

The Bucknoll Cottage Chronicles

Sex and the City *meets* Under the Tuscan Sun, *but no sex,*
no city, and in the Poconos

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Chapter 7: A Pocono Cowgirl



Maybe it was the movie *Urban Cowboy*, branded on my brain back in the '90s, that seeded my interest in bull riding. Remember back then, the movie ran ad infinitum (or perhaps ad nauseam) on higher-digit cable stations. I always enjoyed watching the Englewood, NJ-born Travolta's "Bud" two-step the Cleveland-raised Winger's "Sissy" around the honky-tonk dance floor.

Maybe it was vestigial sentimentality for the reality-TV equivalents of my youth, chief among them *Wyatt Earp*, *Sky King*, *Roy Rogers*, *Gunsmoke*, *Bonanza*, *Rawhide*, *The Lone Ranger*, *Maverick*, *Wagon Train*, *Branded*, *Zorro* and *The Rifleman*, all extolling the romance of the wild, wild West. Just to name just a few.

Maybe it was that I had not, in my years of weekend residency, ventured much beyond the modest green-and-white sign demarcating the Bucknoll Hills boundary. While entirely justifiable to stay put the other two seasons of the year (Winter, Mud), it was time to see what was going on out in the big, bad world of the Poconos.

Another Saturday Night and I Ain't Got Nobody

I considered the entertainment options: Bingo at the Methodist Church. The Kalahari Indoor Water Park. Howler's Peak Ropes Course. Roulette at Mount Airy Casino. Pocono Raceway! Bargain hunting at the Tannersville outlets. An excursion to Lake Wallenpaupack. Perhaps a spiritually renewing visit to the Bernardine Franciscan grotto and shrine at Our Lady of the Poconos?

All rejected. Too boring, too wet, my vertigo. A losing proposition. Too loud, too commonplace, too hard to pronounce. As for my spirit, it was not up for renewal yet.

That left the rodeo.

Yes, rodeo. Turns out, if you happen to live on the East Coast, there's always something to the west of where you are. And that's where, at some point, the rodeo comes to town. Even New York City hosts a cowboy competition at Madison Square Garden (on Manhattan's West Side!) that includes cloverleaf barrel racing, steer wrestling, and tie-down roping. Generally, it arrives in June.

So, one fine summery Saturday evening, I bucked the Bucknoll border and headed seven miles west, toward Wyoming, to the rodeo.

Truckin'

My brilliant idea was to invite my pal Buzz to accompany me. I hoped he'd volunteer to drive me there in one of the truck-like vehicles I'd seen parked on his property down the street. He demurred, claiming he'd been to a rodeo that trotted into the neighborhood three years earlier, part of the Newfoundland Fair (no relation to *Nomadland* but likewise pronounced with three syllables). Once was enough for him. Besides, the trucks all belonged to the various contractors working on his never-ending cottage renovation.

It's okay, Buzz, you've still got a friend in me.

Buzz did disclose an important tidbit of arcane rodeo lore he'd picked up, perhaps from *The Cowboy Channel*, regarding the mystical importance of the number eight. That's how long, he told me, in seconds, not minutes or hours, rodeo contestants must stay on the back of whatever animal they're on before the ride counts as a win.

Eight seconds. Ha! That's nothing, I thought. I myself have been known to hold a downward-facing-dog position for 15.

I parked my suburban-mom Forester on the outer edge of the designated lot. Was I ready to rodeo? Pardner, I thought I had been transported to Kansas, PA, as I followed the flannel-and-denim'd, Stetson-hatted, Coors-guzzling, Frye-booted masses past rows and rows of RAM half-tons, paid my 10 bucks to get into the corral and took a seat at the 50-yard line. I wondered if my standard football rejoinder, "Hey, he was wide open," would make me seem

knowledgeable about what I would be watching. (This works in hockey and basketball as well.)

There's No Business Like Rodeo Business

The evening's events began with a recorded recitation of "The Cowboy's Prayer," a poetic ballad by Clem McSpadden requesting no special favors except to make a clean break to Heaven. My interpretation: it seemed like a big ask. Clem, it turns out, was a rodeo radio broadcaster who had a side gig representing Oklahoma in the US Congress and may not have been entirely serious when he penned the prayer, given that he was related to Will Rogers. Like his granduncle, McSpadden was not a member of any organized party, which is to say he was a Democrat.

Next, a cowgirl on horseback bearing Old Glory circled the ring at full gallop. In the center, this Pocono Annie Oakley screeched to a halt. A compatriot trotted in to sing an unmemorable national anthem. I hoped against hope "Beer for My Horses" would follow. It didn't.

First up was bareback bronc riding. Cowboy mounts horse in pen. No saddle. No stirrups. No reins that I could see either. He gives the Ol' Cowboy Nod, and the gate opens. The horse tries to throw him off. If he stays on for eight seconds, he's rescued by another cowboy. If he doesn't, cowboy Mounties swoop in to scoop him up. This event is over quickly because, shucks, eight seconds is not all that long unless you are the rider or the horse.

Next up, the first of three tie-down roping contests. In this one, a calf runs around like a mad cow, chased across the stadium by a

cowboy on horseback who tries to throw a lasso around its neck. If the cowboy succeeds, he jumps down and ties three of the calf's legs together.

It's harder than it looks.

The next variation is breakaway roping, where the calf is roped but not tied. My new friends seated next to me explained this is considered a wussy event, kind of like beach volleyball. They asked me to save their seats while they took a bathroom break.

The third is team tie-down roping. By now, I was out-and-out rooting for the calves. In this, two cowpersons (often a mixed-doubles team) give chase, one going for the head (the "header") and the other the legs (the "heeler"). I was starting to feel a little overwhelmed, not just by the action but by the terminology. Six seconds in, I realized "That heeler was wide open!" wouldn't work.

Git Along, Poor Little Dogies!

During the changeovers between events, a rodeo clown and his 5-year-old Mini-Me intern offered comic interludes. Ha. Ha. Where's Will Rogers when he's needed?

An exhibition at halftime featured a couple, apparently married according to their chitchat, demonstrating the fine art of bullwhipping, which is not something you should Google in the presence of minors.

The wife held a pair of sticks in her hands and then her mouth. The husband would crack the whip and snap the sticks in two.

Clearly, this couple had a terrific marriage counselor. And dentist.

Saddle bronc riding was brief due to just one contestant. He won. He also appeared in dire need of a chiropractor as he limped out of the corral.

Finally, the grand finale: bull riding. On bulls.

No bull, these guys were mean. None of this Ferdinand-smelling-the-flowers business here. (Fun fact: *Ferdinand the Bull*, published the same year as *Gone with the Wind*, had by 1938 surpassed Margaret Mitchell's hot new romcom novel in sales.)

These bulls bullishly tossed every rider before I could get the shutter release on my camera squeezed.

The End of the Line

Thus, the last embers of my night out died down. "You're leaving?" my enthusiastic bleacher-bench neighbors asked as I gathered myself and my stuff. Apparently, a music show was about to start.

"Will Randy Travis or Lyle Lovett be playing?" I asked. "Not tonight," I was informed.

I sauntered out with the vague notion that I might explore a Pocono Saturday night out again in a year or two. In the meantime, I left Kansas and the rodeo in the dust because, when it comes right down to it, there's no place like home.

Best of all, I now have the street cred to truthfully claim, “This ain’t my first rodeo.”