Scratch Houston and you will find—underneath each of the oil people, refiners, pipeliners, space scientists, retailers, real estate moguls, politicians, manufacturers, cotton merchants, seafarers, whomever—there’s always the heart of a cowboy.

When visitors, especially those from the East, come to Houston, you can regale them with the wonders of this giant city, fourth largest in the USA: the great Medical Center, Reliant Stadium, Minute Maid Park, Toyota Center, and their professional sports teams; the incredible ship channel and port; the skyscrapers and the Galleria; the renowned centers of education; and more, ad infinitum. Then, when you pause to take a breath, they will interpose—“Yeah, well, but where are the cowboys?”

“Pilgrim,” the cowboys are here. Every February they doff their workaday garments and reveal the Texas in their souls. From every point of the compass, trail rides converge on Houston. Cowboys on horses, wagons, stagecoaches, and festive floats parade down the streets of Houston. Streets lined six or eight deep with cowboys and cowgirls of all ages in their “Go Texan,” pointy-toed boots, jeans, fancy Western shirts with pearl snap-buttons, and wide-brim cowboy hats.

The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo co-opts every facet of city life from late February through March. This remarkable spectacle is an outpouring of a suppressed cowboy spirit on a scale that is all-encompassing . . . and authentic Texan to the bone.

Not at all surprising . . . the roots were always there.

Spectators lined the streets of downtown Houston dressed in their western finery to kick off the Show each February. Children were given a holiday from school to attend the parade.
COWBOY FROM DAY ONE

In 1836, when the Allen Brothers were busily founding a city, they wisely hired another pair of brothers to do the real work of surveying the city, and laying out the streets. Thomas Borden and brother Gail laid out the streets on a grid pattern. All of the streets were planned with an eighty-foot width, except two. Main Street was to be ninety feet wide, and Texas Avenue was expanded to a width of 100 feet to accommodate fourteen head of longhorn cattle moving abreast across the city to the stockyards and port. Later, Lubbock Street was named for early settler Francis R. Lubbock, who had an 843 acre ranch in the area where Hobby Airport now stands. Lubbock’s cattle brand and earmarks remain listed in the “Records of Marks and Brands” book in the Harris County clerk’s office.1

“History of the Texas cattle industry is full of unlikely events and circumstances,” wrote Leon Hale in 1988. “The settlers who came into this state from the east weren’t really livestock raisers. Most were farmers and knew little about ranching. But when they saw the oceans of Texas grass waving over free or cheap land, they began having pleasant dreams.”2

TOP CATTLE COUNTY IN THE TOP CATTLE STATE

The bountiful, nutritious grasses, the abundant sources of good water, the moderate climate, and the access to markets made Houston/Harris County a center for raising cattle. For much of the twentieth century, Harris County was the leading Texas county in cattle production with adjacent counties, Brazoria and Wharton, close behind.

Some figures from the Texas Almanac illustrate the extent of Harris County’s lead. The top three counties in 1954: Harris – 113,426 head, Brazoria – 96,801 head, Wharton – 82,286 head. In 1959: Harris – 105,230 head, Wharton – 87,059 head, Brazoria – 81,763 head. THEN, the top three counties in 1964: Brazoria – 98,388 head, Gonzales – 96,144 head, Harris – 95,829. By 1969, Harris County ranked eleventh, with 86,000 head. In 1974, even though Harris County held a substantial 94,194 head of cattle, it stood tenth among the 254 Texas counties.3

The Texas Almanac, 1956-1957 Edition, states, “Cattle raising is the oldest of Texas’ present large industries . . . From the very beginning of the livestock industries in Texas, it has been a story of breeding up the original scrub stock—the Longhorn beef cattle, the blue-john milk cattle—into the fine blooded stock on Texas farms and ranches today.” “Breeding up” is easier said than done. In the early twentieth century, knowledgeable cattlemen asserted that the outstanding Texas cattle could be seen only at the big livestock exposition (and legendary rodeo) in Fort Worth. Some mentioned San Antonio; Abilene, Pecos, San Angelo, Nacogdoches, Lubbock, and other cattle centers were respected as leaders in breeding practices. Houston area cattlemen were making advances, but they received less notice.4

A TOP HAND . . . WITH A TOP PLAN

James W. Sartwelle was a prominent Houston businessman who ran the Port City Stockyards—a job that required mastery of the infinite details of the cattle business. In order to stay abreast of the significant developments in the cattle industry, Sartwelle made frequent trips to the leading livestock markets in the southwest. His observations persuaded him that the cities where livestock shows and competitions were held drew a better quality of livestock. Sartwelle believed that if an annual livestock exposition could make a substantial improvement in breeding and raising practices, then Houston should organize and produce an exposition. Preferably, the most popular, celebrated, and beneficial livestock show in the State of Texas. So he took steps to make it a reality.

To set up an organizational meeting, Sartwelle ran an ad in the Houston newspapers seeking Houstonians interested in founding a local livestock competition and show, along estab-
lished lines. The first meeting, in the Texas State Hotel, on January 30, 1931, consisted of J. W. Sartwelle and six “interested persons.” Sartwelle was a large, aggressive man whose enthusiasm and commitment inspired the “interested persons” to pledge their support and join in the founding of the “Houston Fat Stock Show.” The group elected Sartwelle to be president; J. Howard West, Marcus Meyer, W. C. Munn, and Julian A. Weslow were elected vice presidents. W. S. Cochran was elected treasurer, and Haygood Ashburn was elected secretary. The influence of these seven men spread to their families, their friends, business associates, farmers, ranchers, and real, authentic working cowboys! Volunteers turned out to perform the myriad tasks that required attention to produce an organized, large-scale, county-wide endeavor.

On April 30, 1932, a year of preparation culminated in the first Houston Fat Stock Show. The show ran through May 4, in the huge, wooden Sam Houston Hall on Bagby Street. This historic 25,000-seat auditorium was built for the 1928 National Democratic Convention as a result of the efforts of Houston businessman Jesse H. Jones. Some 2,000 exhibitors showed livestock. Spectators watched the judging, and were entertained by Billie Ehman and his trick horse “Baby Doll.” While an official rodeo was not held in combination with the first Fat Stock Show, authentic bucking bronc action took place in the livestock arena courtesy of Emil Marks, who owned the LH-7 Ranch in Barker and supplied the horses for the cowboy riders.

Although the first Houston Fat Stock Show lost $2,800, the effort was judged by one and all as a success and a new asset for the city. Plans were immediately set in motion for the second show in 1933.

**BIGGER AND BETTER – IN THE COLISEUM AND MUSIC HALL**

From the first Show in 1932 through the much-expanded Show in 1936, Sam Houston Hall proved more than adequate. But in 1937, Houston was ready for something grander; something with air conditioning! So the hall was razed, and the elegant Sam Houston Coliseum and Music Hall built. No Houston Fat Stock Show was held in 1937; the organization devoted that year to preparations for a revamped Show in 1938.

The one-year hiatus proved to be of immeasurable value to the Show. The ranks of volunteers swelled. The Houston Chapter of the Junior Chamber of Commerce (soon to become the largest chapter in the world) helped with ticket sales and promotional endeavors. The new Coliseum and Music Hall offered state of the art facilities. The quantity and quality of the livestock exhibited and judged multiplied, and horse shows were held. Bands performed, including local favorites such as fiddler Leon “Pappy” Selph who played the western swing music that was wildly popular on the radio and in the honky-tonks.

Saddle bronc riding evolved from breaking horses for use on a ranch. To receive a score, the cowboy’s feet must touch the horse’s shoulders on the first jump out of the chute, and he must stay on for eight seconds. Points are awarded to the horse for bucking action, and to the rider for spurring and maintaining balance.
In her definitive book, *February Fever*, Lynne Chesnar described the first Houston Fat Stock Show parade, “The parade in 1938 was a tremendous success. Headed by a mounted police escort and color guard, the parade line-up included state, county and city officials, a 20-piece band and officials of the Houston Fat Stock Show and Livestock Exposition. It also included a 65-piece cowboy band under the direction of Cliff Drescher and drum and bugle corps from area high schools, including the famous all-girl ‘Black Battalion’ from Sam Houston High School in Houston,” which was the only all-girl marching drum and bugle corps to perform under the baton of the great John Phillip Sousa.

J. W. Sartwelle announced that the 1938 Show would be “The Show of Shows.” The excitement and wonder stirred by the downtown parade set the stage for the record-setting Show. Each performance opened with the Grand Entry spectacular in the arena of the Coliseum. There was special entertainment and the drama of livestock judging and auctions. But the favorite new element was the thrilling, action-packed rodeo. Reese Lockett, a respected rodeo hand and mayor of Brenham, served as the rodeo’s producer. Cowboy contestants flocked to Houston for this event. Texas cowboys competed with top hands from California, Nevada, New Mexico, Colorado, Oklahoma, and even Calgary. There were five rodeo events: bareback bronc riding, saddle bronc riding, bull riding, steer wrestling, and calf roping. Barrel racing and team roping were added in later years.

One of the Texas cowboys who competed in 1938 was Warren Gunn from Houston. In 2000, Gunn was selected for the Texas Professional Rodeo Cowboys Hall of Fame. In an interview on the occasion of this honor, Gunn related memories of the 1938 competition. “I rode bareback and the bulls,” said Gunn. “Most of the bulls were Brahmas. My life-long friend, Gerald Abbott, worked pick-up at the 1938 rodeo. He continued to work pick-up for the Houston Rodeo for many years. Abbott worked pick-up at the Huntsville Prison Rodeo for thirty years.” The pick-up man is the cowboy in the arena on horseback who “picks up” the bareback or saddle bronc rider from his horse after the ride. Even though Gunn spent much of his life traveling to compete in rodeos across the country, he considered Houston his home until he retired to Fredericksburg to be near his ranch. He died in 2002.

Another “first” followed the 1938 Houston Fat Stock Show and Livestock Exposition when the event’s leaders decided to offer memberships in the Show for minimal annual dues. This organizational procedure has proved to be practical and successful. Wilhemina Beane purchased the first one-year membership for $5.00 on June 24, 1938. Beane, a writer with the *Houston Press*, was a Show volunteer and became the first woman director of the Houston Fat Stock Show.

Throughout his tenure as founder/president of the Houston Fat Stock Show and Livestock Exhibition, J. W. Sartwelle was a flamboyant, forceful leader. He was not only a brilliant planner and organizer, but also a natural showman and impresario. Even so, he never lost sight of his original objectives: to promote Houston as a convenient and profitable marketplace for livestock, and to encourage area ranchers to produce improved livestock through better breeding and feeding practices. Over the years, the educational aspect of the Show expanded, and this has paid vast dividends in the billion-dollar agricultural and agribusiness segment of Harris County’s economy.

**FIRST STOCK SHOW PARADE – FIRST RODEO**

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**DECEMBER 7, 1941 – WATERSHED OF THE 20TH CENTURY**

The entire world experienced drastic change on Pearl Harbor Day. Certainly, the Houston Fat Stock Show and Livestock...
Today, he may look like a rodeo clown, and sometimes act like a rodeo clown, but as this photograph demonstrates, he is really a bullfighter—which is now his proper title. His job is to divert the bull away from the exiting rider.

Rodeo clown Quail Dobbs entertained Houston audiences for decades as the clown in the barrel.

At each rodeo twenty-eight youngsters compete for fourteen calves in the exciting, and often chaotic calf scramble. They must get a rope halter on the calf and bring it across the finish line. They then receive a certificate to purchase a calf to raise and show.
Exposition was not immune from world events. Plans for the Show in early 1942 were all in place. Should the 1942 Show be cancelled? President Sartwelle and the association’s executive committee decided to proceed as planned—an action of visionary wisdom that proved successful.

“Grand champion steer buyers during the war years were restaurateurs George P. Kelley, Bill Williams, and Virgil Shepherd of Grand Prize Brewery,” wrote Maudeen Marks in a lengthy story for the February 12, 1995, issue of the Houston Chronicle. “In all, a lot of fine folks gave their best and came through the war era with a sense of pride, having helped provide meat for the Army, and having done so with a camaraderie that is still magic in stock show circles.” She continued, “Despite rationing, war quotas to be met, inconveniences and personal stress, the Houston Fat Stock Show prospered in every way.

It came out of World War II with money in the bank, the calf scramble, better livestock housing, an organized rodeo visit for the handicapped, the quarter horse show and a half-dozen and more new committees. It gained in membership, efficiency and sophistication.” Maudeen Marks, daughter of Emil H. Marks, one of the early directors of the Show, volunteered with the Houston Fat Stock Show & Livestock Exposition from its early beginnings in 1932. During the war years she handled publicity for the Show. Maudeen remained active well into her eighties, and died at the age of ninety on March 20, 2009, in Bandera, Texas.13

Fittingly, the first “star” entertainer brought in for the Houston Fat Stock Show was a native Texan. Born in Tioga, Gene Autry achieved worldwide fame as the “Singing Cowboy” in numerous Western movies. In Hollywood, he added a new dimension to the ever-popular Western genre and along the way, continued to turn out hit recordings, including “Tumbling Tumbleweeds,” “Back in the Saddle Again,” and “You Are My Sunshine.” Additionally, his recording of “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer” reached legendary status and is now a Christmas tradition.

Superstar Autry and his famous horse, Champion, were a grand hit with Houston audiences. He brought business to a halt when he led the rodeo parade down Main Street. The Coliseum was packed for his six appearances in 1942, 1943, 1944, 1947, 1948, and 1955. Autry and his business partner Everett Colborn, from Dublin, Texas, produced the Houston Rodeo for several years, as well as the rodeo in New York’s Madison Square Garden during its final years.14

The “Calf Scramble” was added to the program as a rodeo event in the 1940s. This energetic, somewhat chaotic event has given thousands of youngsters an opportunity to become “miniature” ranchers, with the responsibility for “hands-on” cattle raising.

Change was the word for the 1940’s. The world changed. Texas changed. Houston changed, and with it, the Houston Fat Stock Show and Livestock Exposition. J. W. Sartwelle, the
The bull rider, hanging on to a flat-braided rope with one hand, must stay on the bull for an eight-second ride. If his free hand touches himself or the bull, he is disqualified. While he is not required to spur, it does add to his score. Points are awarded for the bucking action of the bull and the cowboy's style and control for a total score.
strong hand at the helm, retired from the presidency in 1948, and W. Albert Lee was chosen as his successor. Lee, a successful businessman who owned hotels and a radio station, enthusiastically worked in Show activities. His management style differed from that of Sartwelle, but he was effective and popular. Lee made his mark in the Fat Stock Show through his leadership on the advance ticket sales committee and his coordination of the first Rodeo and the first Rodeo parade. W. Albert Lee will be remembered also as “the man who brought television to Houston.” He outmaneuvered other applicants to gain the first license issued by the Federal Communications Commission for a station in the Houston area. His station, KLEE-TV, went on the air on January 1, 1949. Lee sold it to Governor William Hobby in 1950, and the station became KPRC-TV.

GO TEXAN IN THE FABULOUS FIFTIES

The phenomenal progression of success for the Houston Fat Stock Show through the 1950s reflects the leadership of Show presidents Ralph A. Johnston, 1951-1954; Archer Romero, 1954-1957; and Douglas B. Marshall, Sr., 1957-1960. During the 1950s, Charles Giezendanner proved beyond any doubt that “should you happen to scratch a Houstonian, beneath the modern apparel you likely will find the big heart of a cowboy.” Advertising executive Giezendanner, restaurateur Bill Williams, and others sprang the “Go Texan Days” promotion on an astonished city and drew an immediate, powerfully positive response.
Educational Programs and Scholarships
by Aimee L’Heureux

Since the scholarship and educational program support began in 1957, more than $235 million has been committed to Texas students for their education. Currently, 1,934 students are furthering their education with the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo scholarships. Enrolled students are attending eighty-eight different Texas colleges and universities. In order to qualify for any of the scholarships, students must demonstrate academic potential, citizenship/leadership, and financial need. Winners may major in any field of study leading to a bachelor’s degree; however, they must attend a college or university in Texas. These three students are a sampling of the many scholarship recipients who were able to accomplish their goals and, today, follow the example set by the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo’s scholarship program by giving back to the community.

Kristina Kovar, a Rodeo Art Scholar from Lamar Consolidated High School who graduated in 2005, says that The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo Scholarship made a difference in her life because it enabled her to attend college and pursue her dreams without worrying about how to pay her expenses or divide her time between work and school. Her artwork was chosen for the Rodeo Art Auction and sold for $9,000. She says the auction was bittersweet because she knew that she would never again see the picture that she had poured hundreds of hours into; but much to her shock and surprise, the artwork was donated back to her. Kristina says that her life is now full of unlimited possibilities because of the generosity of the scholarship donors and the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. Since graduating summa cum laude from the University of Houston with a B.F.A. in Interior Design and a minor in Architecture, she is now attending Graduate School at UH, seeking a master’s degree in Architecture, as well as being a student design intern at Newberry Campa Architects. Her time spent with the rodeo through the years, volunteering at their scholarship booth and speaking at one of their meetings were memorable and rewarding experiences that she treasures to this day. Kristina’s ultimate goal is to give something back to the people and community that have given her so much. Through architecture, she hopes to positively contribute to the fabric of society.

Audrie Luna, a Metropolitan Scholarship recipient, 2002-2006, says that The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo scholarship helped her to attain her goal, while also providing her family with the peace of mind that she would be able to attend college even though they could not assist financially. Audrie Luna graduated from the University of Houston in 2006 with a B.S. in Psychology and a minor in Sociology. She is currently working at LINN Energy, a mid-sized oil and gas company in Downtown Houston as an executive assistant for the company’s top three executives. In her spare time, she volunteers with CanCare, a local non-profit organization whose mission is to improve the quality of life for cancer patients and their families.

Gabynely Galvan-Solis graduated from Furr High School in the top five percent of her class and always dreamt of going to college. Coming from a very low income Hispanic family, she wanted to be one of the first in her family to obtain a bachelor’s degree. College was not an option unless she ridded herself with student loan debt. Her parents only achieved a middle school education and, even though she knew they wanted to help financially, they did not know how to make this dream a reality. With her high school counselors and teachers pushing her to apply for as many scholarships as possible, the final tally was between thirty-five and forty applications. One by one she was rejected. Just as she was beginning to lose hope, she received a big yellow envelope in the mail that said she had been awarded $10,000 from the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. Gabynely Solis graduated in May of 2008 from the University of Houston majoring in Public Relations and minoring in Russian. Since graduation she has been working at the College of Optometry at the University of Houston as a Pediatric Research Coordinator. The program offers patients services, such as free eye exams, free eye care, and free eyewear.

Aimee L’Heureux is a master’s student in history at the University of Houston.
All of Houston rushed to dress in wide-brimmed cowboy hats, jeans, and boots, and to participate in one way or another in the Houston Fat Stock Show and Livestock Exposition. This had to be one of the most successful community promotions in Houston history.16

Another major innovation in the 1950s was the scholarship program. The first scholarship was presented in 1957 to Ben Dickerson of Houston in the amount of $2,000. Officials quickly recognized this community service program was an area with the potential for future growth. Today it has become a centerpiece of the program.17

The Houston Fat Stock Show and Rodeo included the Annual Rodeo Queen’s Contest with generous prizes awaiting the winner. One prize was a convertible, donated by Don McMillian Ford. A sixteen-year-old brunette from Robstown, Kathryn Grandstaff won in 1950. The charming Ms. Grandstaff met a cattleman, with a 25,000-acre Nevada ranch, who had a special way with a song. He made an enduring classic hit of “Don’t Fence Me In” with the Andrews Sisters. He recorded “Deep in the Heart of Texas” and, the never to be forgotten, “White Christmas.” So Kathryn Grandstaff, 1950 Queen of the Houston Fat Stock Show and Rodeo, became Mrs. Bing Crosby.18

THE SALT GRASS TRAIL RIDE TRADITION
A friendly conversation in the Cork Club at the Shamrock Hotel turned into a challenge that changed Show history. Charles Giezendanner challenged Reece Lockett to ride horseback from his home in Brenham to the Fat Stock Show in Houston, and the Salt Grass Trail Ride was born. Rancher Emil Marks, TV personality Pat Flaherty, John Warnasch, and Lockett set out from Brenham on horseback, with one chuck wagon. Along the way, they were joined by other riders. J. W. Sartwelle and Vernon Frost were among one group that braved the elements to reenact the almost forgotten custom of driving herds of cattle to feed on the nutritious coastal forage. Although this trail ride was a publicity coup of epic proportions, hardly anyone would have imagined that by 2009 there would be thirteen trail rides, involving thousands of riders. One of the rides, the Los Vaqueros Rio Grande Trail Ride, originates in Hidalgo, Texas, and stretches over 386 miles. This is certainly “community outreach” on a grand scale.19

After a winter of foraging on unappetizing hay, the soft, sweet, verdant grasses of spring are just the thing for hungry cattle. Early South Texas ranchers held spring cattle drives to the coastal plains for the nutritious “salt grass.” Today, barbed wire and dangerous highways have reduced this ancient practice to a much smaller-scale movement of cattle from one pasture to another.

Ray Bullock, a director and a vice president of the Houston Fat Stock Show, had a special interest in the study of the grasses of the South Texas area. His family had extensive agricultural holdings, including a ranch in Washington County with 2,300 acres of pasture and a herd of Herefords. As he sought to improve his estates, he developed a profound respect for the work of the Harris County Soil Conservation District, and served as chairman of this organization for twelve years. When Bullock assumed management of the family ranch, he found that it required eight acres to sustain one head of cattle. By improving the pasturage with better grasses, Bullock was able to reduce the ratio to only two acres per head.

With more than 6,000 different species of grasses, educated selection was very important. To encourage further improvements, Ray Bullock persuaded the leaders of the Fat Stock Show to include a judging of grasses and recognition for those exhibiting the best varieties. Finding no satisfactory space for judging in the Coliseum, Bullock rented the Music Hall. He covered the stage with trays of grass, and a professor from the University of

Barrel Racing is a timed event. The rider and horse must race in perfect synchronization to round the barrels in a cloverleaf pattern at top speed. Riders are penalized five seconds for knocking over a barrel.
Tie-down roping, previously called calf roping, requires precise teamwork between horse and rider. The cowboy must lasso the calf running out of the shoot. He then dismounts the horse, and while the horse maintains the tension on the rope, the cowboy flips the calf to the ground and ties three of the animal’s feet together. When done, he throws his hands up to stop the clock. He remounts the horse, which releases the tension on the rope. The calf must remain tied for six seconds for the cowboy to receive a time.

Houston came in to do the judging. This display of grasses drew a great deal of attention and focused serious interest on the potential benefits from cultivating better grasses. The Show still has a plant and pasture identification contest as part of its judging.  

**HEADLINER STARS AND THE SPACE ERA**

While the ultimate million-dollar potential of the entertainment element of the Show may not have been recognized when Gene Autry rode Champion in the show ring at the Coliseum, a new era had dawned. The crowds flocked in to see the stars. After Autry, came the Lone Ranger, Eddy Arnold, the Cisco Kid, Roy Rogers and Dale Evans, James Arness, Chuck Connors, and Hugh O’Brian. One thing was obvious: the Coliseum was no longer adequate to handle the vastly expanded Show.

Changes began to be made in June 1961. Vernon Frost and others suggested that the name of the organization be changed to reflect the fact that the Rodeo was now a major part of the Show. The original name, “Houston Fat Stock Show and Livestock Exposition,” was outdated. For one thing, the Rodeo was now a major activity, important enough to be recognized in the organization’s name. Additionally, the phrase “fat stock” had become increasingly unfashionable. The board of directors agreed, and voted to change the name to “Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo Association.”

Space . . . the wonderful old Coliseum just did not have enough for the burgeoning Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. As presidents Douglas Marshall and Neill T. Masterson struggled with this problem, a site in northwest Houston was selected, and plans were readied for construction of a new home for the Show.

Stuart Lang was elected Show president in 1964, at a time when everyone was talking about the giant domed stadium that was nearing completion on the bald prairie south of the Main Street and O.S.T. intersection. Lang had a vision of a Show complex adjacent to the Astrodome with enough space for multiple cattle and horse arenas, convenient loading and unloading of livestock, offices and meeting rooms, vendor sales areas, and parking spaces stretching to the far horizon. The directors were persuaded by this vision. Think big! And they did.

The negotiations with Harris County, the Houston Sports Authority, and the many other interested parties were intense. The logistics of a move on this scale were mind-boggling; but the vision of space, of having enough room to accomplish their immediate goals and to grow in the future, overcame obstacles. The thirty-fourth annual Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo opened in the new facilities on March 6, 1966. Much of the credit for this remarkable achievement goes to E. C. “Dick” Weekley, general manager of the Show from 1962 to 1984. The new Y-shaped building, named the Astrohall, evolved into a
A far cry from those modest days at the downtown Coliseum, Reliant Park provides a massive space for showing livestock including multiple breeds of beef cattle (27), dairy cattle (3), rabbits (27), swine (5), and dairy goats (5). Other animals exhibited include turkeys, cavys, broilers, Boer goats, alpacas, and llamas.

“The King,” Elvis Presley appeared at the rodeo in 1970 and 1974. He set a record for Houston rodeo attendance. The event was also the largest crowd for which Presley had performed, with his previous high being 25,000 fans at the Cotton Bowl.

Reba McEntire, a former barrel racer from Oklahoma, has entertained at the Show more than seventeen times since her first appearance in 1984.
30.1 acre complex by 1990. It cost almost $22 million and became a gift from the Show to Harris County.\(^{22}\)

Famed cowboy artist/sculptor Mark Storm created a life-size sculpture of Stuart Lang that now has a place of high honor in the “Allen H. ‘Buddy’ Carruth Plaza” on the grounds of the Show’s newest home at Reliant Park. At the base of this sculpture is a raised image of the Astrohall-Astroarena complex.


**POST-MILLENNIUM — “TO INCREDIBLE, AND BEYOND!”**

In 1999, the Show had signed on to a master plan to remake the Astrodome complex into Reliant Park, which proceeded at a fast pace. At the center of the Park sits the stadium that covers twelve acres, and rises forty feet above the Astrodome. The facility, home to the Houston Texans football team, has a retractable roof that remains closed for rodeo performances.

Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo activities moved to the new stadium in 2003. Adjacent to the stadium, Reliant Center houses the main offices of the Show. A huge exposition center 1,532 feet long with some 706,213 square feet of space, it features ceiling heights ranging from twenty-five to sixty feet. The old Astrohall was razed; however, the 6.9 acre Astroarena, now Reliant Arena, continues to be used for horse events, as it was originally designed.\(^{24}\)

**GEORGE STRAIT CLOSES THE DOME AND OPENS RELIANT**

After thirty-seven breathtaking years, the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo threw one of the world’s great parties on Sunday, March 3, 2002, to mark the end of its relationship with the real and the mythic Astrodome, the world’s first covered athletic stadium. For the first time, the event was all show, no rodeo—a special two-hour concert by legendary country music superstar, George Strait.

George Strait is a fourth generation Texas rancher. He is a talented team-roper and a long-time member of PRCA. He was airlifted to the Astrodome in 1983 as a last-minute replacement for an ailing Eddie Rabbitt. From that sensational performance, Strait has become a favorite of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, as well as an enduring country-western music chart-topper. In 1993 he starred in the movie, “Pure Country.”
Auction, to Calf Scramble, to Gatekeepers. It has tremendous community influence and has made a positive contribution to Houston, Harris County, and Texas beyond imagination. It has enriched and inspired. Not bad for a bunch of cowboys, now is it, Mr. Sartwelle?

Jim Saye has written for magazines, newspapers, radio, and television during his forty-five-year career in advertising in Houston. He was also a writer and editor with a cowboy sports magazine for three years. Jim holds degrees from two universities; he earned one before and one after sea duty in the Navy during the Korean War. He is an Honor-ary Captain of the SS SELMA, the World War I concrete ship stuck in the mud of Galveston Bay.

Team-roper Strait, whose cowboy credentials are impeccable, rode into the Dome on a brown and white paint horse and clutched the heart of a record 62,266 ecstatic fans. With his Ace in the Hole band, Strait rocked the Dome with a mixture of hits from his albums and classic country and western songs. Long after the concert ended, the applause and cheering continued as the crowd made its way one last time down the ramps and out to their buses and cars.

On Tuesday, February 25, 2003, at 7:00 p.m. George Strait took the microphone and opened the “Reliant” era of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. Strait was the only performer who could have followed the top-flight success of his 2002 performance. His sixteen Rodeo performances have entertained more than a million people. In more than one way, the achievements and the persona of George Strait exemplify the “Go Texan!” spirit of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo.

THAT WAS THEN . . .
THIS IS NOW

The 2009 Show was another record-breaker. A new attendance record was set – 1,890,332 visitors! Professional rodeo athletes competing in the seven rodeo events won more than $1.4 million. Clint Cannon of Waller won $59,250 as Bareback Riding Champion, and Douglas Duncan of Alvin took home $55,000 as the Bull Riding Champion. “Perhaps the most exciting record was set March 15 – Go Tejano Day,” stated C. R. “Butch” Robinson, Chairman. “Paid attendance reached 74,147 fans for championship Rodeo action and Ramon Ayala and Alacranes Musical performing in concert. On a rainy afternoon, this performance broke the paid Rodeo attendance record set in 2008, when Hannah Montana/Miley Cyrus performed.”

The Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo is now the world’s largest livestock show and the richest regular-season Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association competition. It consists of ninety-nine committees, ranging from Poultry Auction, to Calf Scramble, to Gatekeepers. It has tremendous community influence and has made a positive contribution to Houston, Harris County, and Texas beyond imagination. It has enriched and inspired. Not bad for a bunch of cowboys, now is it, Mr. Sartwelle?

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Charles R. “Butch” Robinson, in his first year of his term as Chairman of the Board, has been an outstanding leader. New records have been established in several major categories.

On “Go Tejano Day” in 2009, Ramon Ayala and Alacranes Musical set a new all-time paid Rodeo attendance record of 74,147 fans.

Presidents of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo

1932-1948 James W. Sartwelle
1949-1951 Albert W. Lee
1952-1954 Ralph A. Johnston
1955-1957 Archer Romero
1964-1966 H. Stuart Lang, Jr.
1967-1969 Louis M. Pearce, Jr.
1970-1972 M. C. “Buddy” Bray
1973-1975 Tommie Vaughn
1976-1978 N. W. “Dick” Freeman
1982-1984 E. Norwin Gearhart
1985-1987 Dr. Joseph T. Ainsworth
1988-1990 Hal Hillman
1991-1993 Dick Graves
1994-1996 Don Jordan
1997-1999 Jim Bloodworth
2000-2003* P. Michael Wells
2003-2005 John O. Smith
2006-2008 Paul G. Somerville
2009-2011 Charles R. “Butch” Robinson

*Wells became the last elected president. Subsequently, the Chairman of the Board became the top elected official.

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