

RODEO

magic for more than a century

By Frank Whitehead

On a warm September afternoon in 1914, a collection of settlers gathered for a picnic under the shade of a cottonwood grove on the Hummel Ranch near the town of Sonoita. The topic of this small meeting concerned the task of organizing a formal county fair. For several years, this group of farmers, ranchers, and miners had been informally gathering on a nearly annual basis to share food and stories, and a proposal was made to schedule a proper county fair. The following year, Sonoita hosted the first Santa Cruz County Fair. The event proved so popular that the Southern Pacific Company arranged for an extended train schedule

to shuttle passengers from Nogales between 8:30 a.m. and 11 p.m., and the highway from Tucson was clogged with automobile traffic.

Among the horse races, livestock shows, and dances, that first county fair featured what the Nogales Daily Herald described as a “bucking contest” with a \$25 jackpot. Beginning a full ten years prior to the first Fiesta de los Vaqueros in Tucson, this small competition between local cowboys over who could ride the rankest broncs grew into the Sonoita Labor Day Rodeo, now entering its 110th year in 2025.

Over the course of its first ten years, the rodeo gradually added more events. The second annual Santa Cruz County Fair added “roping and branding contests” to the program, along with the bucking contest. By 1923, the rodeo also

included bulldogging, steer riding, and a trick roping competition. The prize money steadily increased as well. In 1924, a bronc or steer rider could expect to pay a \$5 entry fee, while calf ropers paid \$10. Those skilled enough to emerge victorious in their event would go home with \$40 in prize money for bronc riding, \$125 for calf roping, and a piddly \$25 for steer riding.

In just twenty years, the rodeo went from a relatively minor attraction among many at the Santa Cruz County Fair to what the Arizona Daily Star described in 1933 as the “principal feature” of the fair. The organizers of the event clearly agreed with this assessment, as in 1934

Settlers gather under cottonwood trees at a picnic held at Hummel Ranch to plan for a Santa Cruz County Fair Association, 1914.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BOWMAN STRADLING HISTORY CENTER AT THE SONOITA FAIRGROUNDS

