

Opinion: Don't let Stampede spoilsports call us down

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The anti-rodeo crowd started squawking early this year, more than two weeks before sneak-a-peek. Peter Fricker of the Vancouver Humane Society delivered a self-righteous anti-American rant in these pages far outweighing his compassion for animals. Worse, he denounced the myth of the cowboy because cowboys are an American invention.

The Stampede has become an international tournament, akin in its way to the recent soccer competition in South Africa. It's one thing to give voice to anti-Americanism. But criticizing a myth, which is just about the only way human beings express and convey meanings to one another, is inexcusable.

Northrop Frye, Canada's greatest literary critic, said: "History aims at telling what happened; myth tells what happens all the time." The Stampede rodeo is rooted in western history and embodies the myths that give meaning to life on the northern range.

The Stampede grew out of the Wild West shows of the late 19th century. I can still recall "winning of the West" pageants at the Stampede when I was a kid. It was a playfully triumphalist story and everybody knew it, cowboys and Indians alike. It was a story of hope, of winning, of reconciliation and of gratitude.

The myth of the cowboys lives on in the actions of volunteers and competitors, and in what the Stampede calls, rather bloodlessly, its "values." What they mean is culture. So let's get specific. In the Rodeo Cowboy's Prayer, we read: "As cowboys, Lord, we don't ask for any special favours. We ask only that you let us compete in this arena as in life's arena." No special favours. There's a "cultural value" worth cultivating.

In the rodeo infield, there is plenty of competition. Among cowboys, but also between two-legged and four-legged athletes. As in life's arena, the luck of the draw counts. Even the most skilled cowboy cannot win if his ride won't buck.

There is danger from broncs and bulls, also as in life's arena. Bulls embody brute meanness and broncs are simply wild. Both must be tamed for civil culture to exist. Nothing is guaranteed. No special favours. The legendary bull and bronc rider Jim Shoulders said: "People don't want to see a cowboy die, but they want to be there when he does." This is not sadistic voyeurism but bearing witness to reality.

Things have changed since the old days. Today, the stress is on manliness, strength, independence and laconic toughness. Women haven't competed in rough stock events for more than a half-century. I'm not sure that's an improvement.

Bull-dogging, which began when cowboys imitated bulldogs and bit the lip of a steer to calm him, has turned into steer wrestling. Wild cow milking is gone, despite the fact it was an everyday part of cowboy life -- there is no Cremo on the range.

Bronc riding and calf roping are still there, not least because they demand present-day cowboy skills. Visit a ranch during branding and you'll see cowboys roping, riding and herding. Or visit the Glenbow for a history lesson. All this is lost on our west coast critic.

The fact is there is no negotiating with humourless fanatics. What is particularly irritating about the advice from Vancouver is that the Calgary Humane Society monitors the treatment of Stampede stock and takes care of animals. The Vancouver bunch talks big and urges the inhabitants of the Lower Mainland to neuter their kitties.

Spoilsports have become part of the Stampede tradition. In 1912, Genevieve Lipsett-Skinner wrote in the Calgary Daily Herald of "the appalling cruelty to the steers chosen to illustrate the prowess of the cowboys in the many art of 'bulldogging.' " She launched her own myth: one of these manly cowboys tore off a steer's horn, which would have been cruel were it not impossible.

The critics' myths have become boring. They have no story worth telling, unlike cowboys who do little else.

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