

Shortgrass Country

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11-19-70

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Each November, San Angelo has a two day roping contest. On Saturdays, calves are roped; on Sundays, steers are put on the ground by a procedure that is known as "fairgrounding." This fairgrounding business, as most of you know, is nothing more than hooking a rope on the horns of 750 pounds of a Mexican steer running full speed ending with the steer being turned a sort of an oddly directed somersault.

Anybody who has the athletic ability to win six events at the World Olympics can learn to be a calf or steer tumbler. Only 44 months of constant practice will put the poorest prospect in condition to compete in amateur rodeos. Don't let anyone tell you that 15 years of training won't put a student in shape to compete with the boys at the San Angelo affair. Rodeo announcers do a lot of blabbing about how skilled ropers are, but it can be proved that one out of every 200 ordinary men has a chance of being a passable kind of rope slinger. The odds would run higher if only professional athletes were included.

Even in the big leagues, like the Wool Capital festival, you see some pokey times made. This year two matched ropers spent over two minutes apiece to rope and tie 12 calves. Their overall averages ate up close to 17.5 seconds. Plenty of movieland cowboys can unholster their six shooters that fast; lots and lots of Hollywood punchers can tune a six-string guitar in 15 seconds. People sure do have a strange appreciation of speed. As old as I am, I can get out of a pickup in 17 seconds, or I can if the door is already open.

The roping was hard to see from our seats. You could see the horizon real well, but the arena was a long ways off. I bought three reserved seats for my wife, myself, and two guests, thinking that the action would be so hot that somebody would be standing up hollering most of the time. I couldn't see any sense in giving \$3 for standing and yelling room.

The seating arrangement didn't work at all. Our guests were too sophisticated to rouse from their seats and my wife was too disgusted to pay attention. Twenty years ago, she would have thought it was very romantic to share a grandstand seat. In the days of our courtship, she wouldn't have done all that grumbling about me sitting on her dress or jabbing her in the ribs. Love's flame shouldn't dwindle in so short a period, but I guess they all get cranky after they've had a few kids. How was I supposed to know that our visitors were going to take up two seats? The printing on a 2x3-inch rodeo ticket doesn't say how big the seat is going to be. I should have known that chinchy bunch at the wool capital wouldn't allow an extra inch of space without charging a ridiculous price.

By intermission, two bad investments in a \$1 pot had wrecked me. From the way my wife and guests were acting, I could see that they would be eager to turn down Aristotle Onassis' loan. So I went over on the shady side to see if any of my big shot compadres might extend a friendly advance. It's no fun being anywhere broke and it sure isn't any fun to be at a roping broke.

The first fellows I struck had been family friends for 40 years. They gave me a greeting that would have been overacted at a French king's reception, but when I told them of my ill fortune, they got the same look on their face that banker's have during a market-breathing drouth. I imagine that incidents like this are the reason that old Nero could fiddle a merry tune while ancient Rome went up in flames. Nero probably had gone busted at a chariot race some time or the other, and didn't mind seeing his home town fall into ruins.

Not much happened after that. As I left for home, I told one of those ticket swindling Angeloans he'd had his last shot at my hip pocket. Next year, they're going to have to rob somebody else.