

# How the Ellensburg Rodeo was born

Contributed by Mike Allen, Ellensburg Rodeo Hall of Fame Association

The Ellensburg Rodeo is steeped in traditions. The men and women who founded the Ellensburg Rodeo in 1923 were ranchers, farmers, Indians, and community-minded citizens working in a group effort of huge proportions. They were motivated not only by a desire to celebrate a vanishing frontier way of life, but also by a desire to promote their community and generate commerce. From their efforts, Washington State's world famous Ellensburg Rodeo was born.

Rodeo is a relatively young sport. It is based on contests from cattle roundups, Mexican fiestas (called *encharreada*), Wild West Shows, and Indian "pow wows." Rodeos emerged during the last quarter of the nineteenth century just as the "Cattle Kingdom" had reached its summit and the West was a more settled region. Some of the first rodeos were impromptu amateur affairs held in conjunction with the annual roundups in cattle country. Having gathered together their herds for branding and sorting, cowboys often used the occasion to exhibit their skills in riding, roping and bulldogging. Competitions sprang up naturally among top hands as their fellow cowboys looked on.



But when non cowboy spectators began to appear on the scene, these simple ranch rodeos began to make the transition that would eventually take them into town and into the world of modern rodeo. The newly emerging townsmen of the post frontier west possessed a huge appetite for nostalgic re-creations of the "Wild West" in dime novels and Zane Grey Westerns, and in the rodeo arena. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Westerners flocked by the tens of thousands to enjoy the new sport of rodeo.



Ellensburg lay in the heart of a thriving central Washington cattle region. Thousands of cattle and horses grazed the rich meadows and semi-arid plains of the early Kittitas Valley. The roundup competitions that characterized cattle country were commonplace among the Kittitas cowboys. By the early 1920s, Kittitas Valley cowboys had taken the process one step beyond the

strictly amateur category. Several ranches in the valley were staging contests, or as the locals called them, "Sunday Rodeos."

Clovis Chartrand, a long time valley resident, remembered one of these Sunday rodeos at the "upper river bridge, which is where the Thorp Bridge is now, west of Ellensburg." Ben Ferguson, a Kittitas Valley cowhand and rodeo competitor described his family's promotion of an important Sunday rodeo:

"[We] had all them horses and, my brother and a couple of friends put on a rodeo.... My brother, he just wanted to have some fun. Just got a neighbor boy or two up here, went out and rounded them [cattle and horses] up. They got a wagon load of poles and made the corral and made the arena [and] chutes."

During the early 1920s the Fergusons were staging rodeos "every other Sunday." It was not unusual for 100 to 300 spectators to attend.

The economic potential of all this activity did not go unnoticed. Ferguson remembered that several townspeople saw "that we was having a big time" and began to discuss the possibility of staging an annual rodeo in the Ellensburg city limits (the Kittitas County Fair had already sponsored rodeo exhibition events).

Sometime around 1922 a group evidently came to ask the Ferguson brothers to assist in the staging of the first annual Ellensburg Rodeo: "They [the townsmen] come out and got us to go in there [to Ellensburg] and furnish the horses."



Actually, three groups combined with local ranchers to create the Ellensburg Rodeo. The Kittitas

County Fair Board, which included townspeople and farmers alike, proposed the inclusion of a rodeo in the venue of the Kittitas County Fair, held annually in the early fall. The Fair had already sponsored intermittent rodeo events. An annual rodeo, they reasoned, would enhance the quality of the fair and increase attendance. Local businessmen and professionals were quick to jump on the rodeo bandwagon. A rodeo would draw out-of-town visitors to Ellensburg, generating tourist revenue and promoting the community's business prospects and prestige in the region.

Local Indians formed the vital fourth group of the rodeo coalition. The Kittitas Band of the Yakama Nation had, for hundreds of years, hosted an annual fall pilgrimage to what Columbia Plateau Indians called their Kittitas "Meeting Grounds." Kittitas and Yakama Indians (including the SoHappy, Nason, and, later, Aronica families) were anxious to continue this Meeting Ground tradition. They saw a fall rodeo as an



opportunity to continue their dancing, gambling, and horse racing traditions into the modern age.

These rodeo boosters immediately faced a huge obstacle: they needed a great deal of money to buy land for the grounds, construct an arena and stage the proposed three day event. At the urging of newspaper editor Clifford

Kaynor, businessman Clarence Fitterer and several others, the Kittitas County Commissioners started the ball rolling on April 1, 1923, budgeting \$10,000 for the purchase of 18 acres adjacent to the fairgrounds in northeast Ellensburg. State Representative Phil Adams garnered some state government support. Since the land cost \$6,450, the balance would be used to construct the arena and bleachers. Still, this was not nearly enough money to pay for the lumber, tools, horse teams and huge labor force necessary to construct the grounds. In a bold move, the Fair Board called upon valley residents to donate materials and labor for the construction of the rodeo grounds, and they set Thursday, June 14, as the date of a "field day" to build the new arena.

Community work projects like the Ellensburg Rodeo field day are just as much a legacy of Western heritage as the pioneers' individualism and independent spirit. Barn raisings, corn-husking parties, quilting bees and cattle roundups all exemplified the volunteer, community-minded nature of Western America. Ellensburg's field day was actually a series of work days held in June of 1923. However, the work reached a crescendo on June 14 when over 500 valley men and women turned out to work on the grounds.



The *Ellensburg Evening Record* served as the voice of the field day organizers. On Monday, June 11, the Record previewed the official plan: *Every Man Urged to Report to his Strawboss at 7:30 Thursday Morning. All*

*superintendents and foremen have been over job and know work to be done, men unassigned should bring picks and shovels.*

In a Tuesday article entitled "Women of the Valley and Town Respond" the Record discussed the "Feed" local women had planned for Thursday noon. Coffee, "weenies on buns," ice cream and other morsels had been donated by local merchants and

would be prepared and served by women on the grounds building site. Another Tuesday article stated optimistically that "Movie Men May Come to Field Day" and noted that one moviemaker wanted to film a "good slow action comedy of some banker or lawyer in the pick and shovel brigade."



Five hundred men with over two hundred horses assembled on Thursday and set to work. They graded a road, a racetrack and the grounds, and rerouted Wilson Creek around the site. They finished building corrals, fences, three bridges and a grandstand, plumbed new water mains, dug ditches and pruned trees. Their accomplishments were, as the *Record's* headlines shouted, amazing: "COMMUNITY EFFORT IS SUCCESSFUL. Business Men, Farmers Work on Fair Grounds. Sight of Toilers Working in Common Cause Inspiring." After several hundred men stayed over to work on Friday, the *Record's* headlines concluded that "Cooperative Work Has Astonishing Results." The rodeo arena was ready to go.

Kittitas County Fair and Rodeo Board members, townspeople, ranchers, farmers, and Indians spent the remainder of the summer planning the first Ellensburg Rodeo. Dr. H. F. Pfenning served as "superintendent" for a three day show that was slated for September 13-15. Pfenning and his committee began by inviting the entire Yakama Indian nation to attend and participate in the rodeo. Then they scheduled 18 major events and advertised the rodeo as the "greatest Wildest Roundup in the State." By early September Kittitas Valley residents waited anxiously to see if the upcoming rodeo would be the great success for which its creators hoped.

Howard Thomas, who helped organize and competed in over ten Ellensburg rodeos, remembered that first rodeo as "a good one." Mrs. Lillian Pope noted, "You knew pretty



near everybody that was riding in it ... it really made a difference [because] it was really more of a local show." Chalmer Cobain described the contestants as "regular cowboys. They wasn't these drugstore cowboys or these fellas that don't do nothing only just follow rodeos. They was real cowboys and they would ride and have wild horse races, stagecoach races, land chariot races." In addition to the events Cobain remembered, there

were grand entry parades, bucking broncs and bulls, calf roping, relay races, bulldogging, and special races for Indian contestants. *The Record* reported that the "Riders are Skillful and Horses and Steers are Wild." More importantly, the *Record* noted that well over 500 rodeo fans had been turned away and that "Hundreds Are in Overflow Crowd; Grandstand Filled."



Despite a few problems caused by the large crowds, most in attendance reportedly "yelled and cheered and thoroughly enjoyed Ellensburg's first real rodeo." Local cowboy Frank Woods was named "Champion Buckaroo of the Roundup" at the conclusion of Saturday's show. The *Record* applauded Dr. Pfenning and the Fair and Rodeo boards and "the hard work of the men responsible for its success." On Sunday, the stock was driven home, cowboys packed up their gear, the Indians rode back to the Yakama Reservation, and local businessmen counted their generous receipts. Everyone looked forward to the next year's rodeo.

In retrospect, it is interesting to speculate on the motivations of the Ellensburg Rodeo's founders. It is no doubt partially true to say that Ellensburgers staged a rodeo as a spontaneous celebration of their frontier heritage. Yet the Ellensburg Rodeo was far more professional than a ranch rodeo or even a "Sunday rodeo." Interestingly, the desire to stage a rodeo can be attributed partially to nostalgia. This was a nostalgia felt by townsmen and many valley residents for a pioneer way of life that was already vanishing in their world of automobiles, airplanes, moving picture shows and radio broadcasts.

Modern Chamber of Commerce booster spirit combined with old-fashioned frontier characteristics to produce Ellensburg's first rodeo. Townsmen, businessmen and



professional men were in the forefront of the rodeo movement. They were joined by local cattlemen and farmers, and all looked upon the event as a grand way to foster business and promote their community around the Northwest.

Of course, traditions of the frontier still remained, and in one important way the people of the Kittitas Valley relied upon their frontier heritage to create their rodeo. Volunteerism—the community spirit of the

pioneer days—provided the base upon which the Ellensburg Rodeo was built. Without volunteer, community labor, the first bucking bronc may have never exploded out of the shoots into Ellensburg's splendid new rodeo arena.