

Rodeo Trauma

Dale H. Easley

Summer 2016

“She has something new to show you,” the rodeo announcer began. Many years after suffering one of my life’s greatest traumas, I was back at Laramie Jubilee Days with my 16-year-old daughter, Tess. I wanted her to see the West, culturally and scenically different from the Midwest she was growing up in. The rugged Wyoming landscape with long vistas and few people paralleled the rugged individualism of its inhabitants, not worn smooth by rubbing up against Midwestern politeness. The Western ideal: a cowboy on a horse, riding alone, gun at his side, with snow-covered peaks in the background. Or a lone man aboard an angry bull.

This year, opening night had been turned over to junior bull riders, starting as young as 4-year-olds and ending with 19-year-olds. The oldest group rode full-sized bulls. Elementary- and middle-school riders were on specially bred mini-bulls. And the pre-schoolers, mutton busters, rode sheep.

In the 30 years since my rodeo trauma, much had changed. Girls participated in the younger age groups. A few Hispanic names appeared in the program. Country and Western now included country rap. Rodeo clowns were listed in the program as *bullfighters* or *rodeo protection athletes*. Helmets with face masks kept the bull riders’ faces pretty and their heads uncracked. Their Kevlar vests appeared borrowed from the local SWAT team’s Junior Auxiliary. More guns were openly displayed, like adults playing with Red-Rider BB Guns, or as if the locals had become less secure in their communities. Perhaps a reason was that technological changes had altered who they allowed into their homes—ranch houses out on the desolate plains all have satellite dishes, inviting in the latest incarnations of Justin Bieber and Bill O’Reilly. And who isn’t a bit scared by that?

But some things remained unchanged. Parking was directed by volunteers from WyoTech, an excellent no-nonsense vocational school that trains diesel mechanics and other useful members of society while maintaining admission selectivity that would be the the envy of the Ivy League if there were any overlap between their recruiting pools. Also unchanged were the big hair, tight jeans, and big belt buckles of the Rodeo Queen and her court, crowned with cowboy hats, not tiaras. And like all rodeos I’ve attended, Laramie’s began with celebration of the greatness of America and her flag, including a rousing rendition of *The Star Spangled Banner*, sung with the fervor and reverence of a Baptist choir singing *Onward Christian Soldiers*. Then: “Ride Bull!”

Those of us in the grandstand settled in, passing the time with hot dogs, pretzels, and other stadium fare. Like at a baseball game, given to long interludes of inaction, hawkers strolled the stands shouting, “Soda. Popcorn.” But the long waits were punctuated by brief excitement, a sort of condensed adolescence. A successful bull ride lasts but eight seconds—six for younger kids. Still, six seconds seems like a long time, and few of the Junior Bull Riders stayed on that long. For the older riders, there is less holding on with the single rope than balancing. For the younger kids, a bit more latitude was granted. Thus, the “something new” announced.

A girl bull rider and mutton bustin’ were by themselves new to me. But a different “new thing” still awaited. As the chute opened and a sheep burst out, on its back was a little girl face down, her stomach to the sheep’s back. Her head dangled above the sheep’s butt. Had some older brother *triple-dog-dared* her? Perhaps her father had admired this particular sheep’s nethers. Certainly, the little girl’s mom must have been back at the ranch where Dad had said, “I’m just taking her to watch and eat ice cream.”

No matter what deception led to the moment, a little girl with her nose to a sheep’s tail is an abomination. An exorcism ceremony quickly followed, mediated by the sheep. The prayful *baahhs* were heard on high or, perhaps, by the golden bull god for which Moses’ followers jilted him. Regardless, the sheep was possessed of a big bucking spirit. The little girl’s hands, grasping at the wool beneath her, failed. Off she went upon her helmeted head. The crowd gasped. Up the tough, not fragile, little girl bounded, wiping herself clean of dust, manure, and other impurities. The crowd loudly applauded her pluck. No injury resulted. Still, I hoped a video was sent to Mom—trauma for dad, not his daughter.

Though my trauma 30 years earlier was neither deserved nor earned, I, unlike the little girl, had not escaped uninjured. As the rodeo began, beside me sat Cathy, the future wife of my friend, Chris, who sat on her other side. While watching a beautiful Western sunset and waiting for the action to start, we prepared for the excitement with beer and peanuts. The vendors had placed tokens in the bottoms of select peanut bags, entitling the purchaser to a free popsicle. I was the lucky first to discover my token and claim my popsicle. The hawker showed no rejoicing for my fortune and gave no warning about the danger of his product. I peeled the paper and took a lick.

As my tongue started up the frosty side of the popsicle, the smooth glide ground to a halt. My tongue froze in place to what was essentially a chunk of the hawker’s dry ice. With the popsicle stuck to my tongue like a tiny flagpole, I turned to Cathy and mumbled “Help!” My tongue tried to buck and twist and dump its load. I then tried using my lips to push it off, like a bull rubbing against the arena fence. My lips, too, froze tight. The popsicle threatened to occupy my entire face.

Thinking back, I can imagine some toddler sticking such an imperialistic popsicle into his mouth:

“Take it out of your mouth, Johnny” mom says.

“Umm-Ummm.”

“I said take it out NOW!”

Perhaps the family dog decides to take a lick. He, too, becomes stuck to the popsicle. Howls, cries, and dragging of Little Johnny, tongue to tongue, follow.

Imagining some poor kid’s tribulation, I suppose I should be glad to have been the one who suffered. Regardless, as Cathy turned at my “Help!,” I was ready to end the popsicle’s ride upon my tongue—I ripped it loose. Off came the lining of my lips. Cathy gasped. Also on the popsicle, still frosty, numerous tender tastebuds dotted the surface like cheap sprinkles. Cathy gaped. And like strawberry sauce, blood decorated it all. Cathy gagged. In fact, more blood gushed from my mouth than I’ve ever seen from any orifice or wound of an injured bull rider.

Fortunately, at that time, I had been in Wyoming long enough to take on the habits of the tough Westerner. I cauterized my wounds with cold beer and watched the remainder of the rodeo. I suppose a true cowboy might cauterize the oozing flesh with a branding iron, such as I once saw in some movie, though even for a cowboy, a hot iron on a bullet wound differs from branding your tongue. Better would have been to avoid the trauma in the first place—numerous non-participants have pointed out that I could have used the beer first to melt loose the popsicle. But they don’t understand the terror of those few seconds—perhaps fewer than eight. But a sensitive bull rider might.

Despite my pain, little was lost but some lip-skin and blood and a fair amount of pride. What remained as I told my story to Tess, though modified, rooted in physical courage, community, and style—the Western tradition. Not Western in the Greek sense but in the uniquely American way, full of Hollywood posers and true believers often nostalgic for a past that never was. Still, when the bull chute bursts open or the popsicle sticks, the flight-or-fight system that we developed on the African savannahs pumps adrenaline into our American blood and, for a few seconds, we are once again transported to an epic, existential battle.