

they invested significantly in new lumber corrals and chutes for the rodeo arena, signed contracts well in advance for high-quality bucking stock to be brought to Sonoita, and expanded the rodeo from a one-day to two-day event.

The height of the rodeo's popularity in the 1930's and early 1940's was exemplified by the frequent attendance of high-profile state politicians. Between 1938 and 1941, three consecutive governors all made sure to campaign at the rodeo. Earlier in its history, the rodeo also hosted the first Arizona governor, George W. P. Hunt, and later in 1953, new U.S. Senate candidate (and future Republican presidential nominee) Barry Goldwater.

Following a four-year hiatus due to World War II, the 1946 Sonoita rodeo returned with a distinct Hollywood flavor. John Wayne and the cast of Red River took a break from filming in nearby Elgin to lead the grand entrance

and enjoy the roping, riding, and festivities.

During the late 1940s, organizers again invested heavily in the rodeo, with a reported \$2,000 spent on expanding and renovating the arena, bucking chutes, and livestock pens, and more money added to the jackpots. The investment paid off, as it attracted the top contestants in rodeo, including 6-time world champion steer wrestler and Pro Rodeo Hall of Famer Homer Pettigrew, 3-time world champion team roper Asbury Schell, and two-time world champion calf roper Joe Glenn. As the rodeo's prestige grew, it was eventually sanctioned by the Rodeo Cowboy's Association (RCA) in 1954, meaning that winnings could count toward each year's world championship.

The 1960's saw the rodeo undergo several significant changes. First, in 1961, it switched from RCA sanctioning to the

Arizona Rodeo Association. That same year, the rodeo included women's barrel racing and a rodeo queen contest for the first time. Five years later, the Santa Cruz County Fair & Rodeo Association decided to separate the rodeo from the fair, moving it to Labor Day weekend.

Throughout the 1980s, the Labor Day Rodeo was once again sanctioned by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA), but today it is sanctioned by the Grand Canyon Professional Rodeo Association. The 2024 event hosted over 5,500 attendees who witnessed over 300 contestants compete in many of the same events as cowboys did over a century ago. This year's Sonoita Labor Day Rodeo will take place August 30th through September 1st, 2025, at the Sonoita Fairgrounds. ■



Cowboys gather in front of the bucking chutes at the Sonoita Rodeo during the 1950s. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BOWMAN STRADLING HISTORY CENTER AT THE SONOITA FAIRGROUNDS



Ronnie Pyeatt (son of Buster) roping a calf at the Sonoita Rodeo, 1940. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BOWMAN STRADLING HISTORY CENTER AT THE SONOITA FAIRGROUNDS



Team ropers speed after a steer during the rodeo, date unknown. PHOTO COURTESY OF THE BOWMAN STRADLING HISTORY CENTER AT THE SONOITA FAIRGROUNDS