

The Houston Rodeo

David J. Schneider (*all rights reserved*)

[Soon] the rodeo will come to Houston. The Houston Rodeo and Livestock show is apparently the largest thing of its kind in the world although I suspect England, The Netherlands, and, say, Jordan, are not giving it a run for the money. Probably not Romania either. It seems among other things to be a testament to a Texas past that few Houstonians have ever experienced. The event lasts for 3 weeks, but even before the actual rodeo begins several groups of wannabe cowboys organize trail rides from places near and far. These consist of large numbers of people riding horses and in various support wagons. Apparently, they camp out each night and at the end ride in triumph onto the rodeo grounds. That's all well and good for those who like horses and sleeping in the elements, but if you've ever been stuck behind one of these groups in your car, you do quickly develop fantasies of running down a horse and rider to encourage some 21st Century speed.

Presumably they all arrive safely (perhaps with sore backs), and the rodeo opens with great fanfare. In case you didn't know there are several parts to the rodeo. First there are classic rodeo events where people ride animals which clearly are not keen on the idea; others try to get a rope around generally smaller animals trying to escape them. There's even an event where small children try to stay on the back of a sheep – I'm not making that up. Once you've seen what goes on it gets very boring after about 5 minutes. Men flying off bucking animals doesn't have much staying power, one flying cowboy looking about the same as the others. As far as I can tell no points are awarded for flying technique. But with the exception of kids on a sheep (which really is kinda fun, and just so you know they do wear helmets), it's like an Indianapolis 500 race where you hope for an accident to liven things up. People cheer the loudest when some poor guy gets thrown far into the sky and gasp when the angry beast tries to trample him – all in a day's work. A near trample is clearly better than no trample or the kinds that really hurt. No one likes to see the cowboys get injured which does tend to beg the question of why they are so eager to do so. But if you want to avoid the violence and guilty feelings about animal cruelty, there are always the chuck wagon races, pig races, dogs herding sheep, and tractor pulls for some variety. After a beer or two pig races are actually a lot of fun. I also rather enjoy seeing dogs chase sheep around; there's some contest involved, the rules of which I don't entirely grasp, but having owned several dogs of limited intelligence and no accomplishments I wonder if they could train me up a dog that could herd, say, squirrels in my yard or even visiting cats.

Second, there are contests to see which particular animal is considered best of breed. I think they judge just about every known farm animal but the focus is on the cows. The winning cow gets like a zillion dollars. Unfortunately, cows are about the dumbest mammals humans regularly come in contact with, so they don't spend it wisely. The owner – some farm kid – gets some money or a scholarship as well. Some restaurant buys the beast for something approaching a million dollars, so I guess somewhere you can dine on expensive cow parts. I do like steak, but I'm guessing that my uneducated palate would not be able to discriminate a T-bone steak from the prize winner and say the steer that came in 10th or even, for that matter what I might buy at HEB. I doubt I'll be given the opportunity to find out since I don't believe there are steak tastings around and about. Lambs, pigs, rabbits, goats and pens of broilers don't fare as well prize wise. For those less interested in common barnyard beasts there are also contests for BBQ, student art, wine, and rabbit costumes among too many to list. If farm people do it, there's a contest to see who's best at it.

They also have education sessions on important topics such as how to breed rabbits and tell one breed of cow from another. It strikes me that you either know this already or find that it's pretty useless information unless you're in the process of buying a cow for the back yard or building huts for rabbits you erroneously think are cute and might breed, well, like rabbits. In an excruciating 8th grade required agricultural class – punishment for growing up in a rural area -- I actually learned my cow breeds, my pig breeds and even chicken breeds – maybe rabbits or goats for all I can remember – and I can safely say that this information is about as totally useless as any I have ever absorbed. As I recall I was better on cows than pigs or chickens. I can still remember some of it which unfortunately I can't seem to unremember, so that useless stuff is taking up brain space that might accommodate something of greater importance especially since I don't have nearly as much space for memories as I once had.

There are concerts every evening with, I'm told, the best of the country and western singers and bands. I kinda grew up on C&W and in the right mood can still really enjoy Willie and Waylon and many of the other first- and second-generation greats – if you promise not to tell, I even own some CDs. However, I confess that I don't even recognize the names of most of the folks on at the rodeo. It's altogether possible that I'm missing a great experience, but somehow being locked in a large arena with a few thousand other people, many quite drunk, listening to music so loud it hurts my ears, and at my age having to be next to a bathroom, is not an appealing prospect despite how good the music might be. So I pass on this part of the rodeo.

Naturally there is a carnival, but my stomach won't allow me to ride on the more adventuresome rides. A Ferris wheel is about my speed, but only barely. The rodeo has at least 3 of various sizes and speeds. Still I enjoy hearing the screams and the obvious enjoyment of kids too young to realize that the rides are probably scrambling their brains or causing future infertility. It is also fun to watch the young folks staggering off the rides that go round and round trying to keep from being sick. Happy to watch, but participation is not my thing – never was. There are also rides that drop you from great heights, perhaps something my stomach could tolerate except that I prefer to come down from heights gracefully and slowly. Then there's also the fact that I'm a coward.



But I also enjoy watching the array of humanity there, most dressed in their best imitation cowboy gear, presumably taken out of storage every rodeo season to try to impress others that they have a rural background which makes them somehow more authentic human beings. Or should I say Texas human beings. I am amazed that most of these folks seem comfortable in their costumes so for all I know this is everyday wear for many. Leather vests, dusters, and even chaps are in full display along with boots, pearl button shirts, hats of various dimensions, and, of course, jeans, well pressed and thus far from authentic. Very few spurs, although they might come in handy in some of the crowds. I do especially love watching the small children trying to carry enormous stuffed animals that presumably some adult won for them in one of the many contests. So the midway is the best place to watch a particular and perhaps peculiar slice of humanity. I've also had some interesting conversations with various folks when I've not been dressed in cowboy garb because I don't own any; I am usually wearing a tee shirt imprinted with a college name. People are eager to know where in Texas Stanford is located and whether Rice has a strong agriculture program.

But the best part of the carnival is the food. Basically, everything is fried, and clearly some of the people trying to walk around have eaten far too much of it. But in addition to the usual fried turkey legs and stuff on a stick, there are more inventive entrees. For several years aficionados have treasured deep fried oreos, twinkies (heavenly for those of us with a sweet tooth and far more nourishing than they may seem), cheese cake, and butter (don't ask – I never tried it because I have some standards). Last year they added deep fried tam tams, deep fried nachos, deep fried potato bits, and the one I most wanted to try – flaming hot cheetos on a roasted corn cob. Clearly something for everyone.

Unfortunately, we usually eat prosaic BBQ and hit the wonderful cobbler stand (blueberry to die for), but my wife begins to make gagging noises when I suggest a trip down fried treat lane. Last year I went with my daughter and son-in-law, but they were on diets and no fun at all.

Then there is the place where every store that has any connection to anything Western has a booth – more than 500 of them by official count. Lots of really bad art, signs meant to be funny but aren't, toys that make noises and fly or run about, tee shirts with slogans you're not likely to find in San Francisco or Boston, small casks to sit on your counter for dispensing your bourbon, beer mugs fashioned from every known substance that holds water. There are booths specializing in rugs and clothing made from cows, and leather chairs are not in short supply. As far as I could tell there's nothing made from horse hides perhaps because we love our horses. There's a place that sells mattresses and gives you a chance to rest up a little if you pretend to be testing for comfort preparatory to buying. Booths that give machine massages and those that help aching feet. One place sells flashlights in every design you might imagine and some you can't. Many promise to polish anything on you that might be in need of more shine. Of course, you can buy boots, hats, and other clothing that makes you look like you know your business in a cow barn or on a horse. Some of this stuff is very shiny so there's a lot of glitter and things that sparkle on display; sun glasses come in handy. Clearly the supply of silver and turquoise have been significantly depleted to make various kinds of jewelry – some actually attractive. I confess that I have bought two turquoise rings there, ostensibly at bargain, rodeo prices but likely at least twice as expensive as going to a store. Candy, fudge, beer, chicken, tacos, marguerites (big ones), even a salad or two. You can buy grills and smokers, things that slice and dice, cooking devices that would astound my mother and maybe make her envious. There is also a booth, I discovered, that sells wine stoppers with college names – they even had Wabash, and, of course I had to buy that; it's around somewhere. It's kind of a once a year window shopping, especially for buying gifts for people who have everything and will immediately re-gift it.

In addition to cars (mostly Fords for some reason) and truck displays (featuring the venerable F-150), they have tractors that cost more than most starter houses in rural areas complete with air-conditioning (a non-trivial addition), hi-fi, and for all I know Internet and cable TV. And if you really want to play cowboy there is a massive display of horse trailers. Some of these are upscale from the ones you see on the road with horse heads and tails sticking out the end; these fancy ones cater to those who take traveling with their horses very seriously. What I'll call mega-trailers are large enough for the horses and a fairly good sized and nicely appointed apartment at the front. I can barely drive an SUV so it's hard for me to imagine what it must be like to drive with one of those attached to the back of a truck or Rolls Royce. I also am not sure I would like to share space with my horses on long trips given their nasty smell and horsy noises. I don't like horses, so this is not likely to come up in my lifetime.

But the highlight of the rodeo for me is the various exhibits of baby animals. Farmers bring in their pregnant animals and they produce babies on the spot which you can see popping out or shortly after

birth. I'm of a mind that there is nothing cuter than a baby pig and seeing a litter of them (and we're talking a dozen or so) frolicking and trying to beat each other out for the feeding station – mommy not always that interested until tied down-- is worth the price of admission. New born lambs are a close second. Cows not at all, and chickens sort of but only when they emerge from their eggs and stagger around until they get their legs working right and their feathers a bit dry. My mother-in-law used to say that everything is cute when it's little, and she's right– it's evolution's solution to keep frustrating and irritating young things alive. The problem with trying to see the baby animals is that you're in competition with every elementary school kid in Southeast Texas for viewing space. Sharp elbows come in handy, so it's a good place for children to learn that adults are not always nice. Otherwise get there early. In case you miss the early action they do have videos showing various animals leaving their mothers and owners quickly swabbing the new borns with whatever makes them healthy and immune from germs. The babies don't seem to realize this and kick up a bit of a fuss.

So, the rodeo is a once a year thing, and I look forward every year. In fairness they raise lots of money for scholarships and give folks quite unlike me and my friends a chance to demonstrate their skill sets. It's also a place where jollity reigns. The people are generally nice and friendly, open and welcoming. It's just a damned good advertisement for Texas hospitality. There is no road rage, threats of gun violence, extended fingers, or political rhetoric. A haven from my normal world. Maybe this year I'll buy a hat. My wife has vetoed chaps on the grounds that they're stupid looking and that I have no place to wear them; she was not taken with the idea that they might be an interesting adornment at say a Shepherd School concert. I like to stay in touch with my rural side, but unfortunately, I married a city girl.