



**Your on the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**Rodeo Revisited**

## Rodeo Revisited

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One of the items in my kick-the-bucket list is to see one more rodeo. I have been to many rodeos. Some of my brothers, my father, and two sisters-in-law were accomplished rodeo hands. I rode horses as a youngster, but used most of my free time swimming, while many family members roped calves, wrestled steers, ran barrel races, and separated cows and calves from a herd.

For the latter effort, there is nothing that comes close in a rodeo, or on a ranch, to the elegant athletic skill of an accomplished rider and horse working together to “cut” a cow or calf from a herd of cattle. It is a display of physical poetry in motion.

This operation came about many years ago when herds of cattle sometimes grazed closely together. Mixing occurred, forcing the cowboys to cut cows (maybe owned by another rancher) from the herd. Cutting is also done for maintenance, such as deworming and spraying.

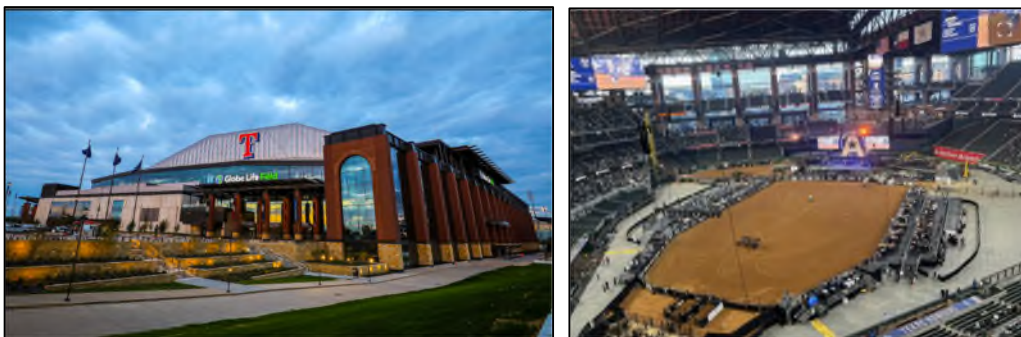
This week I kicked this item out of my bucket, and I am now in Arlington, Texas, to attend a rodeo. I have attended, so I will write in the past tense about the rodeo.

### Texans’ Hospitality and Kindness

Texans are noted for their friendly nature and big heartiness. They are also known for their bravado, but that aspect of Texans’ nature is for another time. I was born and reared in New Mexico, but my roots are in Texas. Mom, Dad, and their parents were born on ranches and farms in central and west Texas. My parents migrated to New Mexico in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They brought their love of Texas with them.

As mentioned in other pieces, I am fighting age and age-old injuries. My once easy travels are as much travails as they are pleasure. I resort to canes to get along while walking, and on wheelchairs to get me through airports. But I keep on going. Rusted parts become even more rusted with non-use. As told below, I was greatly assisted during this trip by several kind Texans.

The rodeo was held at the Globe Life Field, home of the Texas Rangers, shown in Figure 1. Parts of the baseball field were covered up with dirt, with chutes and other rodeo equipment installed at each end. The building and surrounding grounds are huge. Seating accommodates 40,300 spectators.



**Figure 1. Site of rodeo.**

The stadium has five customer ticket offices and entrances. The main entrance is shown in the left photo of Figure 1. Going around the sidewalk to another entrance entails a walk of about a quarter-mile.

We had tickets available at will call, but could find no online information on where the will call office was located. I assumed it was at the main entrance, but we could not get near there because of heavy traffic. It was dense with lots of red cones set up to control vehicles. Holly, Bitzi, and I drove around looking for handicapped parking. No luck, but the police noticed my handicap placard, and generously allowed us to drive into a restricted area next to one of the entrances.

I hopped out of the car, and with cane assistance, went to the ticket booths. Holly and Bitzi remained in the idling car, which was parked in a no-parking area. Upon reaching the ticket office:

- Ticket agent, “Sorry, sir. This entrance has no will call windows. Don’t know why. It usually does.”
- Me, “Where is will call? We’re temporarily parked, thanks to the police. See our car?” as I pointed to it.
- “Will call is at the main entrance, but I’m not sure you can get there with all the traffic restrictions.”
- Back at our car, “No luck. Have to go to the main entrance. Impossible to back-track with all this traffic. How about you stay here? I’ll walk around to will call, then give you a call to see what’s next.”
- Holly, “Okay, hope the police don’t chase me away.”

They didn’t. Holly was able to stay parked in the restricted parking zone while I walked to the other entrance. The police never hassled her during a 30-minute wait for me to make it to the will call booth. ...God love those Texans.

It was slow going, but my cane encouraged me, and I encouraged my cane. When I was about a half-block from the main entrance, I noticed a woman approaching me. She was wearing a blue shirt, identifying her as a member of the Globe Field crew.

- “Sir, looks like you could use some help. I’ll call for a wheelchair.”
- “Thanks. That’s okay, I’ve made it this far. Am I near the will call window?”
- “Yep, just to the right of the security gates.” She touched my shoulder, “Are you sure you’re okay? I’m worried about you.”
- “Yep, I see it. I can make it. No need to bother. ...God love those Texans.

I made it to will call, purchased the tickets. Holly made it to a remote parking place, then hoofed it to the entrance where I awaited her and Bitzi. The space cost \$55 for the privilege of parking about a half-mile from our seats. I’m not one to bicker about prices, but the fee for parking was semi-extortion. As for the tickets to the first day’s rodeo performance: \$155 each. (Our dog got in free.) Recalling the old days when admittance to rodeos was free or nearly so, I was surprised about this price---especially after we sat and watched the show for a few minutes.

## A One-Ring Circus

While walking to our seats, we passed by at least 30 booths and carts selling everything from tequila to T-shirts---and that was going around only ¼ of the huge walkway that circled the seating sections. Once settled-down, we looked onto the rodeo arena and beheld the display shown in Figure 2. Not like the old days.



Figure 2. Where are the horses and cattle?

The size of blue emblem and star dwarfed the cowboys and cowgirls who were warming-up in the arena. In fairness to this spectacle, the arena itself was well-lighted, not spotlighted as shown here. Periodically, the star also took on the colors of red and blue, all to the tunes of semi rock and roll music.

Amplified music at a rodeo? Hype, like a used-car salesman, even before the events began? We did not need this drivel. Maybe I could have lived with a much less-loud rendition of a C&W song, say, “Momma, don’t let your babies to grow up to be cowboys.” But the music bordered on hard rock.

The music was amplified so loud that Holly and I had to shield our ears with our hands. Bitzi started shaking. Heretofore, calm as a cucumber, our puppy must have been startled by the loud music, the decibel-defying hype from an announcer, and the crowds’ shouts at (yet) nothing but light and sounds. It was a circus-like atmosphere.



Figure 3. A warning...unheeded.

I had been attracted to this rodeo after learning it was one of the finest in the country, featuring the country’s best rodeo hands and livestock. If I were to attend just one more rodeo, this was a good choice. The online advertisements, one shown in Figure 3, sold me on buying tickets for the rodeo, plane fares, rental car, and hotel.

I regret to report that we left after a couple of hours of what I can only call an obnoxious and ostentatious distortion of a revered part of America’s culture. I might as well have been at a professional hockey match.

But good fortune had come along. The initial event on this first day was the cutting horse contest. It was one of the main reasons I had come to the rodeo. I had recalled my days on dad’s ranch, of my father, my brothers, and hired hands routinely cutting cattle from a herd. Of many rodeos, where, without fanfare and with a sparse crowd, the cowboys and cowgirls reenacted what they did most every day on their local ranches.

But the noise and bright flashing lights obliged us to leave the performance. Maybe it was because of our cantankerous old age. Other spectators did not seem to mind. Maybe it was my

past experiences with rodeos and my general dislike for hyped-up basketball, football, and hockey games. I watch these sports for the pleasure of seeing humans excel in athletics.

We left our seats and began looking for wheelchair assistance. After a while, we came across a help booth. The poor souls at the booth were enduring sounds---for two days and nights--so loud we had to bend down to their ears and almost shout at them.

I asked one of the assistants how she tolerated the noise. She pointed to her ear plugs and offered us some. In the meantime, they had summoned a wheelchair. I sat down in it, and we began about a quarter- to half-mile trek to our car. The wheelchair person (WP) said he would get me to our car, even over a gravel filled lot.

- I said to the WP, “No, that’s alright. I’m pretty mobile. Get us to the lot entrance, and I can walk the rest of the way. No sense in your trying to navigate this thing over a lot of rocks.”
- WP, “No sir. I’ll get you to your car, come hell or high water!”
- And he did. Ever so graciously, as we had trouble finding the car in a huge lot, he gave words of encouragement to Holly as she searched for our vehicle. If all people on this earth were as kind as this wheelchair person, we would have less trouble around us. ...God love those Texans.

### Rodeos of the Past

Before we examine this modern version of a rodeo, let’s take a short diversion to past times and old-time rodeos. Dad gave me this photo (Figure 4) of a rodeo that took place near Crossroads, New Mexico.



**Figure 4. An early rodeo.**

He said the contest happened around 1917. There were no corrals, neon lights, or rock and roll music. The cowboys occasionally got together to compete in the riding tasks they performed on ranches in the vicinity. Later, we did the same on our ranch in southeastern New Mexico. Dad had built a small arena where relatives and neighbors paid calls to visit and pass the time with their horses and cattle.

Of course, the photo does not reflect later rodeos, ones I attended in the 1940s, 50s, and 60s. Nonetheless, rodeos in New Mexico and Texas remained low-key and unpretentious for many years. I was not prepared for the rodeo in Arlington.

Figure 5 shows two photos of my brother, Tom, and my sister-in-law, Kaky. The pictures were taken of Tom and Kak’s performances at a rodeo in New Mexico in the 1960s. The two met at a rodeo, married, and kept competing in rodeos for many years.

As you can see, steer wrestling (bull dogging) is not for the faint hearted. And the barrel race, like the cutting horse contest, requires considerable skill on the part of the rider. Kaky worked with her horse for many hours to become an exceptional barrel racer. Tom also worked-out extensively, and even had his own steer to practice on.



**Figure 5. Members of the Black family plying their trade and love.**

Figure 6 captures much of the spirit of these former rodeos and the toughness of the rodeo hands. The rider of the steer was my niece, Jennifer---all of ten years of age. Brother Tom, with shades on, is guiding the steer out of the chute.

Jennifer was riding a steer that did not have its horns clipped. Those were pre-OSHA times, pre-coddling times. Times before bull riders wore Stetson hats, and not Nike football helmets.

See the hat on the rider in Figure 4---No football helmet. The riders knew the risks and rode anyway. Today, some bull riders, who certainly know the risks of a bull ride, do not choose another way to spend their time. They change the event so they can emulate the legendary cowboy and keep their insurance rates down.



**Figure 6. Before America began protecting everyone.**

If you are not willing to take the risks associated with an endeavor, any endeavor, then find another way to spend your time. Don't change the sport or profession to suit your personal needs. A cowboy wearing a football helmet is not exactly the Marlboro Man. More to the point,

it is degrading to *America's most prized legacy*: the American West's way of life, the way of the cowboy and cowgirl. Nowadays, enacting the scene in Figure 5 would be impossible.

I recognize will I likely be tagged by some readers as uncaring. In my younger days, I chose a profession whose odds were not in my favor that I would survive some beach survey assignments in Vietnam. I went anyway, and I did not ask for special dispensation. The Underwater Demolition Teams did not furnish a "helmet" to its frogmen. Obviously, I carry a bias on this matter, but one based on experience and a choice I made.

Back to the present, where we cut to the chase, the cutting horse contest.

### The Cutting Horse Contest<sup>1</sup>

The Arlington rodeo featured the best cutting horse teams in the world. As shown in the first photo in Figure 7, the contest begins with a rider (most riders are men) taking his horse into a herd of cattle. Next, he and his horse separate the herd until they face one cow or calf, as shown in the second photo in Figure 7. Notice the horse is helping the rider in steering the lone calf away from the rest of the cattle.

Then, it becomes a contest of the calf trying to join the herd, while the cowboy and his horse try to keep the calf (or cow) separated, as shown in the third photo in Figure 7. Of course, in a working situation on an open pasture, the animal would likely be roped to aid in the operation.

The contest lasts two and one-half minutes in which judges assess the skill by which the horse and rider control the calf.



<sup>1</sup> Photos in this section are courtesy of Bing.



**Figure 6. Horse and rider cut the cow or calf from the herd.**

Although we had tickets, we spent the next day staying away from the rodeo. We found an extraordinary art gallery, the Sid Richardson Museum in downtown Fort Worth. It had two rooms full of art by Fredric Remington and Charles Russell, two of my favorite artists.

I suspect most of us who grew up in the southwest, in the cowboy culture, in the rodeo world, are disappointed in what has happened to this American icon. The rodeo has been a symbol to the world of some of the best attributes of this country.

But then, I have stopped watching the Super Bowl half-time show. A spectacle of excess, the show uses blinding lights and ear-deafening sounds, disguised as music, to awe the fans. I always liked the long-defunct football half-time performance of marching bands. But then, I always liked John Philip Sousa.

The saving grace for this trip is that I have updated my kick-the-bucket list. It once again contains my self-promise to attend at least one more rodeo. The cutting horse and rider have not changed over many years. They remain as graceful, powerful, athletic, and elegant as ever. I want to see them again.