

# Rodeo came of age in 1913

*Born in 1911, it took only two years for it to become more than a quaint curiosity*

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The Salinas Californian

As every Salinas school kid knows — or should know — Salinas' signature event, the California Rodeo, was born in 1911 as a Wild West show to fill up the time between trotting horse races at Sherwood Track.

This year's rodeo is billed as the 95th annual installment of the cowboy Olympics. That's true. But if you want to pin down a date on which the Rodeo changed from a mere amusement to a world-class event capable of standing on its own four hooves, you need to scan the pages of history a little more closely.

## Its origins

It was in the spring of 1913 when Frank Griffin, one of the directors of the inaugural 1911 event, got a burr under his saddle. The first two "exhibition" rodeos had been such marvelous successes, Griffin believed, it was time for the buckaroos to break the sinewy bonds of the trotting race association and grab for the big time.

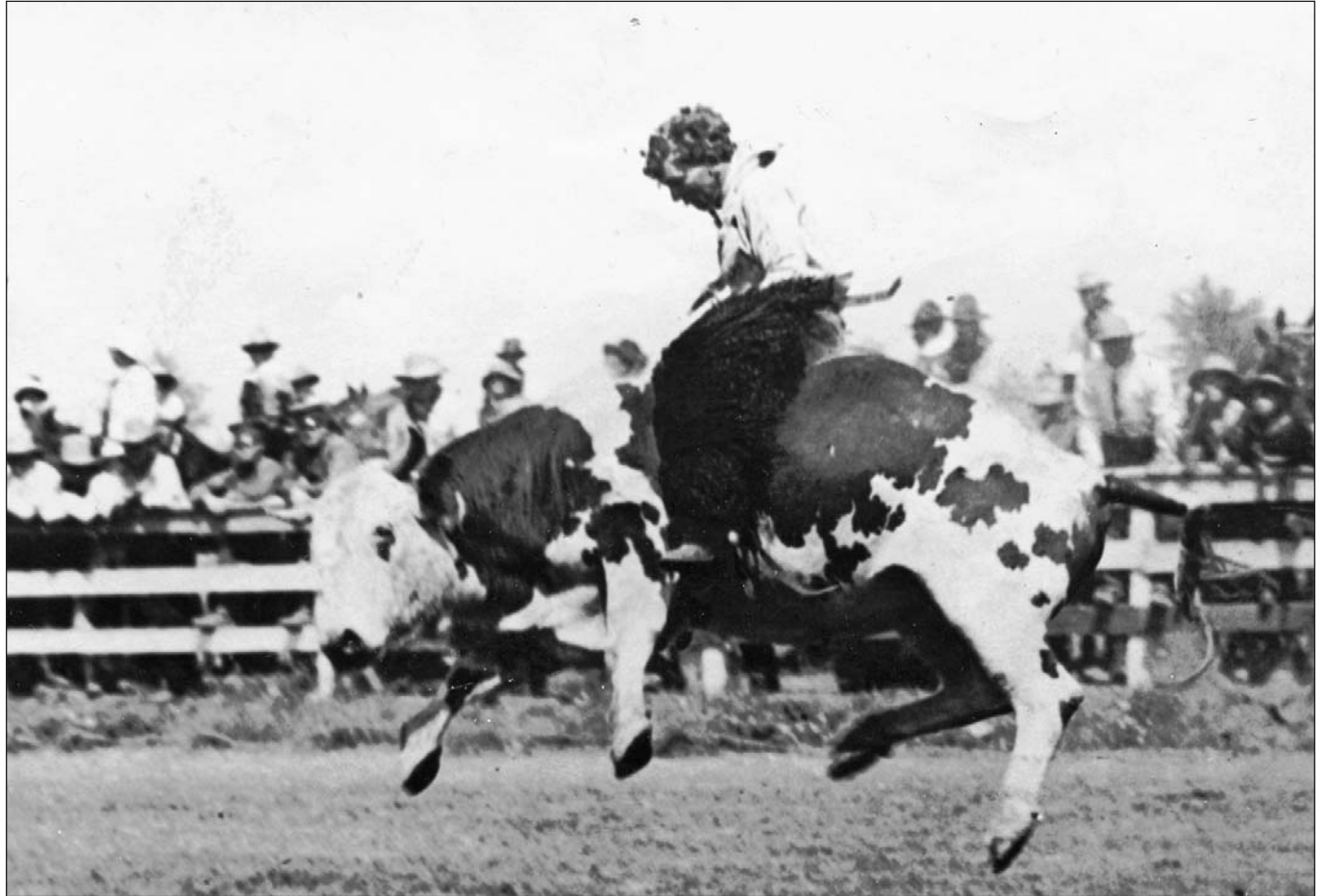
Griffin used his business acumen to have the California Rodeo incorporated with a board of directors in order to win official sanction from the godfathers of the sport of rodeo and attract the nation's best cowboy talent.

There were other changes, too. Under the direction of Dr. Garth Parker, official rodeo physician, the El Colmado del Rodeo parade, better known by its shorter name, The Colmo, was organized. The rodeo itself was expanded to encompass 19 events. A brand new grandstand, 90 feet long with 48 new box seats, was erected in anticipation of larger crowds.

That done, Griffin and his cohorts needed to drum up publicity. A byproduct of the first two unofficial rodeos was that the influx of tourists and day-trippers from San Francisco and points north made Salinas' cash registers ring, not just at the racetrack, but at hotels, eateries and general stores. Griffin wondered what might happen if officials actually went out and tried to attract customers.

Later that spring, Griffin, Ed and Harry Breen and A.J. Zabala, competent horsemen all, led a cavalcade of Salinas buckaroos on a publicity parade through downtown San Francisco.

See **HISTORY**, Page 10



THE SALINAS CALIFORNIAN FILE PHOTO

**Curley Fletcher and the bucking bull he drew in the 1915 Rodeo go airborne. The California Rodeo Salinas began as an effort to pump up the trotting-horserace season in 1911 and has evolved into a world-class spectacle.**

## TIMELINE

Highlights in the history and evolution of the California Rodeo Salinas:

**1870:** First informal rodeo held in Salinas.

**1872:** The Monterey County Agricultural Association constructs a racetrack, grandstand, stables, bar and restaurant on 69.4 acres donated to the city of Salinas.

**1878:** The name of the park changes to Sherwood Park.

**1888:** Rodeo begins charging admission.

**1911:** Salinas holds first Big Week.

**1912:** Rodeo includes cowgirls in competition, and dignitaries and politicians are guests. Jesse Stahl steals the show as he rides a previously untamed bucking horse, "Glass Eye."

**1913:** Rodeo association erects new 90-foot-long grandstand with 48 new boxes.

**1913:** Frank Griffin leads convoy of Salinas Buckaroos on a publicity parade through downtown San Francisco.

**1914:** The rodeo continues under the name "California Rodeo."

**1915:** Panama-Pacific International

Exposition in San Francisco causes association to cancel Rodeo.

**1921:** 10th anniversary of Big Week.

**1923:** First Colmo del Rodeo parade through downtown Salinas.

**1924:** Outbreak of hoof-and-mouth disease cancels rodeo.

**1926:** Rodeo crowns first queen, Bernice Donahue.

**1928:** Former rodeo clown, Abe Lefton, entertains crowds as events announcer.

**1929:** Jesse Stahl, arguably the most famous black cowboy, retires.

**1930:** Salinas Exchange Club sponsors and conducts first Kiddie Kapers Parade.

**1939:** Brahman bulls, large and unpredictable, are used for the first time in the bull-riding contest.

**1940:** California Rodeo declines opportunity to become the site of the Monterey County Fair.

**1942:** War causes Big Week to shut down. Government takes over rodeo grounds.

**1947:** With war over, association reinstates Big Week.

**1950:** Abe Lefton retires as Rodeo announcer.

**1957:** California Rodeo receives a joint resolution of the state Senate and Assembly, which commends the board of directors "for the great service they render annually to the state of California and its people."

**1972:** Rodeo purchases 145 acres northeast of Sherwood Drive and deeds it to the city for additional recreation facilities.

**1979:** Rodeo association creates California Rodeo Historical Commission.

**1980:** First Round-Up Barbecue welcomes guests.

**1985:** Rodeo cancels Colmo parade indefinitely because of safety issues.

**1994:** All contestants at the California Rodeo have to be members of the PCRA.

**1996:** The old grandstands are demolished.

**1997:** Rededication of grandstands.

**2002:** Harden Association gives California Rodeo Historical Committee \$25,000 grant to improve museum.