Valley Mid-Winter Fair in Harlingen

Norman Rozeff
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From its relatively obscure origins in the winter of 1920, a vibrant institution was to arise. The Valley had seen annual winter agricultural fairs in Brownsville, as after the railroad's arrival, land salesmen and other pushed to advertise the area's agricultural potential. Hucksterism was the order of the day. When Harlingen became the shipping hub for Valley produce it became natural for some type of display event to be held there. The idea was conceived to have an exhibition of Cameron County plant and animal agricultural products. The logical time to do this was when the cotton season was over and vegetable production was underway. A loosely organized fair was conducted, apparently at Four Corners. This was the intersection of Harrison and F Street in an empty lot where the Hi-Way Inn, now Las Casuelas, on F Street would later stand. One Harlingen Star item in 1921 notes a C of C meetings concerning the fair. By 1921 the Fair featured a parade which would become an annual attraction. In the following years a series of post cards would document the parade and its viewers and serve as publicity. To generate more widespread interest in the general community a queen and royal court were selected. Miss Hesta Stuart, later Mrs. Woods Christian, was the first queen selected and was crowned by Governor Pat Neff, who would also do the honors in 1922 for queen, Lois Summers. As a society reporter for the Valley Morning Star bubbled "Selection as queen of the Valley Mid-Winter Fair is one of the honors secretly hoped for by most girls as they reach their late teens."

With W.T. Hodge originating the idea, the event now named the Valley Mid-Winter Fair is officially commenced in Harlingen on 12/19/22 to celebrate and promote agriculture. Invitations to participate are now extended to commodity producers across the Valley. From its inception and the next four years Bob Stuart of Stuart Place would work diligently to promote the success of the Fair. The 1923 Fair would be remembered for its muddy conditions as rains were the order of the day. Boards had to be place over the deepest ruts. Queen Pauline Drummond hailed from Mission.

Assisting President R. T. Stuart in the 1924 Fair, which ran 12/9-14/24, are Will G. Fields, manager; and Sam Botts, treasurer. On the executive committee this year are John T. Lomax, S. Findlay Ewing, H. H. Burchard, R.T. Stuart, Al Parker, J.R. Roberts and Sam Botts. Dr. J. T. Traylor was in charge of veterinary matters. A special honor was bestowed when John Shary, leading citrus industry organizer, was asked to be king in the royal court.

With ever-increasing attendance and higher revenues, plans to bond the Valley Mid-Winter Fair Association are revealed on 3/30/25. Its directors propose the building of a large auditorium on the fair grounds. This will come to fruition in 1927 with the construction of the Valley's largest auditorium. This is the 3,000 seat Harlingen Municipal Auditorium. By November 1925 a 60' x 230' main exhibition hall is being built to accommodate 92 booths. As a fair attraction, 27 thoroughbred horses will be brought in for racing.
It was also in 1925 that the Oyer Burns planted trees along Fair Park Drive, Harlingen in order to beautify the area. The fair uses Lon C. Hill's spacious barn built at Fair Park for its office and headquarters. It was around 1909 that Hill constructed the barn of brick from his own brick plant on the arroyo.

It is on 12/16/26 that the city is to buy a 60 acre tract from the Valley Fair Association for $80,000. This is the site for the annual Valley Mid-Winter Fair and will continue to be used in part for this enterprise. At the time it is adjacent to the city limits. This deal will free funds for the fair's operations, making it larger and more comprehensive. The deal is mutually beneficial as the city will have use of the area in the off-season. The city agrees to fund beautification of the grounds, install a playground and equipment, and erect new and more substantial buildings. Roads throughout will either be paved or graveled.

The fair in 1926 ran from 11/25 through December 1. The organizers planned daily events to attract a wide range of interests. In addition to the daily carnival rides there would be numerous other activities such as six days of harness racing with over 200 fast horses, auto push ball, polo, and racing cars. The program featured the following: 25th Valley Day Football with Mission High School playing Harlingen High School; 26th Bathing Beauty contest; 27th Gulf Coast Booster Day, Children's Day, Mexican Day; 28th Sunday Religious Day with special speakers; 29th Parade Day with decorated floats the most elaborate ever staged in the Valley; 30th Houston Day; 1st San Antonio Day.

In 1927 the fair runs 11/24-2/1. Isabel Patee of Port Isabel is selected as queen this year. Reflecting the prosperity of the period the costuming has a glittering Quetzal's Court theme. There are a large number of attendants (70+), many from Matamoros. The J. George Loos Carnival is an added attraction as is a football game between the Schreiner Institute and Edinburg Junior College teams. The fair will also see a tennis tournament and daily band concerts.

By 1929 when Sam Botts is Fair president and John Floore its secretary the program lists it as the Ninth Annual Fair. It runs 11/26-12/1. Drawing crowds are a rodeo, Ernie Young's Winter Garden Follies, a midway, a day of Valley cities, a Farm Bureau Convention, and Shrine Day. Horse races of 3/8, 5/8, 3/4, and 7/8 mile are run. The large program this year features individual full-page articles promoting Valley cities and towns. Harlingen is labeled, "The Jobbing Center of the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas."

On 11/22/30, the day before the fair opens, the Coronation of the Diamond Queen takes place at the high school auditorium. There are princesses on hand from every Valley city. The following day 25,000 people throng Harlingen streets for the opening of the Winter Mid-Valley Fair. When all the figures are in by the end of December, it is reported that a record attendance has occurred at the Fair. Part of the attraction was the presentation by a professional rodeo outfit.

At the 1931 Fair that ran 11/21-29, one of the features was 9-year old Betsy Ross of Alamo doing trick and fancy riding on her horse.

The Labor Hurricane of 1933, 9/4-5/33, inflicted so much damage in Harlingen and across the Valley that no fair was held. The powerful hurricane moved inland past Brownsville. Wind velocities are measured at 106 mph before an anemometer was blown away; gusts are estimated to have reached 125 mph. On the Sunday evening after 7 pm some winds may even have reached 135 mph. Forty people are killed and 500 injured across the region. Eighteen die in Cameron County including seven in Rio Hondo. Most of the
citrus crop in the Lower Rio Grande Valley is ruined. The damage everywhere is devastating. There is considerable structural damage throughout the city. The rear half of the Municipal Auditorium is torn off. In the same area the Administration Building of the Valley Mid-Winter Fair is destroyed as is its Exhibition Hall, and the nearby grandstand.

In early June of 1934, it was reported that Mayor Sam Botts was ready to sign a contract to lease some Fair Park properties to Ben F. Culpepper and Herbert L. Peck of Houston. Money would be held in escrow until the end of 30 days or July 9 to insure the city against liabilities and the start of construction of the Valley Downs Race Track, paddocks and the grandstand racetrack. Obviously this would be an improvement over the already-existing and sizeable track, however nothing apparently comes of it for on 11/1/36 it is reported that construction begins on a horse-racing track at Fair Park to allow for a ten-day December meet.

On 11/27/35 at the Harlingen High School auditorium the fourteenth queen was crowned along with a very large Valley cast. The Johnson's Rodeo will perform this year.

When the 12/2-6/36 Fair rolled around D. E. Ewing was president, Bob Adams VP, and C. C. Williams, manager. The Boy Scouts were featured along with community exhibits, a Fine Arts show, Home Demonstration booths, and a dog show competition under the auspices of the American Kennel Club. Along with the race meet was the midway of the W. H. Hames Shows. The VMS reports that stunt pilot "Reckless" Rex Murphy is in town to stage a crash of his plane for Mid-Winter Fair attendees. While here he borrows a plane to search the El Suay Division of the King Ranch for missing San Perlita poachers, John and Luther Blanton. Neither the men nor their bodies were ever recovered.

When the 16th Valley Mid-Winter Fair was held late in November, Fair officials were Stanley B. Crockett, president, Bob Adams, Jack King, A.L. Benoist, and D.E. Ewing, vice presidents, Hugh Ramsey, W.P. Briscoe, H.A. Swafford, S.D. Grant, R.L. Hill, directors and Sidney Kring, secretary-treasurer. Prize money totals $3,500. Under co-chairmen Clayton Prichard and G. L. Semmon, the fair commenced on 11/23 and concluded on the 28th. It featured a horse show with eight categories and such competitive classes as gaited and conformation. The seven large barns available to house the horses contained 200 box stalls.

A new attraction was "Wilson's Aeronaunical Entertainers—Death-Defying Balloon Ascensions." From the large hot-air balloon parachute jumps were executed. Bill Hames with his "Coney Island on Wheels" shows returned for a second year. Admissions to the Fair were, for adults, all of 25 cents, children under 12, free, and over 12, 15 cents.

For the 17th Fair, 11/22-27/38, E. C. Bennett, former fire and city utilities chief, was president, E. M. Crockett VP, D. J. Evans secretary-treasurer, and Sidney Kring manager. The Bill Hames Shows were again to participate.

Three more Fairs were to take place before World War II commenced and they were held in abeyance until hostilities cease and normaley returned. This wasn't until the 21st Fair that ran 11/22-27/48. R. L. Owens was president, Walter Bowman VP., J. L. Head treasurer, and Ed Slaughter secretary-treasurer.

The 11/18-26/1949 Fair was one packed with exhibits. It was under the leadership of J. L. Head president, Walter Bowman, VP, Paul Ewing treasurer, and Ed Slaughter secretary-treasurer. Some of the many presentations were for cotton, grains and seeds, sheath grains, grain sorghum heads, baled hay, corn ears, and 34 types of vegetables. The 4-H
and FFA chapters had booths. There was a registered cattle show and departments for dairy, beef, swine, and poultry. The Women's Clubs had a stand, but it was the Women's Demonstration activities that stood out. It had a culinary department with six categories, textiles with 10, and young women's one with three. In addition the Garden Club had a show encompassing 16 categories of plants. The Art Department promoted works in five media classes for adults and the same for juniors.

The 23rd Fair, 11/18-24/50, and with Walter Bowman as president, saw something special. A Pioneer Day was held to bring out the early settlers of Harlingen. Guests to greet them, during and after the parade, were expected to number 100,000. In attendance was special guest A. E. Hanema, mayor of Harlingen, Holland. The park was renamed and dedicated to Harlingen's founder, Lon C. Hill. His children were present on this occasion. The Valley Boy's Ranch and the Lion Clubs of the Valley sponsored the Darrell Brothers Circus. There was no queen. In the Municipal Auditorium John Seegle, noted baritone and concert and radio artist, performed in the opera, The Old Maid and the Thief. He was backed by singers of the Trinity Opera Workshop.

On 11/23/51 a record crowd watched the parade participants two-miles long. This was to be the last hurrah for the 24 time Valley Mid-Winter Fair. Leaving many fond memories behind it would fall victim to changing times and interests. The Mercedes Livestock Show, founded in 1939, would over the years pick fill the vacuum created by the loss of the Harlingen event.

Comments on Valley Mid-Winter Fair Part II article that appeared 9/5/10 in the VMS

Dear Editor;

When the blown-up photo that accompanied my Valley Mid-Winter Fair article appeared, I suddenly had my doubts that I had captioned it properly. Was this really a woman riding a wild bronco in the photo that I had obtained somewhere in the distant past?

Like many other I turned to the internet to see if I could discover anything about Ruth Roach. Discover, I did indeed. This is what Wikipedia had to say about her:

Ruth Scantlin, later Ruth Scantlin Roach, later Ruth Scantlin Roach Salmon (1896 - June 26, 1986), was a professional bronc rider, and world champion rodeo performer. Her 24-year career began in 1914 and ended in 1938, when she retired from the rodeo and started a ranching business in Nocona, Texas, with her husband, Fred Salmon. She the Buffalo Bill Wild West Show and The 101 Real Wild West Show. Bronc riding was her favorite event, although she performed and won championship titles in other areas (as Ruth Roach). During her career she won the titles of World's Champion All Around Cowgirl, World's Champion Trick Rider, and World's Champion Girl Bronc Rider.

She married fellow rider Brian Roach (winner of the 1919 Calgary Stampede bronc riding competition); after their divorce, she retained the name Roach for the rest of her career for professional reasons. She later married another rider, Ambrose Richardson, and
Fred Alvord, a rodeo director and cowboy. Her final marriage was to Fred Salmon, a rancher.

A short *High Noon Western Americana* biographical note states: Ruth ran away from home to join the 101 Ranch Wild West Show as a trick rider. Her contest debut came at the 1917 Fort Worth Roundup, America's first indoor rodeo, as a bronco rider. Dubbed the "soft-spoken, rough-riding golden girl of the West," she wore trademark giant hair bows and boots hand-tooled with hearts. She is remembered for trick riding up the steps, across the lobby and through the dining room of Fort Worth's Texas Hotel.

Photos of her are available for purchase at several internet sites. One site even has a refrigerator magnet for sale with her photo on it. The University of North Texas has an archival collection of Texas photographs including 74 of Ruth. They may be viewed at The Portal to Texas History.

With such unusual performers as the athletic Ruth, it was no wonder that the Fair in Harlingen was such a stellar attraction.

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