If You Climb Into the Saddle, Be Ready For the Ride: Looking at Contemporary Gay Rodeo

Kate Hansen
Wellesley College, khansen3@wellesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.wellesley.edu/thesiscollection

Recommended Citation
Hansen, Kate, "If You Climb Into the Saddle, Be Ready For the Ride: Looking at Contemporary Gay Rodeo" (2019). Honors Thesis Collection. 637.
https://repository.wellesley.edu/thesiscollection/637
If You Climb Into the Saddle, Be Ready For the Ride:
Looking at Contemporary Gay Rodeo

Kate Hansen

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Prerequisite for Honors in American Studies
Advised by Paul Fisher

April 2019

© 2019 Katherine D. Hansen
Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank my amazing thesis advisor, Professor Paul Fisher. I am so incredibly grateful for all of the time, thought, patience, and care you have poured into this project over the past year. Thank you for exploring this community with me, sharing your incredible knowledge of the West and queer history, and for the many laughs along the way. Our conversations have meant more to me than you know.

To all of my contacts, interviewees, and friends in the International Gay Rodeo Association community – thank you for welcoming me, sharing your stories, and reminding us all that there is no right way to be ourselves. The only right way, it seems, is to be true to our complexity.

Thank you to Professor Rebecca Scofield of the University of Idaho for your guidance and enthusiasm throughout this endeavor. Your deep knowledge of gay rodeo inspires me, and I can’t wait to see what comes of the archive project.

A sincere thank you goes to Professor Andrea Levitt and the Samuel and Hilda Levitt Fellowship. Your generosity made my travel and interviews possible, and ultimately allowed me to take this research into my own hands.

Thank you to Professor Maria Blevins of Utah Valley University and Johanna Blume of the Eiteljorg Museum for helping prepare me for my fieldwork.

Of course, thank you to Professor Michael Jeffries, Professor Ryan Quintana, and Professor Koichi Hagimoto for your involvement in this project. I couldn’t have asked for a better thesis committee.

Thank you to Rebecca Sanchez for taking a road trip with me to attend the North Star Regional Rodeo and for supporting me throughout the entire thesis process.

This project would not have been possible without the support of my kind and thoughtful friends. Sarah, Mairany, Noor, Genna, Dana, Ayla, Jamilah, Clare, Audrey, Nimo, and many more – thank you for listening to even my most jumbled thoughts since day one. Conversations with every one of you have shaped this project into what it is today.

Thank you to my mother for supporting me in all of my decisions, especially the one where I went to college nine-hundred miles from home.

Finally, thank you to my trusty thesis carrel on the third floor of Clapp Library. From the early mornings when sunlight poured onto your soft wood, to the late nights when we closed down the library, we truly were in this together.
Table of Contents

Introduction 1

Chapter 1: Looking Back

1.1 *Once Upon a Time in the West*: History of Rodeo and Myths of the Cowboy 6
1.2 *Double Kicker*: Gay Rodeo’s Emergence in a Dynamic Historical Moment 20
1.3 *Let’s Rodeo*: Early Days of Gay Rodeo 26
1.4 *Rough Riding*: Discrimination and Resistance to the IGRA 32
1.5 *The Go-Round*: Gay Rodeo in the Twenty-first Century 40

Chapter 2: Looking In

2.1 *A Rhyme and a Reason*: Research Methodology 43
2.2 *Rhinestone Cowboys*: Structure of an IGRA Rodeo 51
2.3 *Cowboy Up*: The IGRA Community in 2018 57
2.4 *At Home On the Range*: The IGRA and Rural Identity 67

Chapter 3: Looking Ahead

3.1 *This Ain’t My First Rodeo*: Generations of the IGRA 74
3.2 *If You Climb in the Saddle, Be Ready for the Ride*: Future of the IGRA 77

References 87
Introduction

“‘Rural’ is first and foremost a name we give to an astoundingly complex assemblage of people, places, and positionalities. In this respect, ‘rural’ is not entirely unlike ‘queer’ itself”.1

- Mary L. Gray, Queering the Countryside

Rural America, in its most basic sense, is defined by the census. For an area to be considered rural, its ratio of residents to square miles must fall below a predetermined threshold. This distinction describes about ninety seven percent of the nation’s land area, and is home to about sixty million people.2 As a proportion, approximately one in five Americans live in rural areas. In the century since the United States switched from being a majority rural nation to a majority metropolitan one, the word rural has been complicated by social and political meaning. Scholar Mary Gray writes that rural America “has come to represent many qualities that a lot of people who live there (wherever ‘there’ is) simply do not possess”.3 Assumptions that rural America is entirely white, conservative, and culturally lagging are not only incorrect, but also contribute to the marginalization and erasure of many diverse groups.

Queer people living in the rural United States find themselves at a particularly complex intersection. Not only are they virtually invisible in media and culture, but they also face challenges unique to their geography. Leila Fadel writes for NPR that “LGBT people are typically depicted as city and coastal dwellers. And those who live in rural America are often characterized as people yearning to escape rural life for more acceptance in urban areas”.4

---

3 Gray et al., Queering the Countryside, 4.
other accounts, rural spaces are seen as “gay America’s closet”. To some, the very idea that a queer person could live a full and vibrant life in a rural area is beyond imagination. Queer history and its people have been largely cast under metronormative assumptions. Yet, rural queer people continue to exist and thrive. A 2019 study by the Movement Advancement Project estimates that between 2.9 million and 3.8 million LGBT people live in rural America. That’s twenty percent of the nation’s entire LGBT population.

Of course, queer people living in rural areas face unique challenges. While rural America should not be stereotyped, it is true that many areas embrace a social conservatism that lends itself to homophobia. This type of bigotry and violence is not unique to rural spaces, but rural residents are at a distinct disadvantage: living in a rural area has its limitations to developing queer communities and institutions. Generally speaking, connecting people from small towns peppered across significant land mass is much more complicated than connecting people in a city with thousands of potential members. While the landscape for this type of connecting has changed drastically for queer rural Americans with the emergence of the internet, the vast majority of queer institutions and communities remain in the United States’ urban centers. One exception to this trend is gay rodeo.

I became interested in studying the International Gay Rodeo Association (IGRA) because it is one of the few active queer institutions tied to rural life. Not only does it exist at the intersection of two rarely associated worlds, but it does so with impressive stamina and success.

---

6 I first saw this term used by Mary L. Gray in *Out in the Country*.
8 Fadel, "New Study: LGBT People A 'Fundamental Part of the Fabric of Rural Communities'."
9 Gray, *Out in the Country*. 
The first gay rodeo took place in 1976, and the IGRA has survived an incredibly dynamic four decades for the queer community – a period which included gay liberation, the AIDS crisis, the Reagan administration, the eradication of sodomy laws, and the legalization of same sex-marriage. Still active today, the IGRA attracts participants from across the United States and Canada. And although it presents itself as a safe space particularly for participants that identify with a rural or Western lifestyle, the IGRA community also includes people from metropolitan backgrounds. This project investigates the IGRA as a unique, robust community that unapologetically asserts that rural and queer life are not mutually exclusive.

While academic literature focused on gay rodeo exists, it is limited. To the best of my knowledge, there have been less than ten academic articles published specifically on the IGRA, and under thirty that cite the organization at all. The majority of these pieces are journal articles, such as "Reagan's Rainbow Rodeos: Queer Challenges to the Cowboy Dreams of Eighties America" in the Canadian Review of American Studies and “Collecting visual voices: Understanding identity, community, and the meaning of participation within gay rodeos” in Sexualities. A handful of graduate studies have also been conducted on gay rodeo, notably a master’s thesis by Jonathan Hanvelt at the University of British Columbia, and a doctoral dissertation written by Rebecca Scofield at Harvard University. Following her dissertation, Scofield has continued to publish material on the IGRA, and is presently compiling an oral

---

12 Rebecca Elena Scofield, "Riding Bareback: Rodeo Communities and the Construction of American Gender, Sexuality, and Race in the Twentieth Century" (doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 2015).
history archive of interviews with IGRA participants. She is arguably the foremost academic expert on the IGRA, and she proved a valuable contact for me throughout this project.

Alongside academic articles, there is also an extensive online archive maintained by the IGRA and a cornucopia of news articles on the association. Throughout my research, it has seemed that many of these sources fall into one of two categories. First, there are the sources that concentrate on the early days of the IGRA. Many academic pieces fit into this category, and focus on what was surely a historically fascinating time in gay rodeo history. However, although many of these pieces were published in the 2000s, most include little content on gay rodeo past the turn of the century. There are also the celebratory pieces. Mostly news articles, these types of publications focus on more contemporary IGRA rodeos but interact with them at a surface level. Many feature striking photography and inspirational quotes from participants but collectively do little more than introduce the idea that gay rodeos exists to the unfamiliar reader. Ultimately, while the breadth of gay rodeo literature was fascinating, there seemed to be a gaping hole: what were the complexities of the IGRA, today?

In order to answer these questions, I conducted fieldwork during the IGRA’s 2018 season. I attended three rodeos, each in distinct regions of the United States, where I interviewed community members and conducted participant observation. During the same period, I also developed community contacts within the IGRA and its affiliates. The ultimate goal of these efforts was to create a community profile of the IGRA in 2018.

What follows is an attempt to frame today’s IGRA within the organization’s past and future. First, I detail a brief history of rodeo and Western images in the American imagination. I then contextualize the gay rodeo’s emergence in a unique historical moment, followed by a documentation of its history through the 2000s. Finally, I report on findings from my fieldwork,
which investigated questions of race, gender, generation, and proximity to rural life. Who comprises the gay rodeo community today? How does it see itself? And what challenges is it facing as it looks to the future? The following chapters seek to answer these questions.
Chapter 1: Looking Back

1.1 Once Upon a Time in the West: History of Rodeo and Myths of the Cowboy

In order to understand gay rodeo, it is critical to understand the history of rodeo more generally. Western American rodeo, after all, is the foundation on which gay rodeo is built. A brief investigation into its history reveals that decades before any gay rodeos, identity was already heavily wrapped up in the sport. Rodeo and images of rodeo have long been reserved for only a certain group of people, while many others have been excluded on the basis of gender, race, and sexual orientation. This exclusion extends to even those who are arguably cowboy culture’s rightful inventors. Recognizing this history reveals that popular understandings of rodeo, cowboy culture, and the West are often devoid of their true historical complexity. So when a group of gay men and lesbians\textsuperscript{13} decided to put on a gay rodeo, they were simply adding another layer to an already complicated and imperfect legacy.

As early as the 1840s, rodeos were embedded in rural community events in the American West. They were held as exhibition matches at gatherings such as Fourth of July celebrations and local fairs, where predominantly white cowboys from opposing ranches competed to determine who had superior skills.\textsuperscript{14} At its core, rodeo reflected realistic necessities of ranching life. For example, prowess in capturing cattle for medical attention, branding, or sale was approximated in various roping events. The competitions were informal, but quickly gained popularity in a

\textsuperscript{13} While not inclusive of all queer identities, this description is used because this is how early IGRA was described and also how participants identified – typical of the times. I recognize this is not an ideal term and will use more inclusive terms whenever it does not deviate from historical accuracy.

\textsuperscript{14} Tracy Owens Patton and Sally M. Schedlock, \textit{Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo: Breaking Away from the Ties of Sexism and Racism} (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 11.
landscape with limited entertainment. Scholars disagree as to exactly when rodeos became more commercialized and formalized, but they enjoyed steady popularity through the 1920s.\textsuperscript{15}

Rodeo events were long preceded by the establishment of cowboy culture, which for the purposes of this study will refer to the culture and traditions of horsemanship and ranching. Cowboy culture in the United States has its roots in Latin American traditions, and especially those of Mexico. It is no coincidence that rodeo’s emergence coincided with the end of the Mexican-American War in 1848. This period was marked by significant cultural exchange with Mexico, particularly following the annexation of Texas and Tejanos. White settlers began to hire Mexican cowboys in record numbers and, in time, appropriated many of their ranching and horsemanship methods.

The development of cowboy culture in Latin America began during Spanish colonization. Cattle and horses were introduced to the Americas with the colonial intention of developing ranching economies. In the process, those charged with taking care of the animals created their own methods and styles of working with livestock. These practices, and later more deep-seated traditions, differed by geography. There was gaucho culture in Brazil, the huaso in Chile, and the llanero in Venezuela.\textsuperscript{16} In Mexico, cowboy culture was divided between the aristocratic charros, and the working cowboy vaqueros.\textsuperscript{17} By the late 1800s, one out of three cowboys in the world was a Mexican vaquero,\textsuperscript{18} and by the 1920s and 1930s, half of employees on large ranches in the Western United States were vaqueros.\textsuperscript{19} These cowboys were renowned

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[16] Owens Patton & Schedlock, \textit{Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo}, 147.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
for their prowess in roping and riding. One infamous move, *el paso de la muerte* (the ride of death) required a cowboy to ride a trained horse up to a wild horse and jump onto its back. Below, four vaqueros are pictured mounted on their horses in central Arizona.

For evidence of the ways that Latinx traditions have influenced rodeo culture in the United States, one need not look further than the word rodeo itself. Rodeo comes from the word *rodear* in Spanish, meaning to surround or round up. With it, bandanas, spurs, lassos, stirrups, and cowboy hats all have Latinx roots. Despite their seminal influence and presence in US ranching, Latinx cowboys were rarely featured in *displays* of cowboy culture in the nineteenth and twentieth century. When they were, it was typically under racist premises. Mexican cowboys such as Vaquero Jose Berrara and Vaquero Antonio Esquivel were employed in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Shows, but were cast in roles heavy with stereotypes.

---

Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Shows were crucial to rodeo’s transformation from a community pastime to an institutionalized professional sport. The shows were so instrumental because they catapulted cowboy culture and images of the American West into the mainstream. Born in Iowa and raised in Kansas, William “Buffalo Bill” Cody introduced US audiences to an entirely new form of entertainment in 1883. His Wild West Shows incorporated live animals and real-time combat to enact fictional stories of the frontier. The shows were suspenseful, rugged, and relied on traditional cowboy techniques to entertain their audiences. They were promoted as “America’s National Entertainment” and ran with extreme popularity for thirty years with millions of spectators. Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Shows were the first formalized, large-scale productions incorporating rodeo-style events.

Rodeo historian Tracey Owens Patton suggests that the year 1893 “pinpoints a time when the white American public became fascinated with the Western frontier”. In fact, in this year a Buffalo Bill show was being held just across the street from where the Columbian Exhibition of Chicago was also underway. There, scholar Fredrick Jackson Turner delivered his landmark address, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”. Historian Patricia Limerick notes that Turner not only defined mythic images of Western life as fact, but also as central to American identity. She writes,

The center of American history, Turner argued, was actually to be found at its edges. As the American people proceeded westward, “the frontier [was] the outer edge of the wave – the meeting point between savagery and civilization” and “the line of most effective and rapid Americanization.” The struggle with the wilderness turned Europeans into Americans, a process Turner made the central story of American history.

---

Like in many accounts of “the central story of American history”, these narratives disproportionately focused on white people, and particularly white men. As images and stories of the frontier became increasingly popular in the mainstream, they were also active in their contributions to white male hegemony.

The years following Turner’s speech were marked by a steady influx of Western images in popular culture. Through the 1920s, white Americans consumed art and novels that “blurred the lines between [Western] fact and fiction”.\(^{30}\) Western-themed radio shows became popular in the 1930s and 1940s, and were followed by Western films that skyrocketed in popularity in the 1950s and 1960s.\(^{31}\) By 1959, eight of the top ten programs on television were Westerns, and there were thirty-five Western shows running concurrently. At the same time, Western novels were consumed by the hundreds of thousands.\(^{32}\)

The more that Western culture was produced and consumed in the mainstream, the more its depictions misrepresented realities of the West. Not only did Westerns romanticize an often difficult, laborious way of life, but they skewed demographic dynamics of the frontier. Most Westerns featured white cowboys as their heroes, yet by the turn of the twentieth century, nearly one in three cowboys employed in Southern cattle drives was either Black, Mexican, or Native American.\(^{33}\) This erasure not only ignored the influence of communities of color to cowboy culture and Western life, but also contributed to more harmful, hegemonic understandings of the West for white America.

---


\(^{32}\) Tompkins, *West of Everything*, 5.

\(^{33}\) Owens Patton & Schedlock, *Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo*, 149.
In addition to Latinx people, Black and Native Americans also contributed significantly to historical ranching and Western life. The influence of Black cowboys stems partially from a period in which enslaved Black people were forced to work on ranches in Texas, where millions of cattle were being raised and sold. By the dawn of the Civil War, thirty percent of the Texas settler population was comprised of enslaved Black men. Following emancipation, many Black cowboys continued in the ranching industry, especially because being a ranch hand was one of few occupations accessible to men of color. This work equipped Black cowboys with skills that also made them strong rodeo competitors. Rodeos with both Black and white competitors are recorded as early as 1887, giving way to legends such as Pinto Jim and Bronco Jim Davis. Perhaps the most famous Black cowboy of this time was Bill Pickett, who is credited for inventing bulldogging, in which the cowboy bites the lower lip of a steer in competition. Under different circumstances, there were also Black families who ventured West in pursuit of a better life. Historian William Loren Katz writes on their erasure,

In [the] fantasy frontier, [B]lack people were unceremoniously dropped from the cast. But in reality, alone or in small groups, intrepid African American pioneers penetrated the wilderness as slave runaways, Indians, explorers, fur trappers, and missionaries. Black families seeking their American dream crossed the fertile plains in Conestoga wagons, and poorer ones walked up the Chisolm Trail to Kansas or across the continent to California. Like white pioneers, some [B]lack families struck it rich; others found a homestead.

This is to say that while Black Americans were not the original founders of cowboy culture, they were key players in its earliest days in the American West. This impact extends not only to ranching practices, but also the development of rodeo as a sport.

Like Latinx and Black communities, Native communities also contributed to rodeo and cowboy culture. While historians record that horses were brought to the Americas by the Spanish, some Native traditions teach that horses were obtained through heroic quests and thanks to the generosity of the gods. Over centuries, horses were deeply incorporated into many Native American communities, though they took on new meaning in the nineteenth century. Patton notes that “once American Indian lands were taken through white migration, treaty violations, and the railroad industry, ranching on or near reservations became a way of life for many Plains Indians tribes as a way to survive and subsist”. While some ranched or leased their land, other Native people worked for white ranchers in states like Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and South Dakota. As with Mexican exchange, this interaction led to appropriation of Native horsemanship practices by white cowboys.

Voltaire once wrote that “if the American frontier did not exist, it would have to have been invented”. In effect, popular images not only whitewashed the West, but also normalized violence inherent to westward expansion. One effect was disguising and dramatizing the genocide of Native and Indigenous peoples, who were often portrayed as “savages” in Westerns or demonized within the racist “cowboys vs. Indians” binary. Owens Patton positions this idea

---

38 Peter Iverson, Riders of the West: Portraits from Indian Rodeo (Seattle: University of Washington, 1999), 1.
39 Owens Patton & Schedlock, Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo, 152.
40 Owens Patton & Schedlock, Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo, 152.
41 Owens Patton & Schedlock, Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo, 152.
42 Katz, The Black West, xii.
in deeper trends by saying, “[t]he Myth of the West has lived in the minds of Americans and across the oceans in Europe for generations. The myth began with the [w]hite supremacist ideal of manifest destiny and westward expansion” and Limerick argues that these portrayals of the West serviced white hegemony and romanticized the true history of the West – one of conquest. She notes,

In the popular imagination, the reality of conquest dissolved into stereotypes of noble savages and noble pioneers struggling quaintly in the wilderness. These adventures seemed to have no bearing on the complex realities of twentieth-century America. In Western paintings, novels, movies, and television shows, those stereotypes were valued precisely because they offered an escape from modern troubles. The subject of slavery was the domain of serious scholars and the occasion for sober national reflection; the subject of conquest was the domain of mass entertainment and the occasion for lighthearted national escapism. An element of regret for “what we did to the Indians” had entered the picture, but the dominant feature of conquest remained “adventure”.

Limerick ultimately asserts that during the twentieth century, there was a fundamental lack of gravity in American understanding of the West. This gravity, of course, reflects a more sinister function of Western images: to romanticize away violence committed to Native people. Somber understanding of this history was replaced by untroubled stories of adventure. Such attitudes can still be noted today, such as the use of “the Wild West” as a colloquialism.

En masse and over decades, Western representation in popular culture not only contributed to erasure on the basis of race, but also of gender and sexual orientation. Marginalization by gender has largely been documented within the gender binary – in this case, the marginalization of cisgender women. Owens Patton writes that in the early nineteen hundreds, the cowgirl “encapsulated the nation’s fascination and love affair with rodeo… cowgirls in the early days of rodeo were fierce, independent, and free to pursue their rodeo

---

dreams.” However, not all cowgirls were treated equally. Owens Patton’s statement primarily refers to white cowgirls, who were allowed to compete in rodeos starting in the late 1880s. Opportunities for women of color were virtually nonexistent. Even into the 1920s, when there was potential to be hired to perform in Wild West shows, women of color were often taken advantage of and put into racist or “exotic” roles.

Benefitting from white privilege, white women were generally treated as equals to men from 1886 to 1929 in the rodeo arena, and in some cases they even competed in the same events. Scholar Mary Lou LeCompte writes that “these cowgirls were featured at many of the biggest, most lucrative rodeos in the United States and abroad, with the top cowgirls’ earnings equaling and sometimes surpassing those of the foremost cowboys. Furthermore, unlike most female athletes, cowgirls received overwhelmingly favorable and unbiased treatment from the press.” Into the 1930s, however, social acceptance of the athletic, commanding, “do it yourself woman” began to diminish. In the years to follow, the role of women in rodeo would be dramatically reduced, perhaps in part because some women consistently outperformed their male counterparts. Owens Patton writes that, “After 1925, cowgirls began to find themselves slowly removed from the arena; in other words, they were rounded up and put out to pasture.” This effect was punctuated in 1929 when the Rodeo Association of America was formed, established standardized events for professional rodeos, and did not include women of any race. White

women and cowgirls were technically still allowed in rodeo events, but their expected role shifted. Instead of being seen as fierce competitors, women were largely valued for their bodies. In roles like sponsor girls and rodeo queens, women were responsible for looking the part of a “cowgirl”, but little else. In other instances, women were reduced to wives and girlfriends of cowboys. A 1940 issue of the *New Yorker* stated that “cowgirls, though they do not compete in the more strenuous events, are on terms of affectionate equality with the cowboys, and there is almost no prosperous bachelor cowboy who does not dream of marrying a cowgirl someday and raising kids in a herd of white-faced steers”.55 These cowgirls were expected to be content with “affectionate equality” on the basis of their romantic potential, instead of being seen as fully capable, athletic competitors. Not only was this assumption incredibly sexist, but also heteronormative.

Cowgirl images became even more sexualized by the second half of the century. Owens Patton asserts that “since the 1960s, the sexualized image of the cowgirl reigns supreme: tight Wrangler jeans, low-cut tops, and cowgirl boots. There is a fine line between her and the representation of the buckle bunny”.56 In less than a century, women had been demoted from serious competitors to objects of patriarchy. While women continued to compete in small numbers, it would not be until 1948 when the Girls Rodeo Association formed, or 1971 when Title IX and the Equal Rights Amendment extended legal protections for women in sport.58 Still today, women do not compete in events such as bull riding in elite professional rodeo circuits. While they are not technically barred, there are more subtle, systematic forces that push them...

---

56 A buckle bunny is a term describing a woman who follows rodeos and cowboys. It is sexist and heteronormative, but normalized in many rodeo circles.
As is common in virtually all professional sport, women’s compensation still lags behind their male counterparts'. As late as 2010, there was over a twenty thousand dollar pay gap in the winnings between the top cowgirl and the top cowboy.60 As a percentage, this represents a larger pay gap than that of corporate America.61 Further, women in rodeo today cite rampant and unchecked sexual harassment in mainstream rodeo circuits.62 These examples illustrate the ways in which white women have been systematically and culturally marginalized in the rodeo world. Many women of color, on the other hand, were excluded altogether.

Injustices in rodeo were intimately connected with the media, especially in the early twentieth century. While each had a role in influencing the other, the media was instrumental in popularizing cowboy culture beyond the geographical West, and in effect, into the mainstream. Feminist critic of Westerns Jane Thompkins articulates that “from roughly 1900 to 1975 a significant portion of the adolescent male population spent every Saturday afternoon at the movies. What they saw there were Westerns. Roy Rogers, Tom Mix, Lash LaRue, Gene Autry, Hopalong Cassidy… Westerns – novels and films – have touched the lives of virtually everyone who lived during the first three-quarters of [the twentieth] century”.63 These sources perpetuated images of the white, heterosexual, conventionally attractive, cisgender cowboy. Their version of Western tradition – not the rich, nuanced, and diverse one that history confirms – was the one that was catapulted into the American imagination. In effect, this was also the foundation on which modern rodeo institutions and culture were built.

59 Rebecca Scofield in discussion with the author, October 2018.
60 Owens Patton & Schedlock, Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo, 109.
63 Thompkins, West of Everything, 5.
The popularity of Westerns undoubtedly bolstered the growth and formalization of rodeo. Only their concurrence can explain how one of the first national cowboys’ organizations emerged not on the frontier, but at Madison Square Garden. Owens Patton explains how this popularity, sparked by Buffalo Bill, propelled rodeo’s development. She writes,

The national and international notoriety that the Wild West shows initially brought to rodeo quickly ushered it into being one of America’s favorite pastime sports. Because of this popularity, rodeo began to formalize in 1929 when local rodeo boards, sponsors, and stock contractors established the Rodeo Association of America (RAA). In 1946, the RAA merged with the National Rodeo Association [...] to become the International Rodeo Association (IRA). The RAA’s goal was to create an organized system to increase the professionalism of rodeo as a sport and formalize it [...] However, members of the RAA complained that the organization represented only the management level of the rodeo competition. The white male competitors then decided to organize and fight for better pay, better stock, and better judging for themselves.

The white cowboys that Owens Patton describes above organized themselves in 1936 leading up to a rodeo at Madison Square Garden. Later, their group would be called the Cowboys’ Turtle Association, which a historical account explains as being “a name they picked because they had been slow to act, but had finally stuck their necks out for their cause”. In 1945, the association became the Rodeo Cowboys Association (RCA), which later became the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) in 1975. To this day, the PRCA is remains the predominant professional rodeo association in the United States. The organization hosts hundreds of rodeos a year and self-reports a staggering $39.6 million in combined prize money for the 2013 rodeo season. For some participants in the IGRA, the PRCA is the rodeo organization they have left behind.

---

65 Owens Patton & Schedlock, Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo, xix-xx.
66 "History of Rodeo", Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association.
67 "History of Rodeo", Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association.
Just as Westerns had in the first three quarters of the century, cowboy associations painted a specific and exclusive picture of who could be a cowboy. In the days of the Cowboys’ Turtle Association, white men were seen as the only true participants. While white women were tolerated as nonvoting members, they often faced pushback and assertions that rodeo was too dangerous for women to compete in. Owens Patton notes that during this time, people of color “were already pushed out of the arena at this point due to U.S. segregation laws like Jim Crow laws”. By 1975, when the PRCA formed, membership was still dominated by straight, white, cis men.

Perhaps it is no surprise that gay rodeo emerged alongside other community rodeos, specifically for those marginalized from dominant rodeo associations like the PRCA. They included Native, Latinx, Black, and women’s rodeo associations, many of which originated around the same time. The Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo, for example, was founded in 1984 as a safe place for Black participants to compete and “celebrate and honor Black cowboys and cowgirls in their contributions to building the West.” Like the gay rodeo, most community-specific rodeos operated at the amateur level, and many continue to be held annually or semi-annually today.

Whether community-specific or large-scale, rodeos as they are known today are all similar in structure. With room for variation, rodeos for the past half century have generally been made up of events from three overarching categories. The first is horse events, which

---

70 Rebecca Scofield in discussion with the author, October 2018.
72 Wilke, "Rough Faith", 22.
demonstrate a rider’s prowess on horseback and ability to control cattle. These events typically are divided into roping and speed events, and include competitions like pole bending and barrel racing. The second category is rough stock events, which are the most dangerous. Rough stock competitions require the most direct contact between a participant and animal, and include events such as bull riding and bareback bronc riding. The third category is camp events, which are competitions almost exclusively intended for entertainment. One example of a camp event is steer decorating, in which a team must tie a ribbon around an agitated steer’s tail. A combination of events from these three categories is, in its most general sense, a rodeo.

Though the formalization and standardization of rodeo in the twentieth century benefited gay rodeo in a structural way, rodeo’s complex history cannot be removed from the sport today. In considering gay rodeo, it is important to recognize that the histories of race, gender, and sexual orientation are inherently intertwined throughout the entire enterprise. Even though gay rodeo challenges mainstream rodeo assumptions surrounding sexuality, this does mean that it cannot be complicit in other marginalization by gender and race. Participating in rodeo, playing cowboy, and being a part of the IGRA community are all interactions with larger systems of power in American society.
1.2 Double Kicker: Gay Rodeo’s Emergence in a Dynamic Historical Moment

As articulated in the first section, discrimination on the basis of race and gender in early rodeo was systematic. What was unique about marginalization on the basis of sexual orientation is that queer white men were able to compete in mainstream rodeos, as long as they were perceived as straight. Individuals who were “out” on the basis of their sexual orientation, however, were both unwelcome and unsafe. Historian Rebecca Scofield states that “gay people faced significant danger when they entered straight cowboy spaces.” Gay rodeo was not distinct in that it allowed gay cowboys to participate in its events, it was distinct because it allowed them to participate as gay cowboys. Gay rodeo’s emergence in 1976 is undoubtedly reflective of its times. Not only was this period during the gay liberation movement, but also at a moment in which cowboy culture was a feature of the mainstream. Its unique timing during these two cultural moments ultimately set the stage for gay rodeo to materialize.

The 1960s through the 1980s were marked by the gay liberation movement and an explosion of queer visibility, organizing, and community building. Queer historian Charles Kaiser writes,

No other group has ever transformed its status more rapidly or more dramatically than lesbians and gay men. When World War II began, gay people in America had no legal rights, no organizations, a handful of private thinkers, and no public advocates. As recently as 1970, Joseph Epstein could write in Harper’s ‘If I had the power to do so, I would wish homosexuality off the face of the earth.’ Only gay activists thought that statement was outrageous. A quarter century later, gay people [had] completed the first stages of an incredible voyage: a journey from invisibility to ubiquity… to the triumph of a rugged, resourceful and caring community.74

---

While the claim that no other group has liberated itself more quickly rings insensitive to the fact that gay liberation enjoyed considerable white privilege, Kaiser’s description speaks to the pace and depth of queer community development during this time. Queer political centers were most often coastal cities with already established LGBT populations. One hub was San Francisco, to where more than thirty thousand gay people moved between the years of 1969 and 1979. This connecting of people allowed activist organizations like the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) to form and advocate for gay rights with a determined, often militant spirit.

Even more influential to gay rodeo, connecting people also fostered the development of gay social institutions. Gay sports leagues, for example, strengthened a sense of community while also providing a space to participate in sports for many who did not feel welcome or safe in traditional sports teams. In the 1990 “Survey on Discrimination on Sexual Preference in Sports” interviewees cited discrimination, verbal abuse, and hostile atmospheres as some of the reasons for this sentiment. Gay and lesbian leagues — which included sports such as bowling, tennis, football, softball, volleyball, and wrestling — exploded in popularity in the mid-1970s. Teams like the Burning Butches (a lesbian softball team in Atlanta) and the Outriders (a Boston-based gay, lesbian, and bisexual bicycling group) created space for their members to participate in athletics without judgment. This is to say that gay rodeo was not an isolated event, but instead one of many emerging sports competitions intended specifically for the gay community.

75 Michael Bronski, A Queer History of the United States (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 171.
76 Bronski, A Queer History of the United States, 216.
80 Schlager, St. James Press Gay & Lesbian Almanac, 590.
The establishment of gay philanthropy also directly influenced gay rodeo’s founding. One of the largest of these philanthropic organizations was the International Imperial Court System (IICS). Originally founded in 1965 in San Francisco’s drag bars by Jose Sarria, the Court defined itself with elaborate fundraisers to support local charities. What started as a grassroots effort would develop chapters across the United States and grow to become one of the largest LGBT organizations in the world. It was the IICS chapter of Reno, Nevada that organized the first gay rodeo in 1976.

However, gay liberation was not the only historical condition that encouraged the prospects of a gay rodeo. After a brief decline in popularity, Western images resurfaced in the 1970s and 1980s. Notably during these years, Western myths transitioned from the confines of the screen to being performed in people’s everyday lives. Both gay and straight bars in Los Angeles, for example, frequently held line dancing nights, for which participants dressed up in “cowboy attire” for an evening. Bars and social clubs hastily installed mechanical bulls to cheaply simulate “real cowboy” activities, and Disney’s Frontierland Park was widely enjoyed. The West was trendy. And more specifically, cowboy culture was trendy.

Despite following the civil rights movement, second wave feminism, and gay liberation, cowboy representations during this time remained dominantly straight, white, and male. Especially after the Vietnam War and during the notoriously anti-LGBT Reagan presidency, images of the West were newly co-opted to serve hegemonic white masculinity. The logic was based in the earliest imagination of the West, which was articulated by Turner in his infamous

84 Blake Little in discussion with the author, September 2018.
85 Scofield, “Chaps and Scowls,” 327.
1893 address. The West, as a concept, was a bastion of adventure and ruggedness for urban and metropolitan white men to latch on to, despite a lifestyle that was increasingly sedentary for those in the middle and upper classes.\textsuperscript{86} This is what Scofield describes as the “urban cowboy movement”. She articulates,

> Even as women and men, Democrats and Republicans, gay people and straight people participated in the western boom, the urban cowboy movement coalesced around desires for an American identity which predated many of the social changes wrought by 1960s and 1970s social movements. The popularity of this movement ultimately helped craft a nostalgic vision of a re-invigorated white, masculine America.\textsuperscript{87}

In other words, the cowboy had officially been outsourced. His worth was no longer tied to cattle, the land, or even the West. Instead, his image generated social capital in urban centers, suburbia, and nine-to-five office jobs. By one critic, urban cowboys were harshly described as “tenderfeet who never travel terrain any rougher than pot-holed city streets”.\textsuperscript{88} While traveling those streets, a major component of the urban cowboy was looking the part. Western wear stores appeared in urban centers, and a 1978 collection by fashion designer Ralph Lauren made twenty-five million dollars in a single year.\textsuperscript{89} Although they certainly should be understood differently than cultural appropriation based on race or ethnicity, these trends were also a type of appropriation. In many ways, being an urban cowboy meant performing a character far beyond one’s lived experiences – just as a drag performer might do.

> Though Scofield notes that a wide range of people played cowboy, the practice was used strategically by the political right. Cowboy images recaptured ideas of conservative white male masculinity, and complimented smaller movements like “plain folks Americanism” that emerged

\textsuperscript{86} Owens Patton & Schedlock, \textit{Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo}, 4-5.
\textsuperscript{87} Scofield, “Chaps and Scowls,” 337.
\textsuperscript{88} Scofield, “Chaps and Scowls,” 327.
\textsuperscript{89} Scofield, “Chaps and Scowls,” 327.
in response to the liberal and progressive energy of the sixties. Ronald Reagan was particularly notorious for playing cowboy. Known for adorning himself in cowboy attire and saying things like “there is nothing better for the inside of a man than the outside of a horse”, Reagan utilized cowboy identity to gain hyper-masculine legitimacy. His hobby ranch in Texas, Rancho del Cielo, attracted copious media and public attention. Scofield notes that “the media portrayed men like Ralph Lauren and Ronald Reagan, neither of whom were part of the rural working class, as men with true grit, in part because of their penchant for playing cowboy.” Another scholar, Christopher Le Coney, asserts that Reagan “attempted to resurrect frontier masculinity by rewriting the Vietnam War and rehabilitating its defeated hero: the straight-shooting cowboy.”

Playing cowboy was not restricted to the everyday person, it was also being utilized by those at the highest levels of power and influence.

In effect, the 70s and 80s’ images of the West were only the newest to serve white, straight, male hegemony, just they had decades before. Scofield writes,

Promoters of the urban cowboy strategically re-imagined women, gay people, and Native Americans back into roles which demonstrated the authority of white maleness. While more and different people could be included under the tent of American exceptionalism – urbanites, women, and even non-Americans, these same advocates of expansion amputated full participation in the new imagined frontier. Other populations, especially those who had participated in the territorial expansion of the American West like Chinese Americans, African Americans, and Mexican Americans, were simply not imagined at all. Often rendered silent in the emerging performance of the post-1970s American cowboy, these populations persistently fought for representation in a larger national story of American exceptionalism. While wealthy white New Yorkers indulged in the same fantasies as white, working-class Texans, exceptionalism continued to be grounded in visions of violent exclusion.

---

91 Scofield, "Chaps and Scowls," 328.
93 Scofield, "Chaps and Scowls," 337.
Gay rodeo cannot be fully understood without recognizing that *this* was the climate in which the IGRA emerged. Further, this climate was built upon the decades of re-writing and co-opting of cowboy culture that preceded it. In some ways, this meant that composing a rodeo of almost exclusively queer bodies was incredibly radical and subversive. In other ways, it meant that people of a particular gender and race were automatically advantaged in its proceedings, even if they were gay. Still, the momentum of gay liberation and trendiness of cowboy culture produced a unique historical moment that inspired gay rodeo into existence.
1.3 Let's Rodeo: Early Days of Gay Rodeo

In its distinct timing between progressive change for queer people and regressive meanings of cowboy culture, perhaps it is not surprising that queer people putting on a rodeo was disruptive. But the first gay rodeo was not intended to challenge deeply-seated ideas of who could be a cowboy. Instead, it was intended to be a one-time fundraising event.

In 1976, Phil Ragsdale was the emperor of the International Imperial Court System’s Reno, Nevada chapter. For the organization’s next fundraiser, Ragsdale proposed holding an amateur rodeo. His intentions were not only to raise funds for their charity, but also to challenge stereotypes of gay men.94 Scofield recounts that “as Emperor, Ragsdale proposed hosting an amateur gay rodeo in order to raise money for the local senior center and, later, the Muscular Dystrophy Association. He was finally able to secure the [Washoe County95] fairgrounds for October 1976 and then proceeded to round up ‘wild’ stock because no one would contract animals to him”.96 Despite obstacles, the rodeo was held with one hundred and twenty-five participants97 and raised a few hundred dollars for the Muscular Dystrophy Association.98 The event was a legitimate amateur rodeo, and included standard events such as steer riding and barrel racing. There were also elements that made it distinct to the gay community. At the end of the competition, three winners were crowned – “King of the Cowboys” for best all-around cowboy, “Queen of the Cowgirls” for best all-around cowgirl, and “Miss Dusty Spurs” for the best drag queen.

95 Witt et al., Out in all directions, 546.
Due to the first event’s success, a second gay rodeo was held the following year in 1977. Ragsdale coined the event the National Reno Gay Rodeo and made changes to broaden its activities and fundraising potential. Most notably, he formalized a drag pageant which was held alongside rodeo events – the “Mr., Ms., and Miss National Reno Gay Rodeo Contest”. During the day, contestants competed in pageant-style events for their desired title. In the evenings, they put on drag shows to fundraise for charity. Alongside these shows, Ragsdale bolstered the rodeo’s social and nightlife appeal, which included bringing in gay dance troupes, square dancing, line dancing, and extensive parties. In casual interviews, attendees of these events have described early Reno rodeos as sexually-charged, specifically among the gay men in attendance.

These events were met with enthusiasm by the queer community, which propelled gay rodeo’s expansion to a much larger scale in just a short amount of time. The momentum steadily

---

100 John Beck, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
increased into the 1980s. Scofield notes that “by 1981, the National Reno Gay Rodeo had become an annual weekend-long festival accompanied by a parade and a plethora of cowboy-themed parties. Over the first five years, donations for the Muscular Dystrophy Association raised at the rodeo surged from a couple hundred dollars to over forty-thousand dollars per year. Attendance reached 10,000 spectators and Joan Rivers grand marshalled the parade”.¹⁰¹ By this time, the events in Reno had also inspired gay rodeo associations to establish in nearby Western states. The Golden Spike Gay Rodeo Association was formed in 1979 in Utah, followed by the Pacific Coast Gay Rodeo Association in California in 1980, and the Colorado Gay Rodeo Association in 1981.¹⁰²

As new associations continued to develop, contestants began to request standardization of rules and practices between states.¹⁰³ In 1985, the International Gay Rodeo Association was formed as an overarching body to standardize competition rules and support state associations in putting on their respective events.¹⁰⁴ Under founding president Wayne Jakino, the IGRA held its first convention the same year in Denver, which included associations from California, Arizona, Texas, and Colorado. In addition to regulation, establishing the IGRA established a second layer

¹⁰¹ Scofield, "Riding Bareback," 115.
¹⁰⁴ Witt et al., Out in all directions, 546.
of gay rodeo events. In 1986, a drag pageant had been instituted at the IGRA level, so that regional winners could compete for national titles. Similarly in 1987, the IGRA held its first Finals rodeo, in which local associations’ top competitors competed for international titles. By 1988, six rodeos were held annually under the IGRA framework, and by 1993 the IGRA lived up to its name and became truly international when a chapters began to form in Canada.

Bob Pimentel was the fifth president of the IGRA and documented the organization’s growth in the years to follow. He described that by “1992, twelve gay rodeos were held in eleven states, drawing record crowds from Seattle, Washington, to Bethesda, Maryland, with nearly 36,000 daytime spectators and more than double that number attending associated evening functions”. Pimentel’s account is supported by testimony of members who attended these events. Blake Little – a photographer and IGRA contestant whose photography would eventually comprise the first-ever museum exhibit of photos of the IGRA – approximated four thousand people at a rodeo he attended in the late 1980s.

This time period of significant growth for the IGRA was also one of immense struggle for the queer community at large. The AIDS crisis was first reported as “A Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals” in the New York Times, but exploded in scale so that by 1989, there were over 100,000 reported cases of AIDS in the country. The epidemic’s severity was neglected because of its dominance in the gay community.

---

107 Witt et al., Out in all directions, 546-547.  
108 Johanna Blume in discussion with the author, August 2018.  
109 Blake Little in discussion with the author, September 2018.  
“Homophobia led many decision makers to discount this epidemic, partly because they didn’t care much about those who were sick, and partly because they believed that as long as they were straight, they themselves would never have to worry about it”.112 This dismissal included budget cuts at the highest level. One of the Reagan administrations’ first acts was a proposal to cut half of the CDC’s appropriations, and congressional staffers at the time joked that the NIH (National Institutes of Health) stood for “Not Interested in Homosexuals”.113 The queer community, and particularly the gay community, was in crisis, and the government had left them out to dry.

Queer historian Michael Bronski articulates that the epidemic not only affected the gay community, but also public perceptions of it. In his book, A Queer History of the United States, Bronski writes,

But because [HIV/AIDS] was first detected in gay males and rapidly spread through the gay male community, it immediately became associated with gay men in the public imagination […] gay male sexuality, now synonymous with a fatal illness, became more stigmatized then [sic] ever before […] Occurring just three years after the repeal of the Dade County ordinance resulted in a wave of antigay sentiment across the nation, the HIV/AIDS epidemic was perfectly suited to the rhetoric of the religious and political right. Pat Buchanan, a conservative Catholic Republican leader, wrote in a 1990 column that “AIDS is nature’s retribution for violating the laws of nature.” Shortly after this, popular televangelist Jerry Falwell stated that “AIDS is not just God’s punishment for homosexuals. It is God’s punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals.”114

With virtually no support from the United States government and increasingly hostile attitudes towards gay people in the mainstream, gay communities did what they could to support their members from the inside. The IGRA and its regional associations were no different. Almost immediately, proceeds from IGRA events were directed to charities involved with HIV/AIDS. Longtime member of the Minnesota IGRA chapter, Brad Allen says may people felt that “we

needed to do something about this tragic disaster when the government wasn’t doing anything”. The crisis, after all, hit close to home for many IGRA participants. Some lost partners, and virtually all lost friends. Such friends included Phil Ragsdale – the man who planted the earliest seed of gay rodeo – who passed away of AIDS in 1992. The crisis was ravaging the gay community far beyond the scope of a single rodeo association, and IGRA members were acutely aware of this.

In some instances, the IGRA attempted to be creative in its fundraising efforts and involve itself beyond gay rodeos. In 1984, the Colorado Gay Rodeo Association’s mounted drill team was invited to ride in an AIDS benefit at Madison Square Garden – where the Cowboys’ Turtle Association had formed nearly fifty years prior. Still, it seems the association’s most significant contributions to AIDS patients and research has been through traditional fundraising. In the years during and since the crisis, the IGRA has raised a combined two million dollars for its charities. Perhaps more importantly, seasoned participants cite this period as one of intense bonding and common struggle for the rodeo’s community members, many of whom continued to come back year after year.

115 Brad Allen, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 28, 2018.
116 Brad Allen, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 28, 2018.
118 In the end, this appearance did not occur because the benefit’s producers did not allow the cowboys to ride.
1.4 Rough Riding: Discrimination and Resistance to the IGRA

As has been alluded to, the IGRA did not emerge without substantial resistance. A group of gay people putting on a rodeo deeply subverted the masculinity that cowboy culture had been co-opted to represent for decades. In a positive light, the IGRA challenged stereotypes of queer people, and gay men in particular. Scholar Christopher Le Coney says that the IGRA illustrated that “gay cowboy” was not an oxymoron and that “the gay rodeo reconciles homosexuality with the traditional image of the American cowboy, an image that, as [his interviewee noted], often represents something ‘anti-gay, redneck, hyper-masculine… that bars gays from its genre.’”

A 1991 participant asserted, albeit ungracefully, that “now they know we’re not just a bunch of pansies” in reference to critics who did not think queer people could conduct a rodeo. While most of these descriptions are geared towards men, cisgender women who participated in early gay rodeo had their own stereotypes to navigate. Owens Patton describes the “lose-lose battle with the now-strict gender expectations” that women in rodeo faced, regardless of their sexual orientation. On one end of this battle was presenting as too feminine and being discounted on their skills. On the other end was the potential of presenting as too masculine and being seen as “a lesbian or sexual deviant.” Already a numerical minority, the women of early gay rodeo faced an inflexible, imbalanced reality. In participating in exact same events, queer women risked perpetuating stereotypes about themselves, while queer men were able to distance themselves from their own.

122 Scofield, “Chaps and Scowls,” 335.
123 Owens Patton & Schedlock, Gender, Whiteness, and Power in Rodeo, 59.
Even in the most idealized account of gay rodeo’s challenge to stereotypes, one cannot deny that early IGRA participants were met with vehement discrimination because of it. While some attacks on the IGRA and its members were purely homophobic, most were laced with more complicated anger towards what gay rodeo inherently represented. Residents of the cities and towns where gay rodeos were held often protested, “they’re making a fiasco of the cowboy… they’re making fun of our heritage”.124 They weren’t angry simply because IGRA participants were gay. They were angry because IGRA participants were gay and putting on a rodeo.

Early discrimination affected everyone and, at times, was severe and violent. Scofield notes that the rodeos “were constantly under threat. Slurs, assaults, and bomb threats were not uncommon”.125 In one instance in Nebraska, a cowboy by the name of John Beck had a bomb put underneath his truck and a slur written on the vehicle in animal blood.126 In another year, Beck was stopped by a sheriff who had blocked the road to an event, was handcuffed, had a gun pulled on him, and was arrested for four days. According to his account, the only thing that the sheriff told him to justify this treatment was that gay people weren’t allowed to feed horses.127 In other instances, the entire association was attacked. In 1983, it was reported that “conservative groups and protestors attempted to have the Reno gay rodeo shut down by getting the IRS to confiscate the group’s books and proceeds”.128 During this era of the IGRA, putting on a rodeo was not only radical, but also dangerous.

124 Scofield, “Chaps and Scowls,” 335.
125 Scofield, “Chaps and Scowls,” 335.
126 John Beck, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
The police and IRS were not the only state officials who interfered with gay rodeo events. In 1981, a local commissioner attempted to prevent a gay rodeo from occurring, which he claimed “encouraged a gay ‘lifestyle’ and gave ‘unfavorable publicity’ for the city.”129 The Lieutenant Governor supported the commissioner’s effort by stating that he was “strongly opposed to queers using public property.”130 Ultimately the rodeo was held as planned, but not all events were so lucky. In 1988, a district attorney filed an injunction against an IGRA Finals event just days before it was supposed to be held. They argued that the public was at risk, and cited public health, dust, traffic, and fire safety. The rodeo was officially banned. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) became involved and appealed the case to the Nevada Supreme Court, where the ruling was upheld “due to unexplainable clerical errors”.131 Scofield documents, “police officers posted signs at the arena stating the event was canceled and also filmed vehicles and individuals as they arrived for the rodeo. In this instance and many others, gay rodeoers faced the full measure of legal homophobia. Contestants lost hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars on travel to the rodeo and the association also lost thousands of dollars on rental contracts, printings services, and buckle engraving.”132 Discrimination and resistance to IGRA events not only affected the community as a whole, but also members on an individual and financial level.

129 Scofield, "Riding Bareback," 119.
130 Scofield, "Riding Bareback," 119.
131 Scofield, "Chaps and Scowls," 335.
132 Scofield, "Chaps and Scowls," 335.
Through the 1990s, multiple IGRA events continued to be “cancelled or had to move venues” due to similar discrimination.\(^{133}\) Amidst exciting growth and community-building for the IGRA, participants were unable to avoid homophobia. This injustice was not only limited to slurs and threats, but also extended to physical violence and significant financial loss.

As the IGRA persisted into 1990s and early 2000s, discrimination took on new forms via media and technology. Though different in their effect, these cases were marked by the same negativity and homophobia of the IGRA’s earlier discrimination. For example, hate mail increased exponentially when the IGRA got its first e-mail address in the late nineties.\(^{134}\) For her graduate dissertation, Scofield extensively sifted through the IGRA’s archives. In an e-mail received in 1998, she discovered the following vulgarity: “I can’t believe you fudgepackers think

---

\(^{133}\) Scofield, “Riding Bareback,” 119.

\(^{134}\) Rebecca Scofield in discussion with the author, October 2018.
you can ride bulls when you can’t even ride a woman… Rodeo is a sport for men and now you are bastardizing it with this sick bullshit. BURN IN HELL FAGS”. While the internet was generally beneficial for the IGRA’s growth, a tool as simple as an e-mail address provided another avenue for hate to travel.

Perhaps more impactful than the internet, television media was active in slander of the IGRA. While the association was often able to rely on local media and LGBT-focused publications to represent gay rodeo positively, larger-scale media was not as favorable. Like in any organization, leaders in the IGRA saw media exposure as an opportunity to promote events and recruit new participants. Especially because many IGRA members came from non-metropolitan backgrounds, digital media provided a unique avenue to spread information to people who may not have access to robust queer communities. One IGRA member by the name of Harley stated,

I'm hopeful. I hope that Joe Rural Gay, who has to unfortunately choose to follow what society says about not being acceptable, is flipping through the channel one night on TV… and sees the Travel Channel's story on the gay rodeo, watches it, and gets a positive experience out of it. If it can just touch one person who says, "You know what? Maybe I should go to a rodeo and see how this works out."

Unfortunately for “Joe Rural Gay”, not all exposure had such an ideal effect. One particularly traumatic instance was when IGRA cowboys were ambushed on the Jerry Springer Show in 1993. Just eight years after the formation of the IGRA, members appeared on the show expecting to promote their events. Springer – who has hosted shows about changing queer people's sexual orientations as recently as 2018 – had other plans. Along with the IGRA members, he had also

135 Scofield, "Riding Bareback," 119.
invited members of the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association to film the segment. The traditional, presumably straight cowboys ended up bashing the IGRA and its legitimacy, and during the taping, an audience member used the word “it” to describe a drag queen.\textsuperscript{138} Caught off guard, the IGRA members struggled to recover and respond. As though it was a compliment, Springer concluded the episode by saying "the competition is sufficiently rugged that we can dispense with the discriminatory notion that only straight men have physical strength and courage".\textsuperscript{139} According to Scofield, this experience contributed to many IGRA members being wary of appearing in the media for years.\textsuperscript{140}

In another example, a 2002 episode of cartoon show \textit{King of the Hill} played off of over-sexualized gay cowboy tropes. Entitled "My Own Private Rodeo", the episode follows three straight cisgender men to their first gay rodeo. The trio find themselves at the rodeo to support their friend Dale's father, who is a participant. The dramatic irony is that none of them know about his father's sexual orientation. In fact, they are not even aware they are at a gay rodeo. The cartoon depicts the three men as completely oblivious. To add to the intended humor, the rodeo's participants are highly sexualized caricatures. Some are wearing crop tops and tight pants, and others are wearing no shirts at all. Other characters are touching partners in an overtly sexual manner. One thing is sure; the cowboys are not depicted as athletes. Instead, the trio seems to have has stepped into a sort of scandalous cowboy-themed orgy.

Cowboy-themed is the best way to describe what the episode depicts, because while there are plenty of women participating in real gay rodeo, there are none at the cartoon rodeo. At one

\textsuperscript{138} Scofield, "Riding Bareback," 121.
\textsuperscript{140} Rebecca Scofield in discussion with the author, October 2018.
point, one of the straight men questions "where are all the ladies?" to which his companion replies, "Well, they're probably crowding around Dale's dad's trailer. I bet half of these bastards are losing their gals right now". Just a row behind them, a man lays his hand on his partner's thigh. When one rodeo participant completes an event in drag, the trio responds with the following exchange: "Hey! That guy's wearing a dress"…"Yeah, he must've lost some kind of crazy cowboy bet. Boy does he feel silly."141

Selected screenshots from *King of the Hill* episode, “Our Own Personal Rodeo” (season 6, episode 18). From left to right – two shirtless rodeo participants hold hands, a sign reads “Lonestar Gay Rodeo Association”, a group of men dance to the “YMCA” song.

When it is finally apparent that he is at a gay rodeo, one of the straight men falls into an uncontrollable fit of laughter, repeating the words "gay rodeo" as if amused by their pairing. Later, when Dale finds out that his father is gay, he runs to the center of the rodeo arena and addresses the crowd with "listen up homosexuals and so-called bisexuals". He wants to warn the crowd about his father, more convinced that he could be a government spy than a legitimately gay man. His father's partner, Juan Pedro, runs into the scene wearing a dress and fulfills even more stereotypes, this time both of gay men and Latinx people.

There is no doubt that the rodeo in this *King of the Hill* episode depicts an IGRA event. Among other things, it features a handful of signature IGRA rodeo events and is titled the

“Lonestar Gay Rodeo Association”¹⁴² – strikingly similar to the IGRA’s North Star Gay Rodeo. By different means, this episode achieved a similar effect of othering gay rodeo as the Jerry Springer segment. Instead of attracting new participants, the show conveyed to its audience that the rodeo was a taboo place for sexually deviant gay men.

This episode encapsulates an anxiety that has always existed in the IGRA on the basis of its exposure. Members question: will our rodeos be taken seriously, or will they be infantilized and sexualized to a point of illegitimacy?¹⁴³ Are we managing our own stereotypes, or are they managing us? What is sure is that media representation of the IGRA during this time did little to promote it. Only about a decade later would the tides begin to turn for the IGRA’s representation in major media. During the period described above, the media was simply reflective of the public’s worst attitudes towards queer people and their capacities.

¹⁴² King of the Hill, "My Own Private Rodeo."
¹⁴³ Brad Allen, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 28, 2018.
1.5 The Go-Round: Gay Rodeo in the Twenty-first Century

Despite negative experiences with media during the same time, the 1990s and early 2000s were a steady and fruitful period for the IGRA. These years marked highs for the number of annual rodeos held, number of active regional associations, and saw the institution of a published magazine and a so-called “IGRA University”. From 1994 to 2008, somewhere between seventeen and twenty-two rodeos were held annually in every IGRA season.144 These events were sustained by the IGRA’s newly wide network of local chapters and associations. During this time, approximately twenty new associations were seated across the United States and Canada. Further, most IGRA rodeos were also well-attended. One long-time member of the IGRA remembered that in the 1990s, rodeos in San Diego and Los Angeles were held at two separate arenas to accommodate all of their participants.145 Tangentially to the IGRA, the 1990s also marked the publishing of Roundup: The Gay and Lesbian Western Magazine, which published a total of eleven issues over three years. While some associations dissolved or became inactive during this period,146 the IGRA and its events were generally stable. In 2000, the association even instituted “IGRA University” which trained new participants for IGRA competition.147 Alongside changes within the association, the AIDS crisis was settling down, bonds between long-time participants were decades strong, and the IGRA network enjoyed associations in every geographic region of the country. During these years, it seemed as though the IGRA was enjoying comfortable stability.

145 Dee Zuspann, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
Only in 2009 did the IGRA’s momentum begin to weaken. In that year, sixteen rodeos were held. By 2014, the number of rodeos held annually maxed out at thirteen, and it has remained about eleven ever since. In some cases, downsizing was due to financial strain. Rodeos are typically funded by a combination of fundraisers and sponsorships. During this time period, sponsorships became increasingly difficult to secure. The North Star Regional Rodeo, held in the suburbs of Minnesota’s Twin Cities, switched from being held annually to being held every two years because the organization struggled to fundraise the amount needed for yearly events.

In other cases, associations simply dissolved or failed to renew their status. The IGRA reports that in 2013, “for the first time, the number of defunct association [exceeded] the number of active associations”, with twenty-eight active associations and thirty one defunct ones. Numerically, the IGRA appeared to be shrinking.

What is immediately striking about this decline is its timing. Since 2009, the United States has seen a new landscape emerge for queer people, which especially benefits gay people who identify within the gender binary. Perhaps most hallmark, same-sex marriage was legalized by the United States Supreme Court in 2015, following the revocation of sodomy laws in 2003. While homophobia undoubtedly persists, queer people can see themselves represented

148 John Beck, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
149 Corey Blair in conversation with the author, June 2018.
in culture, media, and politics more than ever before. This is all to say that the landscape in which the IGRA runs today is vastly different than the one it emerged in during the 1970s. And if this is true, there is considerable reason to believe that this new era has had an effect on the IGRA.

While historical documentation of gay rodeos in the decades before was limited, finding information about the past ten years proves to be an even bleaker task. There has been even sparser documentation of the IGRA from 2009 to the present. While articles and investigations have been published during this period, the majority of them focus on gay rodeo’s significance before the turn of the century.

This brings us to my central question in pursuing this thesis project. I was fascinated by the IGRA’s history, especially its durability through infamously difficult years to be a queer person in the United States, and wondered what this post-marriage-equality landscape meant for the community. Attempting to answer this question relied on a more recent snapshot of the organization, which seemed largely undocumented in academic literature. And further, I was unsatisfied by the lack of complexity that dominant accounts of gay rodeo portrayed – including the IGRA’s own records – on the basis of race and gender. I knew that there were women, and presumably people of other marginalized genders, who participated in gay rodeo, but I knew virtually nothing about them. I had also seen pictures of participants who appeared to be people of color, but knew little about them, and even less about their experiences because of their race. I was unfulfilled with what had been documented, and decided to take things into my own hands. My goal became capturing multifaceted profile of the IGRA community in 2018.
Chapter 2: Looking In

2.1 A Rhyme and a Reason: Research Methodology

In order to capture a snapshot of the gay rodeo community in 2018, I decided that I needed to actually attend rodeos and see the community for myself. Academic literature was limited, and online sources were mostly surface-level news publications or self-promotional pieces published the IGRA. For my study, I wanted an honest, robust, and complicated picture of the IGRA community today. What better way to achieve this than to go straight to the source? This is why, between July and October of 2018, I attended three IGRA rodeos across the United States. By my third and final rodeo, I had collected over thirty interviews, logged hours of participant observation, and developed a few notebook pages of community contacts.

While at each rodeo, I guided my research by three central questions. First, I wanted to know who comprised is the IGRA community in 2018? Where are they from, what are their identities on the basis of gender, race, and sexual orientation, and how were their experiences distinct because of these identities? Second, I wanted a more general idea of why people were drawn to the IGRA community, what kept them coming back, and how they saw the community as a whole. Finally, I wanted to understand how the IGRA community was looking to the future, and did it serve a different purpose than it had in the 1970s and 1980s? With these questions in mind, I generated my plans and got to work. During each rodeo weekend, I conducted a combination of semi-structured interviews and participant observation. When I wasn’t doing either, I developed my contacts with administrators and participants.

The three rodeos I attended were part of the second half of the IGRA’s 2018 season, which consisted of ten rodeos in total.\textsuperscript{152} Each rodeo I attended was selected based on its location

and timing. Curious if there would be any notable regional differences between events, I chose rodeos in three distinct regions of the United States – the Midwest, Southwest, and South. This was not a central question of my study, and luckily so. I will not pursue regional differences in my results, because I did not find any striking ones between the rodeos. In part, this observation could be due to the fact that many IGRA participants travel to events from state to state. Though the rodeo’s location may change, its competitors vary less. This dynamic extends beyond the rodeo participants, as many spouses, partners, and administrators are also consistent between events. The three rodeos I attended even had the same announcer, and his signature catchphrases and jokes quickly became familiar. Despite these consistencies among them, the rodeos I attended provided variety in the people and environments I was able to interact with for the study.

The first of the rodeos I attended was the North Star Regional Rodeo in Hugo, MN. The event was held from Friday, July 27 to Sunday, July 29 at the Dead Broke Arena, just a short drive from the heart of the twin cities. Classified as semi-rural, Hugo is part-suburb, part-farmland. The rodeo grounds were located in a more rural part, and were situated between fields and pastures. While there have been community tensions in the past at this rodeo, in recent years Hugo has been generally supportive of the IGRA’s presence.\(^{153}\) North Star was the first gay rodeo to be held in the Upper Midwest, and was first hosted in 1993 with

\(^{153}\) Corey Blair in conversation with the author, June 2018.
support from the Twin Cities Pride Committee.\textsuperscript{154} Once held annually, the rodeo now happens every two years to accommodate for financial strains. Additionally, it is one of only two IGRA rodeos held consistently in the Midwest.\textsuperscript{155}

The second rodeo that I attended was the Zia Regional Rodeo in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Between Friday, August 10 and Sunday, August 12, this event was held at the grounds of Rodeo de Santa Fe. Settled between subdivisions, the arena hosted nearly double the attendance of the one in Minnesota. Zia is put on by the New Mexico Gay Rodeo Association, which is based in nearby Albuquerque. The event is held annually and is New Mexico’s second largest annual LGBT event.\textsuperscript{156}

A panoramic image of the Rodeo de Santa Fe, during the 2018 Zia Regional Rodeo. Source: Kate Hansen

The third rodeo that I studied was the IGRA Finals Rodeo that concluded the 2018 season. It took place from Thursday, October 25 through Sunday, October 28, though I primarily attended the events on Saturday, October 27. The event was held in Mesquite, Texas – once described by an IGRA participants as "a very red-neck suburb"\textsuperscript{157} – in the Mesquite Arena, less

\textsuperscript{154} Stewart Van Cleve, \textit{Land of 10,000 Loves: A History of Queer Minnesota} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2012), 178.
\textsuperscript{155} The other is held in Kansas City.
\textsuperscript{157} Le Coney, "Reagan's Rainbow Rodeos," 178.
than twenty miles outside of Dallas. Only the top contestants compete in Finals; those who garnered the most points throughout the regional rodeos of the regular season. Like the rodeo participants, competitors in the four drag pageants also compete here for International titles. This event determined the season's best all-around cowboy, all-around cowgirl, and crowned the new royalty team tasked with fundraising for the following year.

A scene from the 2018 International Gay Rodeo Finals in Mesquite, TX. The rider in front mounts the IGRA flag, while members and officials behind him mount Pride and regional association flags. Source: Kate Hansen.

At each rodeo, my fieldwork was intended to be unobtrusive and curious. My two principle methods were holding interviews and conducting participant observation. Before attending each event, I researched the history of the regional rodeo, its local IGRA association, and a general overview of the local queer community. I also made contact with each rodeo director to explain who I was, what my intentions were, and ensure that they would allow me to interview. In all three instances, this conversation led to me receiving a press pass, which allowed me to access restricted areas where competitors waited between events.

The interviews I conducted were semi-structured, meaning I had some questions and themes that I consistently asked about, but also allowed the conversation to progress in an organic direction. I prioritized the central questions of my study – namely those related to community and identity. I consistently began each conversation by asking how the interviewee
had ended up at the rodeo that day, which often resulted in a story and insight into their history with the organization. Because of the high likelihood that topics of gender and sexuality would emerge in our conversations, each interviewee signed a release form before talking with me. This form was introduced to me in a class with Professor Chris Walley of MIT Anthropology. All of those interviewed consented, at minimum, to their interview and its recording “to be used for educational and research purposes at [Wellesley College]”. The form also allowed people agency over what name was used to represent them. Some interviewees are listed under drag stage names, some only first names, and some under their full legal names.

On average, each interview lasted between ten and thirty minutes but was largely dependent on the interviewee's availability. Especially for competitors, the day was punctuated by each rodeo event. Most of our interviews had to be fit in after a contestant had finished an event and before they were called for the next. Administrators were equally busy, so I had the most flexible time with drag royalty members, spectators, and contestants' spouses, who were less scheduled for the day. Some of my interviews were pre-scheduled, and others simply involved me approaching individuals, introducing myself, and inquiring if they would be interested in talking with me. Most of the planned interviews were made by recommendations from the rodeo director and other contacts. This included people like John Beck, one of the IGRA’s founding members, and Dee Zuspann, Arena Director and rodeo official since 1994.\textsuperscript{158} I also attended registration the night before each competition, which allowed me to introduce myself to more people and schedule times to meet with them the following day. I found myself approaching people most frequently when I felt my sample was imbalanced. At Zia, for example, I was introduced to many men, and found myself randomly approaching more women in an

effort to diversify my sample. In the rare instance I came across a participant who seemed under
the age of forty, I almost always introduced myself.

The interviews built up on one another. If one interviewee mentioned something that
interested me, I would ask others about the topic in subsequent conversations. I also made
adjustments to my interview persona and language. I quickly realized that using the word *queer*
was not common among participants, particularly those of the slightly older generation. It was
the word that had been weaponized against them in the early days of gay rodeo, and likely for
much of their lives. In describing my project and intentions, I stopped mentioning my interest in
*queer history* or *queer studies*, and opted for terms like LGBT.

It should be noted that the sample I collected is not fully representative of the IGRA. I
spoke with a few handfuls of people at three rodeos, all within a single rodeo season. Further,
other factors also affected my access. While I was intentional to talk to people of all genders and
races, more than half of my interviewees identified as cis-men, and approximately half identified
as white. It is likely that my sample was skewed towards white people because, while the IGRA
has improved, it is still majority white. This reality was consistent for both competitors and
spectators, and at all three rodeos I attended. I did, however, make a strong effort to interview as
many people of color as were interested in speaking with me. On the basis of gender, I only
encountered one IGRA participant who did not identify as cisgender. This extended to the drag
performers I interviewed, who all identify as cisgender off the stage. I also found that because
the women's competition was smaller than the men's, women participated in many events
throughout the day. This is compared to what seemed like a higher percentage of men who
specialized in just a few events. This meant that the women were busier during the day and
harder to secure interview time with. There were only two instances in which I was not able to sit
down across from an interviewee – one in which I interviewed them on horseback, the other while they were preparing their saddle – and both were women.

The second part of my inquiry was conducting participant observation. This typically occurred in the time between interviewing. Most often, I would sit near the back of the bleachers, with a wide view of the rodeo arena and spectators, and take notes. These moments were an opportunity to record details on the overall spectacle. I was particularly interested in the scale of the event, ratio of spectators to participants, what appeared to be the racial, age, and gender makeup of these categories, and the nuances of interaction between people. I also took notes on things that were said by the announcer; namely where participants were from, and the kind of Western-inspired language and jargon that was casually used. While the interviews focused on individual people, participant observation allowed me a wider scope of the events at hand. It permitted me to compare sizes of the rodeos and conduct an informal litmus test of the energy of the crowd. Perhaps more importantly, this was the role in which I was least noticeable. Interviewing or interacting with people meant I had to establish myself as an outsider and explain that I was an undergraduate student writing a thesis on the IGRA. To some skeptical volunteers, I had to flash my press pass to establish that I was legitimate. During participant observation, I attempted to make myself as subtle and unnoticeable as possible. As a result, it also gave me what I see to be a more genuine experience as a spectator.

In short, the descriptions above detail the methods by which my ultimate intention was to capture the IGRA community in 2018. The observations and conclusions that follow are their result. Guided by my three central questions, my fieldwork was people-based; a mix of observations, oral histories, and participant testimonies. While my sample is too limited for any quantitative analysis, it is rich enough in content and conversation to befit a qualitative one.
Creating this community profile not only supplements limited documentation of the IGRA in recent years, but also ask new questions about community, identity, and belonging. In doing so, I hope that this project can contribute more nuance to conversations about the IGRA. Further, a robust understanding of the IGRA in 2018 has the potential to better relate the organization’s present to both its past and future.
2.2 Rhinestone Cowboys: Structure of an IGRA Rodeo

Before diving in to deeper questions of the IGRA community, it is beneficial to understand what a gay rodeo event looks like in 2018. While there is variation between events, IGRA rodeos follow a similar structure. This standardization is a major reason that the IGRA was instituted as an umbrella organization in the first place in 1985.159 Rodeos occur over a weekend, in which Saturday and Sunday are the two main days of competition. The Friday before is typically when registration is held. Formally, registration is the time in which competitors can pay their entry fees, sign waivers, receive directions for the upcoming days, and collect their contestant numbers. Less formally, registration is also a social event in which competitors reconnect with friends and fellow IGRA members. In Minnesota, registration was held at a local gay bar, and in New Mexico, registration was held at the fairgrounds in a tent with a dancefloor and music. Though I left before things got too spirited, these nights typically end with drinking and dancing.

The morning after registration, the rodeo competition commences. Each day of competition runs through the same events, so that competitors have two opportunities to compete and accumulate points in each category. The day officially begins between nine and ten in the morning, and ends whenever all of the events have been exhausted. Exact time varies based on the number of competitors, but rodeos generally end around mid-afternoon. The day is staffed by administrators, officials, volunteers, and a handful of vendors. Despite all of their combined labor, no one is paid except for the private contractors who provide and manage the livestock for the event. Everyone else is volunteering their time.

159 Witt et al., Out in all directions, 546.
As described in an earlier section, a rodeo comprises events from three categories: horse events (roping and speed), rough stock, and camp events. IGRA rodeos are no different and feature a select set of events between rodeos. With a few exceptions, the main reason an event would not occur at a regional rodeo is if no participants signed up to compete in it. Below is a description of each of the IGRA rodeo events, listed in the order that they were held at the 2018 Gay Rodeo Finals in Mesquite, TX.

**Calf Roping on Foot** – contestants attempt to throw and tauten a lasso around a calf’s neck as it is released from the gate. This is one of the most accessible events for new participants, because it requires virtually no equipment and is easy to practice. This is a roping event.

**Chute Dogging** – this event begins with both the participant and a steer in the chute. After the gate is opened, the participant must cross the steer over a ten foot boundary and wrestle it to the ground in under a minute. This is a rough stock event.

**Mounted Break-Away Roping** – a calf is released from the gate and the competitor must throw a lasso around the calf’s neck and tauten it, all from horseback. This is a roping event.

**Team Roping** – this event requires a team of two competitors, each on horseback. One competitor must rope a steer by its head, and the other competitor must rope the same animal by its back leg. This is a roping event.

**Grand Entry** – a cerimonial event that comes between competitive events, usually around lunchtime. Officials, royalty, and the rodeo’s Grand Marshal are announced, the Pride, IGRA, state, national, and Canadian flags are posted on horseback, and the national anthems of the United States and Canada are played. Grand entry finishes with the Riderless Horse Ceremony, which honors IGRA participants who have passed away.

**Steer Decorating** – this event requires a two person team. The team attempts to coerce a steer over a ten-foot line by a rope on its horns. When the steer has crossed, one competitor ties a bow onto its tail and the other competitor removes the rope from its horns. The first competitor must then sprint to tag a timer. This is a camp event.

---

160 Wilke, "Rough Faith," 22.
161 Unless otherwise noted, these descriptions come from the IGRA’s 2018 Rodeo Rules handbook.
162 Press Pass, 2018 IGRA Finals Rodeo.
Pole Bending – a rider and their horse must complete a pattern between six evenly-spaced poles. This is a speed event.

Steer Riding – event in which a competitor rides an agitated, saddleless steer. In some cases, new competitors must compete in steer riding for an allotted time before being allowed to participate in full-fledged bull riding. This is a rough stock event.

Goat Dressing – an event uniquely created for gay rodeo.\(^{163}\) A team of two contestants must sprint fifty feet to a tethered goat, put a pair of jockey-style underwear on the goat, and sprint back to their starting point. This is a fan favorite and often provokes members of the audience and volunteers to participate, who otherwise were not contestants. This is a camp event.

Barrel Race – a rider and their horse must complete a pattern between three barrels. This is a speed event.

Flag Race – similar to the barrel race, a rider and their horse must complete a pattern between three barrels. However, this event includes taking a flag from one barrel and successfully inserting it into a bucket on another barrel without the bucket falling. This is a speed event.

Wild Drag Race – this is the second event unique to gay rodeo.\(^{164}\) Competition requires a team of three competitors, two of which must be from different binary genders, and one of which must be dressed in drag. The team must coerce a steer over a finish line seventy feet away from where it was released. Then, the team member dressed in drag must jump on the steer’s back, and the remaining members must coerce the steer back over the finish line. This is a camp event.

Bull Riding – event in which a competitor rides an agitated, saddleless bull. Originates from an 1880 dispute in Oregon, in which one rancher challenged another to see who could ride a bull for the longest in order to settle the argument.\(^{165}\) Bull riding is the most dangerous rodeo event, necessitating rodeo clowns to distract angry bulls from riders after they dismount.\(^{166}\) This is a rough stock event.

\(^{163}\) John Beck, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.

\(^{164}\) John Beck, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.

\(^{165}\) Wilke, "Rough Faith," 23.

\(^{166}\) Wilke, "Rough Faith," 23.
If nothing else, these descriptions illustrate that IGRA rodeos are legitimate competitions with high stakes. By competing in each event, competitors can earn points. Points from both competition days are added to determine who has won each individual event, and also who wins the all-around title for all of the events combined. Competition is divided based on the gender binary, so each event has a “women’s” and “men’s” category. At an awards ceremony held on Sunday evening, best All-Around Cowgirl, All-Around Cowboy will be announced, alongside the women’s and men’s winners for each individual event. Awards come in the form of belt buckles, and often include prize money. Because IGRA rodeos are ultimately fundraisers, cash prizes are small and typically generated from contestant entry fees. In some cases, a unique award is up for grabs, such as the one offered in Mesquite in 2018, where the best All-Around Cowgirl and Cowboy won a complimentary breeding with another member’s esteemed male horse.

Beyond the titles given at each regional rodeo, points are also counted to determine which competitors are eligible for the IGRA Finals competition held at the end of the season.

---

167 Marco Terrazas, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
168 Mary Honeycutt, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
This encourages some IGRA participants to attend as many events as possible, nationwide, in order to accumulate points. While newer members typically stick around their local events, the most serious competitors travel to most of the rodeos within a season.

As mentioned, a royalty pageant occurs alongside the rodeo events, and winners receive their titles during the same awards ceremony. Contestants first compete for titles at the regional level, and then the winners of each chapter are eligible to compete for the association-wide title at the IGRA Finals. Contestants are eligible to compete for the following titles: Miss IGRA (female impersonator in drag), MsTer. IGRA (male impersonator in drag), Ms. IGRA (woman, not in drag) and Mr. IGRA (man, not in drag). The four winners comprise the royalty team for the following year, and are tasked with fundraising. Most recently, their efforts have supported organizations such as the Trevor Project. The same structure exists at the regional level, where fundraising efforts are most focused on putting on the chapter’s annual or semi-annual rodeo. These efforts are accomplished via drag shows, raffles, and various sales.

In order to fundraise, pageant participants have to make the team first. In an interview at the Zia Regional Rodeo, drag queen and New Mexico royalty team member Nicki Star described the pageant’s intricacies,

Take for instance… in the real world you have beauty pageants. We compete in western wear, which would be your evening gowns. And then we have our entertainment portion, which would be talent. And then earlier that day we’ll have interview. So, I would go as a man. You have to know the ins and outs of rodeo, what size the arena is, who your officials are, how many people it takes to put on a rodeo; different [background]. You go back that evening and have the contest, and you’re usually judged by a five to an eight [person] panel. Then we would win Arizona Gay Rodeo, and that would give us a chance to go to IGRA. That’s the ultimate level… and the bragging rights.

171 Nikki Starr, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
172 Nikki Starr, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
173 Nikki Starr, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
The royalty contest is also not limited to a single weekend. Ramona Valencia Davenport Cox – another drag queen and then-candidate for New Mexico’s Miss title – shared that pageant candidacy can take six to seven months before the competition even takes place. To get to the IGRA finals, she predicted it would take about two years. In other words, while royalty competitors are often mentioned second to the rodeo competitors, they are doing a lot of the IGRA’s heavy lifting. Not only are they involved in a long and complicated competition, but also bring in a large portion of the event’s funding.

Though a rodeo weekend is composed of all of these moving parts – the rodeo, the drag pageant, and the social events – it seems to run smoothly from the stands. The final element of an IGRA rodeo is its crowd. Depending on the rodeo’s location, crowd sizes vary dramatically. Of the three rodeos I attended, the smallest turnout was at the North Star Gay Rodeo, which I estimated had a high of about fifty spectators. The highest as at the Finals event, which I estimated filled a few hundred seats at its peak. Taking inventory of the crowd leads into the first question of this study: who makes up the IGRA community?

---

174 Ramona Valencia Davenport Cox, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
2.3 *Cowboy Up: The IGRA Community in 2018*

It should be noted once more that my observations are not quantitative, and only based on fieldwork at three rodeos. Still, my research was deep enough that general trends like the ones I describe below are useful to track the IGRA’s community dynamics. Largely, it can be said that the association has improved in terms of its racial, gender, and sexual identity diversity, but is still predominantly composed of the types of members that founded it.

Admittedly, the IGRA events that I attended were more racially and ethnically diverse than I expected them to be. However, it was evident that the association as a whole is still majority white. This observation is supported by the assertion in a 2017 study of gay rodeo that described the space as “predominantly white”.\(^{175}\) Both in the stands and in the arena, more people were white than not; the second largest group of people were Latinx, followed by a smaller group of Black participants and attendees. Between the three rodeos I attended, I could count the number of people who appeared to be of Asian descent on a single hand. Representation was bleaker within IGRA leadership. In 2018, every single member of the seven-person executive board was white,\(^{176}\) and more than eighty percent of trustees were also white.\(^{177}\)

Though members were quick to confirm that everyone was welcome at their events, one has a sense that the IGRA is similar to many other predominantly white LGBT spaces. Based on my observations, I suggest that the IGRA community is a space of “white normativity,” which scholar Jane Ward defines as “the often unconscious and invisible ideas and practices that make

---

\(^{175}\) Capous-Desyllas and Johnson-Rhodes, "Collecting visual voices," 468.


whiteness appear natural and right”. Similar to the problematic philosophy of colorblindness, white normativity can dominate spaces that, at the surface, appear to have significant racial and ethnic diversity. In a 2008 study, Ward studied an LGBT Center in Los Angeles at which more than half of employees were people of color. She documented how the “white normative culture of the organization” led to its consideration as a “white LGBT organization” by community members and employees of color. The IGRA’s own white normativity reflects that of both white queer spaces and the sport of rodeo itself. However, one interview was a reminder that the rodeo world is a difficult place to be a person of color, across the board.

Rikki is a Black woman, experienced horse rider, and mother who was working at the North Star rodeo in July of 2018. She identifies what she does as “rodeo labor” and works various rodeos across the Midwest with her best friend and preteen son. The trio “sort calves, steer, and horses, tack up horses… ride in the grand entry of the rodeo, put saddles away” and much more behind the scenes. I was curious about Rikki’s perceptions of gay rodeo, in part because I knew it was just one of many rodeos that she had experience with. I asked her about her thoughts on the gay rodeo community, to which she replied,

You know, I’ll be honest. Working in rodeos in the Midwest, you don’t see any Black people. We’re usually the only two at most of these rodeos (gestures to her son). I found that the perception is that, I’m at the rodeo because I think horses are pretty; that my [white] best friend is the horse person and I’m her friend from the city.... So, it’s taken some time for people to take me seriously, and realize that I actually do ride horses. And it’s really a flip. She’s my friend from the city and I’m the country girl who rides horse, but they see us and they don’t think that. So, I really wanted to do this rodeo because I thought that the atmosphere would be different here. There’s a lot more acceptance in this community… nobody cares what you’re wearing, what you look like.

Rikki’s testimony echoes the near constant erasure of people of color living in nonmetropolitan areas in the United States. But further, she asserts that she has had a more positive experience as a Black woman at the gay rodeo than at traditional rodeos. Though the IGRA has significant room for improvement, it seems to present itself as a safer space than the traditional rodeo circuit for people of color. This is not an invitation for the IGRA to be complacent. Instead, this idea explains why virtually all of the other people of color I interviewed gave me similar feedback. Especially when people’s identities intersect with marginalized sexual orientations or genders, the gay rodeo presents itself as a safer space than most of its rodeo alternatives.

In our conversation, Rikki also touched on issues of gender that she has experienced in the traditional rodeo world. In response to my question, “could you tell me a little bit about what it’s like to be a woman in a traditional, non-gay rodeo? Do you feel like you’re treated differently?” she replied,

I think you’re treated the same [at gay rodeo]. In the other rodeos that I’ve done, though – and my best friend and I have been talking about this – there’s a lot of sexual harassment in the regular rodeo circuit. So, my friend has been in some pretty precarious situations... It’s not that safe to go by yourself. I wouldn’t recommend it. They think that they still have us way down here [gestures hand to ground] because it’s still a “man’s game”...

[Kate: About the sexual harassment… do you feel that here, as much so far?] No. Not at all. 182

Rikki’s statement reflects a similar situation to that of race, but this time with gender. For cisgender women, the IGRA seems to be a safer, more inclusive community than those of traditional rodeo circuits. However, like with race, just because the IGRA appears better does not mean that it doesn’t marginalize women in its own ways.

I ensured that all of my interviewees were asked direct questions about gender. Most often, I asked if they thought that women participants at the rodeo had a different experience.

---

than the men who participated. Overwhelmingly, this question was shut down with glowing reviews of how inclusive the IGRA was. One interviewee noted that “unlike at some of the straight rodeos, the girls do all of the same events the guys do… which still isn’t the case in a lot of rodeos.” This statement was useful enough, though I was frustrated that he used the word girls to described grown women and fierce rodeo competitors. This sentiment was echoed almost every single time I asked similar questions about gender. At least four interviewees told me that the IGRA was the only circuit that allowed women to do all of the rodeo events, including bull riding. This is not entirely true, but the commitment that women are allowed equal opportunity was consistently strong. Mary Honeycutt – a twenty-year participant and then Vice President of association – asserted that “there’s a lot less women, of course, but I mean either way, we all go out and we have fun. It’s pretty equal as far as, how people are treated, how everybody gets along. We’re pretty evened out”. Another long-time contestant shut the question of inequality down almost entirely. Our exchange follows, with I representing interviewee.

K: How do you feel, participating as a woman? Do you think your experience is any different?”
I: It’s the same.
K: Has it always been like that? Or?
I: Yep. [Long pause] the guys encourage the girls and the girls encourage the guys.

While this exchange was sufficiently awkward, the interviewee warmed up a bit and continued to describe how even the schedule intends to be more equal between the binary genders. The example she provided was that on Sundays, the women’s events are held first. On Saturdays, the

---

183 Dee Zuspann, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
184 Rebecca Scofield in discussion with the author, October 2018.
185 Mary Honeycutt, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
186 IGRA Member, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
men’s are held first.\textsuperscript{187} This exchange clarified an idea for me; it cannot be denied that the IGRA has taken institutional steps to promote equal opportunity between the two binary genders, specifically for cisgender people. But this does not mean that, in effect, their experiences are ultimately the same. There are still social intricacies within the community that marginalize women, even if they are far less severe than the ones they have historically faced in the rodeo world. Most of the members of the community that I spoke with, including most of the women, seem to be content with things as they are now. But I wonder if, at least in terms of gender, the IGRA is as radical as it prides itself in being. This question becomes particularly relevant when considering the \textit{full} range of gender, beyond the traditional binary. While crediting the IGRA for the work that it has done to correct some of the deep-seated sexism of rodeo, I also would like to point out a few examples of marginalization that members face on the basis of gender.

First, while it is true that there is less than parity in the IGRA’s competitors, there are even less women represented at the administrative level. Though the 2018 President and Vice President were both women, the other five members of the Executive Committee were all men.\textsuperscript{188} On the IGRA Board of Trustees, at least eighty percent of members were men.\textsuperscript{189} These dynamics were not strictly behind the scenes, but also reflected in the rodeo itself. The team of officials that ran, scored, and officiated the rodeo were almost entirely men, and the deep voice of a male announcer was virtually ever-present. At the beginning of the day, officials would scale the stairs leading up to the announcer’s box from which announcements were made, scores were calculated, etc. Each time, it was striking to me how homogenous the group appeared, not only by their gender and race, but also by the matching shirts that they wore as uniform. This is

\textsuperscript{187} Dee Zuspann, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
\textsuperscript{188} “Executive Board,” \textit{International Gay Rodeo Association}.
\textsuperscript{189} “Trustees,” \textit{International Gay Rodeo Association}.
not to say that these men should not have been there, but instead to highlight their dominance and its effect on the atmosphere of the rodeos. This masculine energy was consistent at each of the three rodeos that I attended.

Two photos intended to illustrate the strong presence of men in officiating roles. Left: officials stand outside of the announcer’s box, where a handful of men are seated inside. North Star Regional Rodeo, July 2018. Right: officials and volunteers stand in the arena, a majority of them are men. Zia Regional Rodeo, August 2018. Source: Kate Hansen.

The gender imbalance at the official level also translated to the social level. Though the community is made up of people of various genders and sexual orientations, it still tends to prioritize gay male sexuality. While the tone remains professional at IGRA rodeos, there are also sexual undertones that emerge from the IGRA’s social events. The balance of putting on a serious rodeo and having social, fun elements for the community has always been debated within the IGRA.\textsuperscript{190} However, sexual undertones are not inherently problematic. What seems problematic is that the majority of those undertones were skewed towards the biologically male body. One example of this were the bags that were given to participants at the beginning of the North Star Regional Rodeo. Among other things, they contained suggestive items such as

\textsuperscript{190} Rebecca Scofield in discussion with the author, October 2018.
condoms and lubricant, intended for a biologically male body. Though this description could extend to people of a variety of genders, the majority cisgender male membership suggests that this was the demographic most targeted with the gifts.

Sexual and erotic messaging is also present in the IGRA’s promotional materials. Historically, the majority of IGRA posters were not inherently sexual, but they were dominated by men. Of the two-hundred and seventeen posters in the IGRA archive, ninety-five feature humans with discernable features. Only seven of these posters feature people who appear to be women and only five of them include people of color. As for the intersection of these identities, there is not a single woman of color featured in the entire collection. Though they were also a minority, the posters that were sexualized were overt and male-dominated. These materials played off of stereotypes and fantasies of the “gay cowboy”, similar to those that would be re-popularized by the film *Brokeback Mountain* in 2005. Such was the case in a 1986 poster for the third Texas Gay Rodeo, which read “Ride Em Hard” next to a picture of a man smoldering into the camera, wearing an almost entirely unbuttoned shirt. In 1994, a poster for the twelfth Rocky Mountain Regional Rodeo was literally just a zoomed in picture from a man’s belt (reading “RMR Rodeo”) to his mid-thigh.

Though the posters from 2018 were far more innocent than those described above, sexualized images still exist today, primarily in fundraising. One example is HomoRodeo.com, which was a steady sponsor for the IGRA in 2018. A chat room and meet-up site connected to

---

IGRA events, HomoRodeo also sells calendars featuring nude and semi-nude models styled as cowboys.\textsuperscript{195} In other instances, sexualized images are performed live. One interviewee I spoke with first learned of gay rodeo two years prior, when he was asked to model for an underwear auction to raise money for the event.\textsuperscript{196} In these instances, the way that the IGRA is portrayed is directly connected with gay male sexuality.

Beyond the social realm, the rodeo competition itself also is structured in a way that can marginalize by gender. Even from within the gender binary, cisgender women face unequal circumstances. One institutionalized example of this is the gendered categories in which participants must compete. For every event, there is a women’s competition and a men’s competition. In the early days of IGRA, these categories were intended to be positive, promoting equal opportunity between binary genders. However, because there is an unequal number of competitors in each category, people in the women’s events often have less competition. Yet, they are paying the same thirty dollar\textsuperscript{197} entry fee as those in the men’s event. Because scores are dependent on easily comparable times and points, why couldn’t the gendered categories be entirely abolished? And the winner of any category could take home a doubly lucrative prize?

The categories become even more problematic when considering gender in its entirety – beyond the binary. Unlike in other sports, IGRA participants are not mandated to the category of their biological sex at birth. The IGRA policy states that anyone is free to participate in whatever category that they identify with. The 2018 Rodeo Rules handbook reads, “The International Gay Rodeo Association (IGRA) hereby endorses and adopts the position that any individual member

\textsuperscript{196} Drew Pelehos, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
\textsuperscript{197} Drew Pelehos, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
of a Member or Recognized Association is eligible to participate fully in IGRA activities under the gender classification with which the individual member identifies” and later that “[a] contestant is eligible to register and compete under the gender classification with which the individual identifies and lives on a daily basis”. This policy accommodates the gender binary, and was likely intended to be inclusive to transgender people who also identify within it. However, these statements offer no explanation for where non-binary, gender nonconforming, or any people in between belong. Not only is this marginalizing, but also could serve as an entirely insurmountable barrier to entry. People who hold these identities are members of the greater LGBT community alongside most IGRA members, but find themselves isolated by the association’s institutional structure. IGRA competition ultimately favors cisgender people within the gender binary, which likely explains an overwhelmingly majority of its members identify as such.

Between the three rodeos that I attended, I did not interview or talk with any people who identified as gender nonconforming, non-binary, transgender, or intersex, and was aware of only one person who identified with any one of these categories. To be clear, this does not mean that there were not more people of these identities present at the events. I did not ask anyone direct questions about their gender identity or biology, out of respect, though I did ask people about their pronouns and a general “anything you would like to share with me about yourself, your identity”. In spite of the limitations of this study, I would estimate that the vast majority of people participating in gay rodeo events in 2018 were cisgender.

198 IGRA 2018 Rodeo Rules handbook.
On the basis of sexual orientation, the majority of people I spoke to also identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The community, however, was accepting of people of a variety of sexual and romantic identities. In one of my interviews, I spoke with two members of a four-person polyamorous relationship who said the IGRA community knew about their relationship and was overwhelmingly accepting of it.\textsuperscript{199} The IGRA’s openness also extends to straight people. Mary Honeycutt described that there were “plenty” of straight people who competed in gay rodeo events. “We let anybody that wants to,” she said, “we’ve got [straight] married couples that come in”.\textsuperscript{200} Though straight competitors participate for a variety of reasons, some members cite the IGRA’s open gender policies as incentives for women who want to compete in “rouglier” events, which they would have less opportunity to do in a traditional rodeo. Even for straight competitors, the IGRA presents itself a uniquely safe space. When compared to traditional rodeo circuits, the IGRA appears far more accepting. However, the IGRA’s membership in 2018 reflected a straight, cisgender, homosexual man most dominantly.

\textsuperscript{199} IGRA Pageant Member, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
\textsuperscript{200} Mary Honeycutt, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
2.4 At Home On the Range: The IGRA and Rural Identity

When I asked questions about what it is like to be a member of the IGRA community, interviewees’ first responses were overwhelmingly positive. People replied with sentiments such as, “I enjoy the people, you know getting to know everybody. Everybody’s really helpful and friendly. It’s like a big family…”, 201 “everyone’s really welcoming and nice here”, 202 and a simple, “I love it”. 203 True, interviewing active IGRA members seems likely to yield positive responses. But for nearly any attendee, the atmosphere at a gay rodeo seems to be an overwhelmingly positive one. Positivity and collaboration are particularly notable when compared to the traditional rodeo circuit. One interviewee noted that “at the ‘straight’ rodeo, there’s a lot more animosity among contestants. They don’t want to give you their secrets… they’re more in it because they want to win… once I started doing the gay rodeo, I was just shocked by the difference of how willing everyone is to share their equipment, share their knowledge. Also, more importantly to be just good friends”. 204 Much of the connection felt between IGRA contestants is fostered by a deep understanding of each other’s lived experiences. For many, the experience of being a queer person from a rural background is normalized and celebrated within the IGRA.

While gay rodeo participants come from a mixture of backgrounds and localities, 205 it is unique in its embrace of queer people from rural backgrounds. The intersection of these two identities – queer and rural – has long been a difficult one to navigate in the United States. In an

201 Mary Honeycutt, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
202 Ramona Valencia Davenport Cox, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
203 Dee Zuspann, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
204 Marco Terrazas, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
205 Mary Honeycutt, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
introduction to their book, *Country Boys: Masculinity and Rural Life*, editors Hugh Campbell, Michael Mayerfeld Bell, and Margaret Finney write:

Some of the most important and sociologically interesting country boys are the individual and obscured ones we do not easily recognize. Take, for example, homosexuals, who are virtually absent from our thoughts about the rural. In the same way, the rural is typically absent from our thoughts about homosexuality, which has a strongly urban cast in our imagination…. The potential violence of visibility and invisibility is not just a topic for fiction. “Brokeback Mountain” was published in October 1998, the same month that a young gay man, Matthew Shepard, was savagely beaten on a back road in Wyoming and [left to die]. Matthew Shepard [was] killed for transgressing the sexual order of one version of rural masculinity: the version that dictates that country boys are resolutely heterosexual. Being a gay country boy can be very dangerous indeed.206

More generally, this passage articulates the dual disservice rural queer people face. On one hand, their existence goes almost entirely unconsidered. On the other hand, when they are visible in their own communities, they risk discrimination and violence. These experiences can be distinct based on one’s gender. For cisgender women, rejecting gendered norms and “doing masculinity” may actually have less consequence in rural areas than in metropolitan ones. Scholar Emily Kazyak asserted in a 2012 study that in some rural cultures, women are privy to a “form of female masculinity that is normative rather than transgressive”.207 One of Kazyak’s interviewees from the Midwest noted, “Growing up in a small town, I worked on a farm. A lot of women worked on farms or in road construction or nontraditional jobs for women. I told somebody that if you were to drive by [my town], you’d think the place is full of lesbians! They’re all wearing flannel shirts and cowboy boots.”208 But just because the range of what is acceptable for women in rural areas seems more flexible for their presentation does not mean that they do not face


208 Kazyak, “Midwest or Lesbian?” 825.
discrimination for their sexuality. Queer women, like queer men and people of other genders, are still subject to discrimination and homophobia.

In some cases, queer people living in rural spaces conform to dominant culture for survival. While acknowledging the vast diversity of so-called rural America,²⁰⁹ Scholar David Bell describes the ways some queer people in rural areas adopt regionally palatable traits. He writes of the “rural homosexual”, and how “[the] eroticizing of the ‘rural butch’ contrasts with the ‘de-gaying’ strategies of ‘butching up’ or ‘cowboy ing up’ reported as coping strategies for rural homosexuals anxious about the association of ‘sissiness’ with homosexuality”.²¹⁰ He continues by citing interviews from Will Fellow’s Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest,²¹¹ which he argues “describe [that] the performance of manliness is often a necessary defense against outing and harassment in an environment where a hegemonic rural heteromasculinity is omnipresent”.²¹² To an outsider, noting this phenomenon may be a purely sociological exercise. It seems straightforward to attribute embracing rural masculinity to self-preservation. However, for many of the individuals living in this environment, the behavior seems less like a cost-benefit analysis and more of a central part of their identity. For some, participating in gay rodeo has just as much to do with identity as it does with the sport.

The IGRA positions itself as a community in which these individuals can be openly themselves, but also a space where traditional tenants of rural and cowboy life are deeply

²¹⁰ Bell, "Cowboy Love," 170.
²¹² Bell, "Cowboy Love," 170.
respected. Put simply, the IGRA is a place where rural queer people feel they can be all parts of
themselves. Jim Wilke writes,

Gay Westerners bear the faith of two societies that would seem mutually exclusive, similar to the way that the terms gay and cowboy once seemed. They often feel tangential to both, risking rejection from their home group from being seen as outsiders as well as from gay communities for being rural. They bear the weight of reconciling faith in
themselves as well as their culture, and must do so without the mechanisms of urban
clichés. This dynamic is increased for working gay and lesbian ranchers who remain in
their communities… the [gay] rodeo creates a place to heal this rift – a place for rural gay
Westerners to find a safe place to be themselves, for rural men and women who had
moved to the city a place to be Western again, and for urban dwellers to encounter the
heritage of Western life and try on, for a moment, the mantle of the West. The process is
inevitably personal.213

Wilke’s comments ultimately suggest that the gay rodeo community is a unique space in which
the intersection of rural and queer identities is not only normalized but also valued. This appeal
of the IGRA has been documented consistently in academic works. In 2009, scholar Christopher
Le Coney cited an interview with an IGRA participant who grew up in a community of two-
hundred people. The interviewee said that because of his background, he “developed stereotypes
that led [him] to think that [he] wasn’t gay”, citing stereotypes associating “effeminate” traits
with gay men.214 Upon finding the gay rodeo community, the interviewee reportedly felt it was a
“very natural” environment where “a lot of [his] past came into fulfillment”.215 Of gay cowboy
culture more generally, Scofield asserts that, historically, “gay cowboy culture also allowed men
who grew up in rural areas, often uncomfortable in urban gay culture, a space to relax”.216 While
this sentiment has been articulated in academic works, I also found it echoed throughout my
fieldwork in 2018.

---

216 Scofield, "Chaps and Scowls," 335.
Like in its earlier years, the IGRA’s participants in 2018 came from a wide range of regional backgrounds. IGRA Vice President Mary Honeycutt calls the association’s composition “a mix”.217 Some participants, such as the one described by Le Coney above, come from small towns in the United States, and others like Wade Earp grew up already heavily embedded in horsemanship and ranching.218 Other participants come from cities, like new participant Jane,219 who didn’t ride her first horse until her early forties.220 Still, observations from 2018 indicated a strong tendency of IGRA competitors to be from noncoastal US states, and particularly those with strong Western tradition. For a single event at the IGRA finals rodeo, I recorded the home states announced for each competitor. It should be noted that this event was calf roping on foot, which is one of the most accessible events. Because it requires virtually no equipment and limited practice, calf roping on foot typically boasts a mix of experienced and inexperienced participants. For the same reasons, it is one of the events with the most competitors in total, and its being held at the finals rodeo suggested that it would be the most geographically diverse than at one of the regional rodeos I attended. A larger sample size and presumably less skewed regional sample made this event compelling to record, but it was otherwise random. The competitors were from the following home states, in order of their announcement.

217 Mary Honeycutt, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
218 Wade Earp in conversation with the author, July 2018.
219 Name changed per interviewee’s privacy preferences.
220 Jane, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
**Calf Roping on Foot, IGRA Finals 2018 Competitor Home States**

**US:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Competitor Home States</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Competitor Home States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>California (Santa Rosa)</td>
<td>Texas (Gonzalez)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iowa</td>
<td>South Dakota</td>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oklahoma</td>
<td>Wyoming</td>
<td>West Virginia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indiana</td>
<td>Texas (Aubrey)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas (Dallas)</td>
<td>Texas (San Antonio)</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas (Austin)</td>
<td>Kansas</td>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This record should not be directly extrapolated as the composition of the IGRA, but it can lend insight into the types of states and places that IGRA participants come from. While hailing from any one of these states does not imply a rural background, some – such as Texas, Oklahoma, Wyoming, etc. – represent regions seeped in Western and rural tradition. For numerous participants, the IGRA can be a safe place to reconcile this identity with a queer one.

One interviewee, Marco Terrazas, has long found himself grappling with these identities. During summers as a child, Marco was familiarized with horsemanship techniques with his extended family in Mexico. As a young adult, he would come to reject this part of himself, and only later re-embrace it after a personal tragedy. It was around this time that Marco reached out to a member of the IGRA, inquiring to join. In his interview, Marco commented,

> I had always felt out of place in most LGBT communities, a little bit of an oddity... when I participated in other sorts of gay communities, like gay choir or outreach sort of groups, I’d always been seen [with] curiosity, almost like a fetishized stereotype. And people assumed that I’m, like this [points to cowboy hat] is like, garb; like a costume, like I fetishize it or something like that. [Kate: like, Western?] Yeah. And there’s a lot of baggage that comes with it. I’m more othered, if that makes sense. But when I’m here, I feel like I’m like, myself. And nobody even bats an eye about it.\(^\text{222}\)

---

\(^{221}\) Recorded at the 2018 IGRA Finals Rodeo on Saturday, October 27, 2018.

\(^{222}\) Marco Terrazas, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
At a later point, Marco added that in many communities of gay men, he had also felt judged for his body, and that in the IGRA he had felt this significantly less. Marco’s testimony reinforces the academic interpretations of Scofield and Le Coney. Speaking generally, the IGRA presents itself as a safe space for people of rural and queer identities. This blend is attractive precisely because belonging to one community or the other can seem mutually exclusive. When queer communities signal that you are too rural, and rural communities signal that you are too queer, the only option seems to be finding one that will meet you in the middle. Gay rodeo provides a space in which participants can negotiate both of these identities, in a community that understands their complexity and takes them seriously.
Chapter 3: Looking Ahead

3.1 *This Ain’t My First Rodeo: Generations of the IGRA*

For members from all regional backgrounds, the IGRA has been a safe landing place for decades. One reason that the association’s demographics reflect the identities of those who founded it is because many of those individuals are still involved. A hallmark component of the IGRA community is that it is largely comprised of, and rooted in, the generation that started it in the 1970s and 1980s. The average age of an IGRA rodeo participant is far higher than the average age of competitor in the traditional rodeo circuit, and the oldest competitor in the 2018 season was sixty-nine years old. Some members of this group are those who survived the AIDS crisis together, and saw gay rodeos reach their peak popularity. They are loyal to the organization because they are loyal to their community members and friends. A majority describe this community as a “family”, to the extent that if members struggle to pay their bills, the group comes together host a fundraiser for them. Many of these community members have held leadership positions in the IGRA for decades and remain the most dominant age group in the organization. The influence of this generation has profound effects on the IGRA and its culture. In some ways, this generation preserves and commemorates past eras of queer life in the United States. In other ways, the group’s dominance may limit the IGRA’s appeal to younger generations and potential growth.

Beyond their demographic presence, older generations of the IGRA shape the contemporary gay rodeo in the way that history is represented during each weekend. For

---

223 Rebecca Scofield in discussion with the author, October 2018.
224 Announced at the 2018 IGRA Finals Rodeo on Saturday, October 27, 2018.
225 Brad Allen, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 28, 2018.
226 John Beck, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
example, the AIDS crisis is central and defined by this generation’s experience with it. Of the interviewees I spoke with, approximately half cited the AIDS crisis, unprompted, when explaining the IGRA community. Because this was a defining time for the IGRA, perhaps it is not surprising that this history is also represented in institutional ways.

Each day of an IGRA-sanctioned rodeo is paused around lunch time for the Grand Entry. This event provides time to acknowledge association leadership and pageant royalty, post the colors, and make announcements. The Grand Entry is lighthearted, with one exception. Each features a Riderless Horse Ceremony. Originally a tradition of the American Cavalry, the Riderless Horse has been co-opted by the IGRA to commemorate IGRA members who have passed away due to AIDS and breast cancer. By the announcer at the North Star Gay Rodeo, the ceremony was described as “the Riderless Horse represents a salute to comrades no longer with us in the gay rodeo community” and that particular day, the ceremony was dedicated to a community member who had passed away less than a week prior. At each ceremony, spectators are asked to rise from their seats and remove their hats. A song is either sung or played, and a horse with a pride flag – and often a cowboy hat – draped over its back is paraded around the arena ceremoniously.

The centrality of this observance speaks to

---

227 Hanvelt, "Cowboy Up," 95.
228 Recorded at the 2018 North Star Gay Rodeo on Sunday, July 29, 2018.
the way that the AIDS crisis is still very much alive to the participants of gay rodeo, especially those of the older generation who experienced it firsthand.

Another way that an older generation is reflected in the IGRA is by the language it uses to define itself. One example is the use of terms such as “gay” and “gay and lesbian”. Examples stretch from the Gay and Lesbian Heritage Foundation – born out of the IGRA in 2009 to “support the broader community in preserving, maintaining promoting and communicating the role of the LGBTQ community in the sport of rodeo”229 – to the “gay” in gay rodeo itself. The use of these terms is a marker of an older breed of activism that seems outdated in 2018. While “gay” and “lesbian” are valid ways to identify oneself, using them to describe an entire group can be seen as problematic. This type of language only represents a portion of the queer community, and excludes a host of individuals of other marginalized genders and sexual orientations. From a modern lens, it seems that these individuals would be better served with a more inclusive term such as LGBT or queer. This language seems especially problematic given that it could discourage potential new members, and new blood is something that leadership wants to encourage.

---

3.2 *If you climb in the saddle, be ready for the ride: Future of the IGRA*

The generational imbalance of 2018 is not only contributable to a dedicated older generation. Gay rodeos are also having a difficult time attracting members of younger generations, specifically millennials and below. The struggle to grow is not one that should be taken lightly. One individual well versed in its history described the IGRA of 2018 as being in “survival mode”. Another noted, “the rodeo is… we’re in trouble. I feel we’re in trouble. And we can’t blame nobody or no individual”. As the number of sanctioned rodeos continues to decline each year, and older members continue to age out, the urgency to attract new blood increases. John Beck urged that “we have to keep our youth going. I’m not getting any younger, and a lot of us around here aren’t”. Beck also noted that the struggle to draw millennials “really worries” him, in part because he sees rodeos as becoming less attractive to younger generations. In this thinking, he is not alone. Other seasoned IGRA leaders are similarly concerned. Mary Honeycutt expressed her anxiety by saying, “we have a few [new people] here and there. I think that the way of the Western style and cowboys is kind of going downhill a little bit, for everybody. Even professionals. So I think that we some things to work on… so we don’t go away”. But beyond all of these attitudes toward rodeo, there also seem to be obstacles that new participants may not be able to surmount.

“It’s expensive. And I think that’s something else you should include [in your thesis]” one interviewee told me in Minnesota. In fact, cost was by far the most frequent answer to my

---

230 Gregory Hinton in discussion with the author, September 2018.
231 John Beck, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
232 John Beck, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
233 John Beck, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
234 Mary Honeycutt, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
235 Drew Pelehos, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
questions about the IGRA’s struggle to attract new people. As one member articulated the problem, “This is also an expensive hobby. If you actually want to have a horse, have a place to keep it, and take care of it; if you want to own a ranch and chase after cows and bulls and things like that, it’s not cheap. And a lot of younger people just don’t, unless they inherit it from their family, just don’t have that”. And the expenses of a horse are not the only ones associated with rodeo preparations. The expenses required for traveling to the events are also high. Dee, the Arena Director, is a truck driver who takes time off of work to attend IGRA events. When asked why she thought the circuit was having a difficult time attracting new members, she replied, “Oh, I would bet part of it is due to the interest. And the overall cost to travel…I went to Pennsylvania and rented a car – I also did buckle sponsorship – but I spent over twelve hundred dollars. Yes.” Because Dee is an official, some of her travel and lodging costs will be covered by the IGRA, but she is not paid and reimbursements will not cover all of her expenses.

While it has always been expensive to own a horse and travel cross-country, the lower number of participants and attendees has also reduced the size of cash prizes. John Beck reflected that, “when I rode steers under the IGRA umbrella […] I was taking home twenty five hundred, three thousand dollars a weekend. And now you can’t even cover your entry fees”. Mary Honeycutt expressed a similar concern when she noted that “you know, it’s not cheap to travel the circuit. Like I said, most of the money goes to charity, so we don’t win a lot. So you’re spending more than you’re actually making. So this is more of a hobby, more for fun. You cannot depend on this to live, for sure”. In other words, even the most talented competitors

---

236 Donald Tony Carson, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
237 Dee Zuspann, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
238 John Beck, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
239 Mary Honeycutt, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
have no guarantee that winnings will even cover their basic costs. For new and younger competitors who will not start out winning, money is an even higher barrier to entry.

Among the factors already deterring new participants, some members are even skeptical that the IGRA is active in promoting its events to new audiences. One new participant said, “I’m thirty seven, and you can look at the stands and see that rodeo across America isn’t as big as it has been…[the IGRA] wants to do events, they need more people. They need to market to younger people, and I feel like that hasn’t happened or isn’t happening”.240 Another noted that “we’re kind of down on members, from what I once… I think we’ve had twice as many members at one point in time. And we always talk about having membership drives, and inviting friends, and getting more people involved. Sometimes that happens, sometimes it doesn’t happen”. This perceived inactivity varies person to person, but also reflects a deeper question within the organization – do we keep pushing to sustain ourselves, against many odds, or will there be a time when the IGRA has inevitably run its course?

Gay rodeo is one among many queer institutions that seem to be struggling in a time when the parameters of queer community are being redefined. The death of lesbian bars, and the significant decline of gay bars, sports clubs, etc. suggests that a more inclusive society could also implicate the deterioration of queer community spaces. IGRA volunteer Ben Martinez described, “I think a lot of the events, like gay rodeo, gay bars, gay rugby, those are disappearing. More bars are just bars for people to go have fun… it doesn’t matter…I know people who are on rugby teams. They used to be gay rugby teams, now they’re just rugby teams who want good players. And they don’t care, other than, can you play rugby?”.241 Ben’s husband, Tony, expressed a similar sentiment by saying,

240 Drew Pelehos, interviewed by Kate Hansen, July 29, 2018.
241 Benceslado “Ben” Martinez, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
I suspect that there always will be rodeo, but I think the gay rodeo’s eventually just going to get absorbed into rodeo. Because our culture, while it’s becoming more city dwellers, it’s also become more gay-friendly in the last twenty years. When I first started participating in rodeo, they would always, at the beginning of one of these events, when a contestant would come out, they would say ‘no photography please’ if that person checked that box. Because they didn’t want anybody to know… they didn’t want to be seen or documented at a gay rodeo. I haven’t heard that in a few years now. And most of these people who participate, who helped found this, are getting older, and I assume that they’re going to be going on to whatever lays beyond this life, and I just don’t know if there’s going to be a lot of young leadership that’s going to really feel the need to have gay rodeo. They’ll just be gay at [traditional] rodeo. And nobody will care.  

Tony’s statement articulates one view of the decline of gay rodeo’s popularity – that it is a sign of the times and a natural consequence of positive societal change. Others in the organization are persistent in attempting to preserve it. John Beck believes that “we have to keep the Western lifestyle alive” for future generations, and mentors horsemanship to younger IGRA participants, as well as six youth under the age of eighteen in his spare time. Whatever a member’s views on the IGRA’s future are, there seems to be a collective sense that the IGRA’s peak is behind it. Especially to those who have been participating for decades, 2018 seems to be a time to savor the community that remains.

While anxiety about the future of the IGRA was expressed throughout interviews, the general atmosphere at the rodeos I attended did not suggest anything so dire. I also documented a variety of trends that seem to be positive signs for the IGRA’s future. First and foremost, while the association is struggling to attract younger participants, it still has a handful of rising stars who have emerged on the circuit. One of these stars is Breana Knight, who participated in the IGRA finals in Mesquite. Raised in Colorado, Breana started watching professional bull riding on cable at the age of six or seven. Today, Breana participates in bull riding with the IGRA.

---

242 Donald Tony Carson, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
243 John Beck, interviewed by Kate Hansen, August 11, 2018.
244 Karlan, “Cowboys, Queens, And Glitter At The World Gay Rodeo Finals.”
Breana and their partner Olivia Lusk, pictured above, were featured in a 2018 BuzzFeed News article entitled “Cowboys, Queens, And Glitter At the World Gay Rodeo Finals”, for which reporters attended the same finals rodeo that I did. This article represents a new trend for the IGRA’s visibility. In the past decade or so, there has been a substantial amount of positive media exposure about the association. Once dependent on positive exposure from LGBT publications and wary of national media, the IGRA now enjoys favorable reporting from platforms like CNN, BBC, and the Washington Post. The collection of articles and videos that has emerged gears itself toward curious eyes. These pieces are feel-good articles that introduce the concept of gay rodeo, and often leave it hanging with little analysis. Some of the reporting is surface-level, and often relies heavily on quotes from participants. Though overwhelmingly positive, these pieces sometimes seem to revel in the perceived novelty of gay

---

245 Karlan, “Cowboys, Queens, And Glitter At The World Gay Rodeo Finals.”
rodeo more than reporting objectively on it. One section of the BuzzFeed article reads that, “this is a place where queer cowboys and cowgirls, drag queens and drag kings, all come together to compete without judgment (aside from the actual judges, of course) alongside their chosen rodeo family. This group may be ‘come as you are,’ but rodeo always comes first”.249 This type of commentary is not limited to English sources, either. An increasing number of Spanish media outlets are also running stories on gay rodeo. Alongside me and the BuzzFeed News team, there were also reporters from Telemundo who produced a news segment in which they interviewed Latinx and Spanish-speaking people at the event. Honorato Gutiérrez, a spectator interviewed with his family, noted, “esos vaqueros son muy buenos y no los aceptan en los rodeos que supuestamente son [de] ‘puros hombres’ (These cowboys are really good, and they aren’t accepted in the rodeos that are supposedly of ‘pure men’).”250 This news segment comes alongside representation of gay cowboys in El País251 and gay rodeo in Buen Diario,252 among others. In 2018, the IGRA and its mission was being broadcast to more and more people, and being framed more positively than ever before.

Two longer pieces of media have also been recently published about the IGRA. In 2014, an episode of CNN’s This is Life with Lisa Ling docuseries profiled the gay rodeo community.253 Reporter Lisa Ling attended a rodeo in Santa Fe and compiled interviews from various participants – a man who had recently come out to his daughters, a new bull rider nervous for her

---

249 Karlan, “Cowboys, Queens, And Glitter At The World Gay Rodeo Finals.”
253 This is Life with Lisa Ling, season 1, episode 7, ”Gay Rodeo,” directed by Rachel Libert, aired November 9, 2014.
first competition, and a member who had been with the IGRA since its first days. I can personally attest to the episode’s effectiveness at raising interest, as it was the first exposure I had to the concept of gay rodeo myself. If I had not seen this piece, I likely would not have pursued a project on gay rodeo. My introduction to gay rodeo became even more significant when I realized one of my community contacts was the reason that this piece had even aired in the first place. This contact had a professional relationship with Lisa Ling’s husband, who shared the idea with her, which inspired the episode.\(^{254}\) The same year, a documentary entitled *Queens & Cowboys: A Straight Year on the Gay Rodeo* followed a handful of participants throughout an entire IGRA season, sprinkled with interviews and clips throughout.\(^{255}\) Central to the documentary’s narrative was a cowboy, Wade Earp, who eventually won best all-around cowboy for the IGRA season. The film has been available to viewers worldwide on streaming sites like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and iTunes.

What makes this collective exposure hopeful for the IGRA is that its members have far more agency over what messages are portrayed. Every example of the reporting described above relied heavily on interviews with contestants and participants. Looking back on a time when IGRA members were ambushed and misrepresented in the media, today’s exposure seems to have come a long way. Also, this new breed of media exposure also seems to center on new voices. Both the BuzzFeed and Lisa Ling pieces, for example, centered on stories of young Black participants, one woman and one gender-fluid person. Just as much as it can promote gay rodeo to the masses, the media can help reframe who *is* the gay rodeo. Expanding images of gay rodeo

\(^{254}\) Gregory Hinton in discussion with the author, September 2018.

has the potential to validate already active members and attract new ones who previously have not seen themselves represented in the association.

Rising stars and positive media exposure, however, do not guarantee the IGRA will survive for another ten years. In fact, they don’t even ensure that it will survive for another season. The challenges that the organization faced in 2018 were considerable, but whatever happens, the IGRA will leave a legacy. Not all of this legacy will be positive, and there is absolutely room to be critical of the association. Especially with regard to race, gender, and non-homosexual sexual orientations, the IGRA can sometimes reflect the worst parts of the history of rodeo itself. At the same time, one must take care and be thoughtful in what they are comparing the gay rodeo community to. Contrasted with other queer communities, especially to those in urban centers, the IGRA can appear to be culturally and politically behind. But in comparison to how queer people have experienced other rodeo spaces, nearly all of the people I interviewed indicated that they felt far safer, fulfilled, and supported in the IGRA community.

On the last day of fieldwork, I spent a few hours enjoying time as a spectator. I was sitting in the back row of the stadium’s bleachers, so that I had a full view of the arena. Despite the various critiques of gay rodeo scribbled down in my notebook, I couldn’t help but appreciate the rare quality of my surroundings. I was in an arena in a conservative Texas suburb, sitting in a majority queer crowd, where the announcer was publicizing a cowboy’s recent same-sex marriage, at an event that had been partially paid for by drag-show fundraising. A few decades before, this event would likely have been threatened, attacked, and perhaps even shut down. And yet, for many of the participants, IGRA rodeos had been one of the most consistent, accepting communities in their lives. Whether the association finds life in a new generation, or dies out with the one that presently dominates it, the IGRA testifies that there is no one right type of
queer community – and with it, no one *right* way to be queer. Expanding our understandings of who queer people are, where they’re from, and what they can do will ultimately help us create more space for their complexity and acceptance.
Academic References


**Additional References**


*This is Life with Lisa Ling*, season 1, episode 7, "Gay Rodeo.” Directed by Rachel Libert. Aired November 9, 2014.


