the essence of the Anglo-Canadian Protestant conquest of the West and saw open-range ranching (not railways, wholesaling and distribution, mining, irrigation, wheat farming, and land development, among other elements) as the formative cultural and economic event in the history of southern Alberta. Only hard work, not hard work along with luck, ethnicity, social and political power, and an economic system that offered most of its rewards within a highly specific social and economic framework, shaped the past and the present. True, the dominant culture of the region was Anglo and Protestant; true, ranchers had worked hard and faced difficulties, but so too had First Nations people and Czech and Ukrainian miners and Chinese navvies and Mormon farmers and failed homesteaders and countless others who were forgotten in this celebration of success and whose lives raised often uncomfortable questions about who had won and why, and who had lost and why, and what those wins and losses have meant.

Notes

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