

Do You Remember?



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The Livermore Rodeo: A Cherished Tradition

The word “rodeo” originally referred to the biannual roundup held by early ranchos in California. In April vaqueros were sent out to collect cattle from the nearby hills and valleys. In those days, no ranchos were fenced. Neighboring owners met at an agreed-upon site to separate the cattle brought in by the vaqueros and mark their calves with brands and earmarks. Sometimes another rodeo was held in July. A neutral person, respected for his wise judgment, was selected to be the *juez de campo* (field judge) for the rodeo. He settled any disputes over ownership of the animals. The water in Los Vaqueros Reservoir covers land once used for rodeos by the Bernal, Marsh, Pacheco, and Livermore families, owners of Rancho el Valle de San Jose, Rancho Los Meganos, Rancho Santa Rita, and Rancho Las Positas respectively. Robert Livermore also owned the reservoir site. The neighboring rancho owners continued to hold rodeos there until the area was fenced in 1863.

Another rodeo site was near today’s Livermore City Hall and Police Station on South Livermore Avenue. Early resident James D. Smith remembered a rodeo there in the early 1850s: “There were probably 2,000 head of cattle, all sizes, including old cows and young calves from the ranges. There were possibly 150 men on horseback, from different ranches—owners, vaqueros, visitors. Only two men were permitted to enter the herd at a time. They located their own stock and carefully drove the animal to the edge of the herd. Then with a rush they would drive it outside and separate it from the large band and drive it some distance away, where other riders took charge.” After the rodeo, a beef was

slaughtered. Three days of celebration followed at a ranchero’s home, with drinking, gambling, dancing, feasting, music, cockfighting, and feats of horsemanship. Gradually these traditions developed into the entertaining western rodeo of today.

One of my favorite stories in local rodeo lore comes from Kathryn McGlinchey Laughlin: in 1917 Captain Joseph S. Concannon, a celebrated horseman, talked a group of about 50 Livermore area riders into competing at the San Jose rodeo. They wanted some bright-colored shirts for the opening parade, so they brought their plain white ones to the McGlinchey girls, who, using crepe paper for color, dyed the shirts in large pots of hot water in their backyard. The contingent left from the McGlinchey home at midnight on June 30. In the San Jose rodeo parade, they carried a large banner and drove a chuck wagon with displays about the Stockmen’s Protective Association, a local group that worked to prevent range fires. The Livermore contestants looked great riding into the arena; however, the crepe paper dye was not colorfast and under the stress of rodeo competition, their underwear and every other piece of clothing soon became green or blue or red or yellow, stained from those bright shirts. Still they had a good time at the rodeo, but they regretted having to go so far for their fun.

One year later, someone had the idea of holding a local rodeo to meet Livermore’s World War I assessment of \$1,200 for the Red Cross. John McGlinchey, president of the Stockmen’s Protective Association, appointed Joseph Concannon, James Gallagher, John Flynn, A.W. Ebright, and Charles Graham to a planning committee. Livermore’s first modern rodeo was held that year, 1918, on James Anderson’s ranch near what are now Interstate 580 and the Portola on-ramp. Thanks to the publicity efforts of G.F. Madsen, proprietor of Livermore’s Bell Theater, Universal Studios filmed the first rodeo, including the colorful grand entry. The newsreel was distributed countrywide. The top event in 1918 was the bucking horse contest, which came with a \$230 prize.

Buoyed by their success, local enthusiasts formed the Livermore Stockmen’s Rodeo Association in April 1919. The organization sold stock at \$25 a share in order to purchase 15 acres of John Callaghan’s vineyard and build a grandstand and bleachers. By July 3, 1919, 2,400 seats were ready, and the second rodeo took place at a site on Lizzie Street, now South Livermore Avenue, not far from Robert Livermore’s original rodeo grounds. At first the Stockmen held the early rodeos, which retained a definite Spanish/Mexican influence, near

the Fourth of July holiday. Later, because of the heat, sponsors changed the date to the second weekend in June.

Today, our rodeo is the largest two-day rodeo in the country. The cost of renting the livestock for the rodeo is about \$130,000 to \$140,000. The cost of putting on the rodeo is about \$350,000. Many organizations and individuals volunteer to help. For example, the Rotary Clubs take charge of the parade and parking. The recent downturn in the economy has been helpful for the rodeo—people have stayed at home to attend local events. During the last four years, the rodeo has been sold out.

In 2008 the Livermore Rodeo Foundation (LRF) was formed, a non-profit (501c3) organization, to ensure that even though something catastrophic happened to a year’s rodeo, contributions to those in need could continue. The home page of LRF’s web site states that the foundation’s “philosophy is keeping the heritage of the Livermore Rodeo alive, for generations to come.” In the last three years, LRF has given \$41,500 to various local organizations, mirroring the charitable purpose of the first Livermore rodeo which raised \$2,500 for the Red Cross. My husband and I will be in the parade on June 8 this year in the 1940 Plymouth pickup truck he restored.

(Readers can reach me at am50homan@yahoo.com.)



Pictured promoting the 1945 rodeo are (back row) Donna Plank, Clara Riggs and Betty Jordan; (front row) Tilli Holm, Margaret Whalen and Noelle Johnson. (Photo courtesy of Noelle Johnson)