THE ROTARIAN

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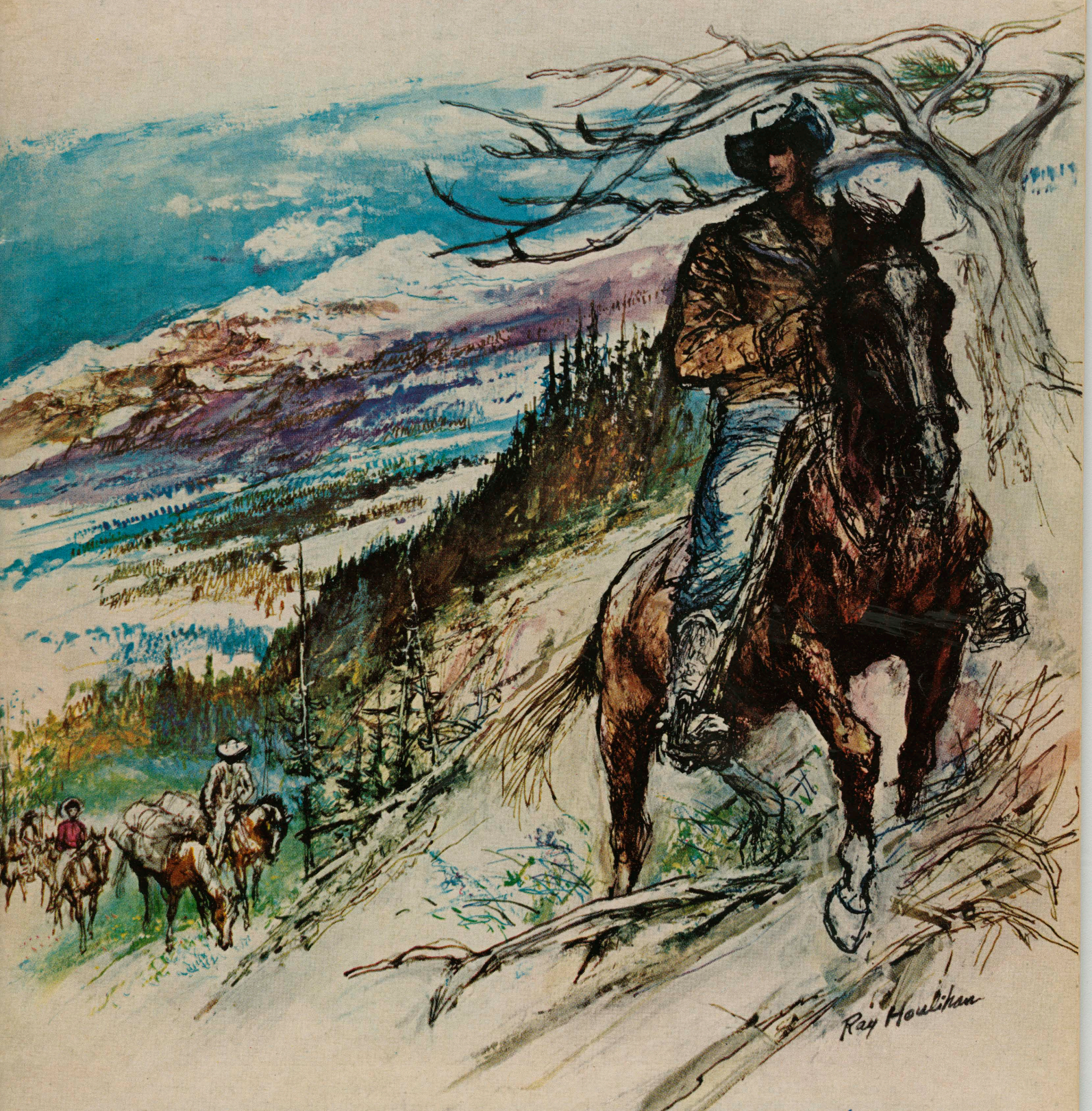

Wandering the High West:

Seven Features on Denver and the Rockies

APRIL·1966

The High West's most rugged sport... viewed by *Ivan Doig.*

Rodeo: Sport of Flings

The photo Way Up High, *by Stanley W. Rice, of Lander, Wyo., won a special merit award in the 1965 Newspaper National Snapshot Awards. It is reproduced here with the permission of the Eastman Kodak Company.*

FIRST, you cross a cattle stampede with a horse race. For flavor, toss in Saturday night in a frontier town. Then lean back and enjoy.

For the benefit of any dudes or greenhorns around, you might explain that you have concocted a small-town Western rodeo.

Rodeo is a flourishing sport in the High West (and some other parts of the U.S.A. as well), a sport as rugged as the region's brawny Rocky Mountains and savored by an estimated 10 million spectators annually. They come to see a series of competitions which have evolved from the skills of the old-time cowboys. Performed one after another in an arena of loose dirt—the softer to fall in—these constitute a rodeo.

Put this simply, it sounds rather dusty and drab. Actually, rodeo is a high-powered and exciting game which likes to call itself "the world's roughest sport" and has the casualty records to support its claim.

Moreover, it has a tang which lingers with the viewer. It's lingered with me since boyhood days in White Sulphur Springs, Montana, when the annual burst of excitement in that mountain-valley cow town of 1,000 people was the Labor Day rodeo. In fact, the tang has been with my family for a few generations now—as you will see—and shows no signs of fading. I think of the uncle who takes double pleasure in that home-town rodeo. For years he has filmed a good portion of it and still delights as much as ever in running the results backward, sending unhorsed cowpokes flying from their arena landing places to the backs of inhospitable broncs.

Despite such modern-day antics surrounding it, and despite performers who arrive by plush auto instead of saddle pony, rodeo is no new sport. The word "rodeo" comes from the Spanish for "surround," or "round up." There are two styles of pronunciation: "ro-DAY-oh" seems acceptable in parts of the U. S. Southwest, but it'll mark you as a dude in Northern climes, where they say "RO-dee-oh."

Some rodeo events go back beyond Spanish-American or even Spanish history. Bull grappling was a favorite sport in ancient Crete, and in Thessaly riders jumped from horses to bulls' backs much as today's bulldoggers do.

When the era of the everyday, working cowboy began to wane in the U. S. West, the cowhand's skills began to be distilled into "Wild West shows" and what we now know as rodeos. The first ones seem to have whooped into history in the early 1880s, in the cow towns of Texas.

Mari Sandoz, one of the great chroniclers of the U. S. West, credits such an account and writes: "The idea of the cowboy tournaments spread and with them dust, excitement, and broken bones."

Such a narrative holds personal meaning for me, for my father knew the "dust, excitement, and broken bones" as rodeo grew up.

Although I've been thrown from horses a few times, none of it was premeditated (at least on my part) and I've never had the least desire come rodeo time to learn whether I could sit for ten seconds atop a berserk animal ten times my size. I forfeit. Not so my father at my age. Until wives and children came along to gentle them down, he and his five brothers avidly rode in week-end rodeos under circumstances which, in retrospect, make him shudder.

Corrals, chutes, and bleachers were scarce on the Montana prairie 30 and 40 years ago, so the arena was formed by a circle of autos and horsemen. While some helpful soul "eared down" a bronc—holding the horse's ears to keep his head down—the rider climbed aboard. Then the bronc was turned loose, and the contest between man and beast went on until the man stopped riding or the beast stopped bucking. Madness? Yes, but, according to the gleam in Dad's eye when he recounts such escapades, madness of a most thrilling sort.

Now, if the rodeo back home in White Sulphur Springs still lacks the organization of big-time shows such as Cheyenne's, it at least has a place (the "rodeo grounds," local folks say) to call its own. There, the first Sunday and Monday of September, several hundred people gather in the weary grandstand and perch on fences to see the broncs and cattle and cowboys and cowgirls go through their paces.

RODEO in my home State of Montana has a pull on people's attention which probably is no stronger nor more enduring than the moon's influence on ocean tides. My case in point: since I was born in late June and the home-town rodeo is always on Labor Day week-end, I saw my first rodeo at the age of about two months, for my family has attended these affairs as if Nature would be offended were they to stay away.

(Certainly Nature, producing chilly weather in Montana around Labor Day, often tests these White Sulphur Springs rodeo-goers. Last year, for example, the rodeo furnished me not only the usual entertainment, but absolute proof that my bride of a few months had taken the marriage vows seriously. On her introductory trip to Montana she shivered through more than ten hours of rodeo during two freezing days and came out of it able to vow, between chattering teeth, that she enjoyed the whole thing.)

So, the ritual is performed each year. Drive into town in midmorning to watch the small but brave parade of horsemen and back-yard-built floats straggle up main street and back again. Next, with frequent stops to chat with old friends, comes the stroll to wherever this year's mob of friends and relatives is sharing lunch, for which each has brought some dish. (Amazingly, there always is enough fried chicken no matter how many guests drop in.) And then, crunch through the gravel streets to the arena where the rodeo is about to happen.

The stars of the rodeo in this little town are the bucking horses—the huge, unruly, cranky bucking horses. The White Sulphur Springs rodeo enjoys a circumstance which provides it with horses of unusual, if not unique, violence: the [*Continued on page 63*]

expenditures and agreed that travel expenses reimbursable by Rotary International, except authorized travel by the District Governor as provided for in his budget, shall generally be on the basis of a rate not to exceed jet economy class or jet tourist/coach air travel, or the nearest equivalent, on the most direct route.

Chartered Air Transport for Group Travel. The Board agreed that it is not within the authority of a District Governor to enter into contractual arrangements which, directly or by implication, bind or otherwise involve Rotary International. Specifically, a District Governor is not authorized by Rotary International to sign contracts for chartered air travel or otherwise bind or act as agent for Rotary International in connection with arrangements for chartered air travel.

Third Meeting of the Board in 1965-66. The Board agreed that the third meeting of the Board in 1965-66 shall be convened in Evanston, Illinois, on May 23, 1966.

Rodeo: Sport of Flings

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owners of two large ranches, in the area have herds of wild horses running on their range. Not the wiry little mustangs that are the true wild horses of the High West, but the offspring of draft stock turned out to pasture—blocky, 16-hands-high-and-better, untamed and fierce animals. Put a saddle on one and the critter gets angry. Put a man in the saddle and the critter goes crazy. Just before rodeo days, a group of at least twice as many cowboys as needed rounds up a herd of these horses to give the bronc riders some action for their entry fees.

The session of mayhem called bronc riding seems simple enough. Riding with a saddle, the rider must stay on the horse for ten seconds. Without a saddle —"bareback"—he must stay on for eight seconds. In either case, he must hold on only with one hand (gripping a rope if he's in a saddle, a ring in the "rigging" if he's riding in bareback competition) and spur the horse rigorously to make a qualified ride.

The catch is that ten or even eight seconds becomes a very long time when a 1,200-pound animal is determined to get rid of you. That it also becomes very dangerous can be read in the medical record of such championship riders as Jim Shoulders. Jim, a Henryetta, Oklahoma, cowboy who no longer competes full time, won more rodeo titles than anyone else and also broke his nose, collarbone, left arm, and right

elbow and ankle, cracked sundry ribs, dislocated both knees, and suffered several concussions in a dozen years of rodeoing.

At our little rodeo the action erupts with the first horse out of the chute. Often you can hear the furious "uhh . . . uhh . . . uhh" as the infuriated bronc grunts and tries to fling the rider from his back.

To achieve this he can do a number of things—such as lunge, twist, hop, dodge, run, veer, rear, and sometimes fall down. Moreover, he may do these in any number of rhythms—to which the rider, who must be spurring the horse all the while, has to attune his own rhythm if he is to stay aboard. In the course of a White Sulphur Springs rodeo, a good many don't. I recall too vividly the rider years ago who died in mid-arena because his horse was too much for him.

If the horses are difficult, the monsters in rodeo's bull-riding event are well-nigh impossible. (In fairness to the bulls, it should be said they contributed their share to Jim Shoulders' medical history.) Generally these are Brahma bulls, even twistier and trickier than a good bucking horse. What's more, they have horns, and it is in the bull-riding event that the shabby, doleful rodeo clown earns his wage tenfold by distracting the disorderly bull from a fallen rider. Unfortunately the White Sulphur Springs rodeo, beset with its rampaging broncs, can't handle the additional trouble the bulls would cause, and no longer has this rugged event.

Another rodeo event pitting a man against a horned adversary is steer wrestling, more commonly called bulldogging. That name derives, legend has it, from the first practitioner of this skill, a Negro cowboy named Bill Pickett. He, they say, would leap from a speeding horse to the back of a running steer, grab the steer by the head, then simultaneously twist the head and bite the steer's nose bulldog style until the animal fell to the ground. Today's cowboys don't chomp the foe's nose, but a championship performer can put a steer to earth three to eight seconds after the steer and the man on horseback leave the starting area together.

Less hazardous but perhaps requiring even more skill is calf roping. The roper must overtake a running calf with his horse, catch the calf with the loop of his lariat, dismount, throw the critter to the ground, and tie three of its legs together. The key to this, any rodeo fan will nudge you and mutter, is a horse trained to back away and keep the lariat taut once the calf is caught. Otherwise, it's no cinch to grab a hefty, kicking calf and dump him on his back.

Some rodeos now have other events besides these basic ones. Chuck-wagon races, for example, in which covered wagons drawn by teams of horses trundle full tilt around the arena. (In Canada, where rodeo also is quite popular, the Calgary Stampede is famous for races of this sort.) Or the ladies' barrel race, in which trim horsewomen—even girls down to grammar-school size—hurry their mounts in a cloverleaf pattern around three widely spaced barrels, the fastest time winning.

WHY do these rodeo people eagerly risk acquiring medical records such as Jim Shoulders', and even pay entrance fees for the events that give them these lumps? Well, "no young man believes he shall ever die," the English poet William Hazlitt once told posterity, and perhaps that is why rodeo is a game for young daredevils. Lean, supple youths in big hats, garish shirts, and second-skin jeans are the men of rodeo. Some, if they are good enough to make money at it, ride broncs for years, perhaps even until they are 30. Then some quit, some concentrate on other events. Time was when calf roping was the older man's province in rodeos. But a few years ago, college boys wearing sneakers for better speed from horse to calf began taking over that event too.

Incidentally, "college boy" is no sneering term around a rodeo arena

these days. Some of the best young rodeo hands are members of college rodeo teams, of which there are now 600, formed into the National Intercollegiate Rodeo Association and competing in their own championship matches.

The organization for professional participants is the Rodeo Cowboys Association. It numbers about 3,000 members, and lists nearly 600 "RCA-sanctioned" rodeos annually. These rodeos pay off more than 3 million dollars in prize money each year, a good deal of it furnished by contestants' fees. The former secretary-treasurer of this outfit, Montana-born Bill Linderman, was the biggest money winner in rodeo history. Bill, who was killed in a plane crash in November, 1965, won more than $440,000 in steer wrestling and riding events in his 25-year career. (The current secretary-treasurer of RCA is Gene Pruett, 1948's champion saddle bronc rider from Washington State's cattle country.)

The Association headquarters is in Denver. If you'd like to know about rodeos in the area around Rotary Convention time, call 455-3270 in Denver. In Colorado, for example, RCA-sanctioned rodeos already are scheduled in Grover and Walsenberg, June 12-13, and in Cortez, June 18-20.

So, if you wonder whether "the world's roughest sport" justifies the name, go to a rodeo. You'll see. And you'll come away with memories such as mine. Of riders such as waggish Johnny Carr, clad in a shirt that looks like an explosion in a cabbage patch and scanning the grandstand for pretty girls as he rides the toughest bronc. Or of Keith Foster, the carpenter back in White Sulphur Springs who magically puts fences back together as soon as the irascible horses kick them down. But if your memory is of the rodeo fan next to you, nudging you and hollering madly while the action explodes, that'll be your memory of me—or any of 9,999,999 other rodeo-goers.

One Husband's Plea

My dear, I realize you are
A very thrifty buyer,
One who travels near and far
And never seems to tire
Of seeking out the lowest price,
The biggest values on the rack;
Comparing prices at least twice
Is good, but please, when you get back
From a shopping tour that's paved
With great bargains end-to-end,
Spare me those tales of all you saved,
Just tell me, "How much did you spend?"

—W. J. McKENDRICK