

BORN ON THE FOURTH OF JULY

AMERICAN RODEO AND ITS ELUSIVE VINTAGE POSTERS

By John Faubion

Collecting vintage rodeo posters can be an exercise in patience, and, in some cases, futility. Particularly if the goal is to acquire the rarest of the genre: Early posters that promoted rodeos held on the Fourth of July. Renowned print authority Nicholas D. Lowry, president of Swann Auction Galleries in New York City and longtime appraiser (the one with the flashy plaid suits) on the PBS television program, *Antiques Roadshow*, told me “There are not a lot of rodeo posters out there, per se, more Wild West Show imagery... .” This was confirmed by my own exhaustive search. The earliest of these inexpensive flyers were printed on newsprint and only needed to last long enough to attract participants and spectators from local and neighboring communities. Very few of these survived. Even the later, sturdier, pre-1940s examples are a challenge to find.

Most of the vintage rodeo posters I located were found at The Dickinson Research Center at The National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, with the help of Donald W. Reeves, their Curator of Cowboy Culture. Reeves points out that “The Museum preserves and interprets the finest and most extensive collection of rodeo memorabilia in the world with holdings of more than 1,250 objects and 200,000 historic images.” As testament to the rarity of vintage rodeo posters, this impressive collection has only one from a rodeo held on the Fourth of July (Dewey, Oklahoma, Roundup, 1923).

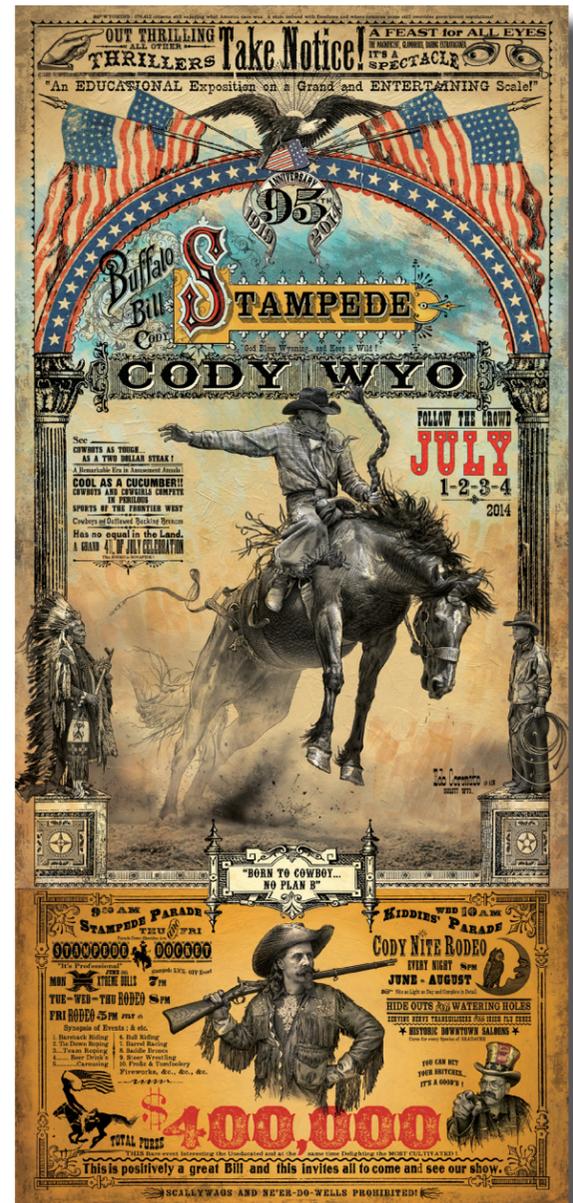
Aside from their scarcity, why are early Fourth of July rodeo posters special? Scholars seem to agree that rodeo, unlike our other national pastimes - baseball and football - was actually born on the Fourth of July. And so were a few notable rodeo “firsts.” In his 2010 book *Arena Legacy: The Heritage of American Rodeo*, author Richard C. Rattenbury writes that: “During seasonal roundups or at the end of long trail drives, the hands from different outfits often challenged one another to matches in working skills such as saddle-bronc riding, steer roping, and calf roping.” And: “Perhaps the first recorded competition of the kind occurred at Deer Trail, Colorado Territory, on the Fourth of July in 1869.” It was later reported that a young Englishman there received the “quite-unofficial title of ‘Champion Bronco Buster of the Plains’ from his comrades.” More than a decade later, “Buffalo Bill” Cody’s *Old Glory Blow Out*, held in North Platte, Nebraska, on the Fourth of July, 1882, featured some of the cowboy events that are seen in today’s rodeos. Its success led to Cody’s popular Wild West shows that met with international acclaim (and generated the more enduring posters that Lowry referenced above). On the Fourth of July, 1883, the town of Pecos, Texas, held what it refers to as the first “semiformal rodeo with an audience,” and on the Fourth of July, 1888, the town of Prescott, Arizona, held what it refers to as the first “annual” rodeo.

As Fourth of July rodeos grew in popularity, lavish parades were often held as their opening ceremonies. One of America’s oldest Fourth of July rodeos with an opening parade is the Cody Stampede, held each summer in Cody, Wyoming. Since 1920, the town has wowed spectators with an annual display of patriotism that causes hearts to swell with pride. Though the Stampede’s earliest posters remain elusive, my search led to an unexpected treasure: The 2014 Buffalo Bill Cody Stampede Rodeo poster produced by artist Bob Coronato. In it, Coronato has captured the patriotism and bravado of the long history of rodeo, and its athletes, as perhaps no other artist, past or present has.

A far cry from the disposable early rodeo posters, Coronato’s rodeo posters (he’s produced nine unique images so far) call upon his decades of experience as a painter, etcher, and printmaker. “The poster” he says, “begins as a sketch, then I draw the main images as an intaglio etching, turn the etching into a contemporary silkscreen and put it on an acrylic covered board that I first paint. Then the entire painting is covered with oil paint in transparent layers. Takes about 6 months from start to finish.” The 59” tall original is then reduced and printed on high quality paper on a large offset press. The finished posters are collected all over the world, shipped to more than a dozen countries.

Like rodeo itself, the popularity of rodeo posters, vintage and otherwise, is likely to grow. Quoting Don Reeves: “Since the late 19th century, rodeo competitions have gradually evolved from amateur contests among working hands to a multimillion-dollar industry for professional athletes – each one quintessentially American.”

John Faubion has researched, written, and lectured about Lawrence Tenney Stevens since 1995. He was award-winning co-curator of a major 1996 Stevens retrospective exhibition at the Tempe Historical Museum in Arizona. His discoveries in the Stevens archives contributed to the preservation efforts of the 1936 Dallas Centennial Fair site, and led to the recreation of three of Stevens’s monumental sculptures there. He is writing a book about Stevens and is planning related exhibitions for 2016 and beyond. He established the Western column in the Journal of the Print World and welcomes your feedback and suggestions for future articles. johnfaubion@basicisp.net



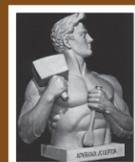
Bob Coronato, 2014 Buffalo Bill Cody Stampede Rodeo Poster, Offset lithograph on paper 38 1/2" x 17 1/2"

LAWRENCE TENNEY STEVENS (1896-1972)



"Spirit of the Stampede," 8" x 10"
Photo of bronze by Lawrence Tenney Stevens, 1931.

Photo of one-and-only bronze, modeled from life, by Lawrence Tenney Stevens after watching bronc-riding champion Nick Knight ride “the world’s greatest bucking horse,” Midnight, at the 1931 Cody Stampede. In July of 1932, the bronze was the centerpiece of the first sculpture exhibition held at Cody’s Buffalo Bill Museum.



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