

# Do You Remember?



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Livermore City Historian

## JOHNIE SCHNEIDER

On 4 July 1923 tow-headed Johnie Schneider, 19-year-old son of a Stockton area rancher, came in sixth in the saddle bronc contest at Livermore and started an amazing, versatile career in rodeo. For the next 10 years, he garnered a share of the money in every rodeo he entered. His numerous titles included World Champion All-around Cowboy in 1931, World Champion Bull Rider in 1929, 1930, and 1932, Best All-around Cowboy in Australia, 1935-36, and the Hawaiian Islands' Top Cowboy in 1939. Bronc riding, bareback riding, bull riding, steer decorating, relay races, pony express races, single and team roping, bulldogging—he competed in every one. In the 1930 Livermore rodeo program, the name of Johnie Schneider appeared 24 times, and he placed in all but four events. Only five foot six, Johnie had a compact, quick, lithe body that helped him in the competitions. M.M. Hightower wrote in *Hoofs and Horns*, “At a rodeo he did just about everything but drive the water wagon and if they had made this a contest event he, undoubtedly, would have been up there, reins in hand and with the familiar gleam in his eye.”

In 1931 Johnie married Julia Frates, daughter of Highland Road rancher Thomas Frates. They rented a ranch up on Morgan Territory Road for nine years. When not on the rodeo circuit, Johnie

practiced there every day. One important facet of his physical training was jumping rope, even on all fours. On Sundays he drove his family down the dirt road to Livermore to attend early mass at St. Michael's, to buy a *San Francisco Examiner*, and to visit relatives. Such a trip was no easy feat in the rainy season.

In 1935 and 1936 Johnie introduced Australia to American rodeo, traveling to Sydney, Melbourne, Queensland, and New South Wales. He had to ship all the livestock and horses needed by the participants because Aussie thoroughbreds were too light to push cattle around. A friend gave me a pair of Johnie's spurs that he had made in Australia when his gear was stolen. Not only thinking in terms of entertainment, he used the rodeo as a promotion for the horses of the American West, later buying and selling horses, then shipping them to Australia. He followed this with a similar trip to Hawaii in 1939.

In 1939, the Livermore rodeo schedule called for Johnie to ride a Brahma bull that had never been ridden. The audience met the announcement of the event with enthusiastic encouragement. As soon as Johnie nodded his signal, the handler opened the wooden gate, scrambling to get clear of the charging bull. The spinning, vicious, twisting leaps of the 2,000-pound animal whipped up the dust of the area, but Johnie held tightly

to his braided rope with one hand, his ruddy face determined. He kept his other hand high in the air, and at the eight-second horn, slipped off the back of the Brahma. The crowd broke out in a roar of approval, but the bull turned suddenly, scraping his rider in the thigh with one horn and knocking him down. Rodeo clown Homer Holcomb waved his red serape and managed to distract the bull long enough for Johnie to hightail it out of danger.

Johnie hung up his spurs in 1941 and achieved his lifelong dream by buying a ranch at Elk Grove, near Sacramento. After the move he qualified as a California state brand inspector and continued in this position until his retirement in 1969. Julia died at age 36 from cancer. Later Johnie remarried and moved to a 30-acre ranch near Salinas. He and his second wife had twin sons, Tim and Tom, in addition to John, James, and Mary, his three children with Julia. He never gave up his interest in rodeo, however. His second wife, Bernice, recalled that on their wedding day, 23 June 1951, he was a judge at the Salinas rodeo. He also continued his connection with the Livermore rodeo, visiting each year and serving as grand marshal of the rodeo parade in 1964.

Bernice and his friends described Johnie as a man with a wonderful outgoing personality who loved to tell jokes and reminisce about his rodeo days. Reporter James Denison

wrote, “Many still consider him world class, but now his field is story telling,” a reporter wrote about him in 1982. He never fit the stereotypical rough, tough image of a solitary cowboy; he enjoyed his family and even wrote poetry and short stories about his experiences.

Children seemed to be especially drawn to him and his rodeo career. In 1932 the city of Livermore invited its youngsters to join the “Johnie Schneider Club” by paying a fee of one coin—it could be anything from a penny to a quarter. Contributions totaled \$115. The children participating rode in a wagon with Johnie in the rodeo parade, and the city presented him with a silver cup bought with the donations from the children. The mob of kids was so great that the parade watchers couldn't see Johnie—the kids were piled all over him.

The Livermore Rotary Club placed a bronze plaque honoring Johnie Schneider at the base of the rear stadium steps on the rodeo grounds at Robertson Park. He was elected to the Cowboy Hall of Fame in 1965. He died in 1982 and is buried here at St. Michael's Cemetery beside Julia, his first love. His plaque at the ProRodeo Hall of Fame in Colorado Springs reads: “Schneider had the soul of a poet and the heart of a cowboy.”

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