

# **ROUNDUPS AND RODEOS**

Gray County, Kansas

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*References: American Magazine, June 1932 and Popular Science Monthly, August 1934*

The “roundup” is the name given to the general rounding up of cattle on open cattle ranges. Roundups were held in Western Kansas during the early days when space was abundant, and the cattle industry reigned supreme.

With so many cattle on the prairie and it being an open range, it was only natural that other ranchers sometimes held some of the cattle belonging to the different outfits from their home range. To get the cattle back to their range, they held roundups in the spring and in the autumn. There, the cattle were counted and branded.

The roundups were exhausting due to lack of sleep and hard work. There was also some risk, but the roundups were also a lot of fun for the Cowboys. The cattleman in a particular region would make plans for the roundups. Each outfit was notified where the section of the country the roundup would cover and where it would start.

It was necessary to take along a wagon and enough supplies to last during the roundup. Usually, every stockman had his own wagon, driven by the cook of the outfit. Sometimes, the smaller outfits would combine their resources and save a great deal.

A roundup usually commenced at the source of some valley or stream, as cattle usually stayed closer to the streams and valleys. All of the outfits gathered at the point where the round up was to start. The wagons carried the “grub” and bedrolls for each outfit. About three o’clock in the morning, the cook called to the men, “Come and get it”. Each man rolled and tied his bedroll when he got up, or the cook would leave it behind when he moved to a different place, and no cowboy wanted to be on the prairie without his bedroll during a roundup.

Dawn was usually just breaking when breakfast was over. The night wranglers would then bring in the pony herd. Each man had a string of eight or nine ponies and used one for morning work and one for night work. That way, a horse only worked once every three days. Each man saddled and bridled his own horse, and sometimes there was bucking, to the merriment of the other cowboys. As soon as the men saddled their horses, they started on the long circuit. The men divided into groups, and each group would go in a different direction. When they had gone about twelve or fifteen miles from the starting point, the group would break up into couples. They would then spread out and cover a specific section of the countryside. The cowboys would

gather up all the cattle they could find and gradually drive them to the meeting place. They slowly worked downstream, gathering all the cattle from each side of the valley. Each night they camped a little nearer to the home section or station. Each cowboy had to take his turn guarding at night.

When they finally reached the home station with the cattle, each owner would find his own, and the branding of the calves would begin. The branding was the most challenging part of the work, for the branding irons had to stay on the fire until they were red hot. The calves were roped and thrown to the ground and then branded. Sometimes they placed a branding iron against them as they passed through a chute. It was easier to brand the larger cattle that way than to throw them to the ground.

The outfit that discovered them usually claimed the mavericks and the unbranded yearlings. The word maverick originated from a man named Maverick, who lived in Texas during the Civil War. At that time, there were thousands of cattle on the range without owners, and therefore unbranded. Samuel A. Maverick of San Antonio was one of the first men to go into business, gathering those loose cattle and branding them. He began locating land soon after the war and became the largest landowner in Texas. His cattle ran wild over the range and soon increased to large extents. Other cattle were also on the range, but Mavericks' was the largest and most significant cattle claimant. He marked them with his brand wherever he caught them. Other cattle owners began to follow suit, and it soon became the custom among the cattlemen to use a free range to stamp as their own, any unbranded cattle they found during the roundup. So to this day, the stray cattle on the ranges are known as Mavericks. The greatest menace for the cattlemen was the wolves, coyotes, and mountain lions. The stockmen suffered many losses due to them.

Rodeos were probably an outgrowth of the roundup. Rodeo is an old Spanish word, which means gathering or roundup. Groups of cowboys in the early traveling rodeos were responsible for some of the first rodeos in Western Kansas. They would often assist at roundups and then furnish entertainment. The rodeos they held were relatively simple compared with the more elaborate ones they have today.

Towns and cities began holding large rodeos, and cowboys for miles around would enter the different contests. The first rodeos were without many rules. It was up to the rider to stay on an animal until thrown off or he mastered the animal. His only safety lay in keeping a steady and tight hand on the bucking rein and keeping his balance in the saddle.

Cowboys moved from rodeo to rodeo each season, risking the possibility of an injury just for the roar of crowds. Most of the riders would specialize in one particular subject. Some of the different specialties are roping, riding bareback on Brahman Steers, riding bucking broncos, and riding wild horses. After rodeos became popular entertainment and furnished a living for the more successful performers, many rules and regulations were set up. Some of the rules are the following; wave one hand in

the air (to touch leather with that hand disqualifies the rider), continue scratching with the spurs, and the rider must stay in the saddle for ten seconds. Some of the offenses that disqualify a rider are; being bucked off the animal, coasting with the feet against the Broncos' shoulders, changing hands on the rein, wrapping the rein around the hand, or losing the stirrup. Therefore, the riders of the present day must do many things besides staying in the saddle.

The riders at the rodeos never know just what horse they will draw, and they must be prepared for anything. In the riding contests, the animal is put in a chute and the rider mounts. Next, the animal is turned loose, and the rider must use all of his energies towards riding the animal, observing the rules, and keeping a pleasant look on his face for the benefit of the crowd.

Riding a wild horse is perhaps the most exciting for the performer. The wild horse is ridden bareback and without a bridle. The rider must hang on to the strap passed around the horse's middle. Considered the most hazardous work of all is to ride a Brahman steer. They are as quick as the wind, and they are a cross between India's sacred cow and the Texas Longhorn. Their long sharp horns are a real menace to the rider. They give more action and are smarter in some respects than the Bronco.

Unusual as it may seem, the worst buckers are the Broncos. The men who contract with rodeos and furnish bucking stock will travel the whole west, looking out for "good" bad horses. They will go hundreds of miles to see about a horse that they have heard has a reputation for being a "real bucking horse." It seems there is no longer bulldogging. It is holding the animal by its horns and twisting its head until it falls to the ground. Now there is "steer decorating", where you hold the animals head long enough to place a rubber band over its nose. It is not as hard or dangerous as bulldogging.

Roping in a rodeo shows real scientific precision and action. The Cowboys work against time while roping. If they cannot rope and tie the animal within a particular specified time, they are disqualified. Team working means the performers work in pairs, and of course, they use their own, best-trained ponies. The performers wait by the side of the chute until the animal passes a line that is many yards from the chute, and then they ride after the animal. The first man of the pair throws his rope first, trying to rope to the animals' horns. The second rider then ropes the animals' heels. They then, throw the animal to the ground and tie it. The team that finishes in the shortest time is the one that wins the contest.

The stars of the rodeo game must stay in fit condition the whole year round. Their work routine is very strenuous, and unless they always keep in the best of health, it is impossible for them to stand up to the rodeo profession's hard life. They must train faithfully as any other athlete, or they lose their skill and ability to perform. The riders very often appear in as many as thirty rodeos in one year, so it is easy to see that it is essential for them to keep physically fit all the time.

So far, as anyone can remember, there have been only two rodeos in Gray County, held in 1925 and 1926 and somehow connected with the Gray County Fair. They were much the same as rodeos held in other places, and of course, they governed by the same rules and regulations that were written earlier. The people of Gray County greatly enjoyed the two rodeos. The entertainment consisted of riding bucking broncos, horseracing, roping, and a few other rodeo entertainment forms.

Since roundups are no longer a part of Western Kansas, the rodeo helps keep a part of the old West alive for the younger generation and brings back special memories to the early settlers.