







YOUTH COUNTRY 105.7FM LIVESTOCK DISPATCH CLARK FARM & HOME



THAT HAS A REPUTATION'

With roots in the ranching community and a family of world-champion riders, Strong City's Flint Hills Rodeo celebrates 82 years this summer



Heritage, dust and grit almost always accompany the Flint Hills Rodeo in Chase County's Strong City. Except for that one year when dust gave way to mud and the rodeo was nearly rained out.

"We had torrential rains, just horrible," Arlene Bailey says, recalling the 2004 rodeo. "We had such bad rains that we postponed the bareback riding by a half-hour. The arena was absolute slop, but we went ahead and had the full rodeo. We didn't cancel anything."

Bailey, who was serving her first term on the rodeo board that year, learned something about the event and the people supporting it—Kansas' oldest consecutive rodeo always goes on. Without fail.

The Flint Hills Rodeo legacy and tradition are powerful. The annual event is one of Kansas' finest examples of how hard work, ranching skills, discipline and talent come together each year—causing Chase County's population of 2,700 to triple for three nights. For 150 years, the cattle business has been a major factor of the economy in this area. Even now, cattle and horses outnumber people in this area of tallgrass prairie at the heart of the Flint Hills. From this culture, at the height of the Great Depression, the rodeo was born on Emmett Roberts' pasture west of Strong City, with a family that dared to ride anything.

"The father would buy a carload of wild horses in Colorado, and the kids would break the horses and sell them to local farmers and ranchers," says Jim Hoy, award-winning author and Flint Hills ranching historian.

The Roberts family held the first impromptu rodeo in 1937. By 1938, their Flint Hills Rodeo was on its way to becoming a tradition. In those early years, the featured attractions were the Roberts family members. Three of the children—Marge, Gerald and Ken—would become world-famous rodeo champions. Marge Roberts won the women's saddle bronc riding at Cheyenne, Wyoming, in 1940. She died in 1982 and in 1987 was inducted into the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame. Gerald Roberts was the first Kansas cowboy to become a World Champion All-Around cowboy in 1942 and, again, in 1948. He died in 2004. Ken Roberts was a World Champion Bull Rider in 1943, 1944 and 1945. He died in 1975.

But descendants of the Roberts family are always at the rodeo.

"I still call Strong City my hometown," says 68-year-old Jim Roberts, who runs a western store, Roberts Cowboy Outfitters, in a Salina mall. Each year, he goes to the rodeo in Strong City, where the grounds display pictures of his family, including his father, Gerald.

"He had three different careers," Jim says of his father. "He was a world champion cowboy. He got into movies out in Hollywood, and then he started a manufacturing company. He was successful at all three."

Jim grew up with his father in Hollywood and recalls traveling to Madison Square Garden in New York City and hanging out with Roy Rogers.

Publicity like this helped put the Roberts' Flint Hills Rodeo on the map. Partly because the rodeo was created by world champions and partly because volunteers pour countless hours into the event each year, it continues to attract world champion competitors.

"I forget how many world champions have competed there," Hoy says. "But when Emmett Roberts died, they held his funeral at the rodeo arena. They had hundreds of people there. There must have been half a dozen or more former world champions in the crowd. "It's a rodeo that has a reputation." **KM**



MILITARY HONORS

Each year, the Flint Hills Rodeo Friday night program honors military personnel and retired veterans with free admission. On Saturday, the parade usually features a color guard from Fort Riley.

“We try and have as much military involvement as possible,” says rodeo board member Dow Wilson. In fact, during the 2018 rodeo, a missile launcher was brought to the parade and used to open the rodeo. That, says Wilson, was “a big outfit.”



FLINT HILLS RODEO
JUNE 9-12

BUD LIGHT
WELCOME RODEO FANS

WELCOME RODEO FANS
RAM

FLINT HILLS RODEO 2019

WHEN

May 30–June 1

COST

Children under 12 are given free admission on Family Night, May 30. Tickets range in price from \$11–\$17 per night, with discounted rates by advance purchase. Call (620) 341-1505 or go online at flinthillsrodeo.org for a full list of ticket booth locations or to purchase tickets online.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotels, private rooms and guest houses fill up quickly for the event. For a list of locally owned options, see the “Lodging” section of the Chase County Chamber of Commerce page at ChaseCountyChamber.org or call the chamber office at (620) 273-8469.

WHAT ELSE TO DO

WATCH THE PARADE

The Flint Hills Rodeo parade starts Saturday 2 p.m. in Cottonwood Falls and travels north down K-177 highway, ending on the north side of Strong City.

JOIN THE DANCE

A community-wide dance is held on Friday and Saturday nights following the rodeo competitions. “Everyone who comes back to the rodeo gathers at the dance,” says Toni Schneider, director of the Chase County Chamber of Commerce.

EXPLORE THE REGION

Leave time for the art galleries of Cottonwood Falls, the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve, a short ride or stroll on the Flint Hills Nature Trail State Park, a tour of the Chase County Courthouse and more. Go online to travelks.com/flint-hills and look for links, information and reviews of attractions in the Chase County region.

THE WORLD STOPS BECAUSE IT IS “RODEO”

Flint Hills Rodeo officials talk about what the event and the sport mean to them

BAILEY LEWIS

My father, Jason Lewis, served 17 years on the rodeo board and was the Flint Hills Rodeo president for 4–5 years. My entire family was involved helping out, in some way, all of those years, and I was competing in it before I was of age. I competed for about 3 years total so that there were enough kids to compete. I won on my fourth year when I was old enough to compete, became the Flint Hills Rodeo Princess in 2010 and have been in the opening acts ever since. There is literally so much time and effort that go into the rodeo. It is definitely a community event, and everyone in our small town has likely been a helping hand in the rodeo's success. During the rodeo, I have met and become very close with several families. These people who travel to help us put on our rodeo come and spend time with my family on our ranch. We have made connections and lifelong friendships because of the rodeo.

BINION CERVI

I was born into the rodeo business and am blessed to have been doing it my entire life. I have a horse stock company in Colorado that provides rodeos with horses and am on the road 10 months a year [because] we go as far west as San Juan Capistrano, California, and as far east as Louisville, Kentucky. The rodeo life is long hours on the road, but lots of rewards, full of wonderful experiences and friendships.

ALEXIS LUCE

I have been riding horses ever since I was a little girl. When I was old enough, I joined 4-H and was active in the 4-H Horse Program. Then, I met a rodeo queen who encouraged me to run at a pageant, and that is how I began competing in rodeo queen pageants for four, going on five, years now. I've held the title of Miss Rodeo Topeka, Miss Rodeo El-Kan, Miss Rodeo Phillipsburg and Miss CPRA [Central Plains Rodeo Association]. My strangest experience was at the Fillmore County Fair and Rodeo in Geneva, Nebraska, where this clown act of Whistle Nut and Ole had trained a bull to ride around the arena—so I got to try a new steed and now I get to say I have ridden a bull. Rodeo is for the entire family, and it has preserved that family atmosphere that everyone can be a part of and have fun. It's a life I am proud to be a part of.

TONI SCHNEIDER

I was crowned Miss Rodeo Kansas in 1988 and traveled all over the United States and Canada promoting rodeo. The people in rodeo life are the best. No matter how far you travel or whether they know you, they treat you like family and are always there to lend a helping hand if you need it. After my sons were born, I became a stay-at-home mom and traveled less. In 2014, a good friend of mine was on the Flint Hills Rodeo board and asked if I could help keep an eye on a booth of historical photos for part of one performance. I ended up being there all night, every night, and 2018 was my fourth year volunteering. I help plan the opening ceremonies around the national anthem and develop the theme for the rodeo history museum. Preparing for the next year's rodeo starts the minute the current rodeo is over. Before rodeo time rolls around, I have picked up meat for the sponsor meal and stored it in my freezer, helped proof the rodeo program, cleaned out the museum building and more. During the rodeo I am outside the arena getting the opening ceremony together. I make sure the young ladies carrying the flags have the right one and know when to go into the area. I am the official “hat pinner” who puts bobby pins through the sweatband of the flag girls' hats and into their hair so their hats don't fly off in the arena. I help outside guests such as the national anthem performer, the dignitaries and the guardsmen be where they need to be. Last year, I helped at one of the beer stands because they were short-handed. I have made sure there was toilet paper in the ladies room and I have occasionally plunged a toilet. It is an honor to be a part of a rodeo that is an 80-plus-year tradition. Here in Chase County, rodeo weekend is like a family reunion. No one leaves towns or makes other plans; family members come back to attend and spend time with friends. The world stops because it is “rodeo.”

–Interviews conducted, transcribed and edited by Jason Dailey



BAILEY
LEWIS



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