



Big Week a tonic for city confidence

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Salinas needed a boost back in 1911 and turned a trotting-horse race into a festival of the West

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Big Week and the California Rodeo Salinas are world-class happenings, a thrilling test of man and animal and a merciless clock or a strict judge. But for Salinas and the Salinas Valley it represents much more than that, more than an Olympics for cowboys. Big Week was the tonic that gave Salinas its swagger back and chased away its blues and crisis of confidence. The mouse of a town that roared at its founding that it was destined to become the "Chicago of the

West," found itself in 1911 with a stagnant economy, rising crime and little else to distinguish itself as the "Peoria of the West," let alone Chicago. A population that boomed a decade earlier flattened out. The only thing to commend Salinas in 1911 was its place in the trotting-horse race circuit and that, like everything else, was on the decline. What civic leaders did back then was decide to juice up the horse races with a Wild West show between heats. It just kind of snowballed from there over time:



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■ Someone suggested urging everyone in town to "dress Western" for "One Big Week."



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■ Parades every day, someone else suggested. Parades on horseback from Main Street to the racetrack at Sherwood Park.



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■ Collect good food and plenty of it. Get folks together for feasting and dancing and fun.



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■ Set aside a special night for kids to have their own parade.

Then a curious thing happened. Word got out and people from out of town came to be a part of it. Merchants were happy, hoteliers were happy, restaurateurs were happy. And a city that had almost come to the end of its tether smiled again. In the 97 years between that first rodeo and this year's extravaganza, Salinas has emerged as a civic force — maybe not Chicago, but a thriving, diverse community of dreamers and doers. And just when it looks like present-day Salinas needs a bit of a confidence tonic itself, here comes Big Week.

Big Week is the week Salinas takes off the white shirt and tie, dresses Western and has a parade — or several parades. Whether it's the celebrities, such as professional bull rider Chad Denton, to sign autographs, the horse parade, center, or the Kiddie Kapers Parade, Salinas always has a little giddyup in its stride and a bit of a twang in its speech. So dig out your cowboy hat, pardner, and let's ride.