

# The Trail Rides: The Oldest and The Longest

By: Ernesto Valdés

*Today, spectators still line the highway watching the riders converge on the city.*

All Photos and trail ride map are courtesy of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo unless otherwise noted.

Along the Gulf Coast, the weather in the month of February cannot seem to make up its mind to be cold or wet—or worse, cold and wet. It is probably a cruel coincidence that February was the month chosen as the time for the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. On the other hand, one of the purposes of the Show is to allow Houstonians to step out of their modern life style and to relive, as closely as one chooses, a historical era that helped mold our Texas heritage and mystique. The coincidence of choosing February as the time to begin the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo and its trail rides is that its name comes from the Latin phrase *februariolus menisis*, “month of purification.” Although that “purification” may not register with all Houstonians, certainly the riders feel the “purification” from modern niceties and the daily routines as they ride through the weather, in all manner of discomfort including sore “extremities.” Still, the recurring

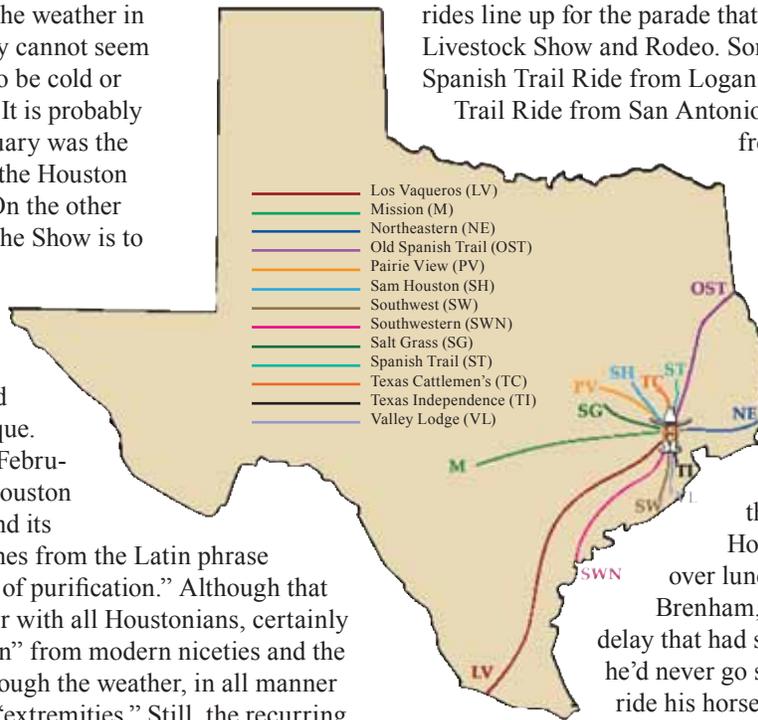


John Warnasch, Emil Marks, Pat Flaherty, and Reese Lockett (left to right) enjoyed the adventure of the first Salt Grass Trail Ride in 1952. No one could have imagined at that time what they had started.

response is that it was a lot of fun!

Implicit in this annual region-wide celebration are the cultural roots that remind us of the city’s birth expressed in the trail rides that begin in some thirteen cities and towns throughout the Texas Gulf Coast and make their trek to Houston riding horseback, buckboards, and covered wagons. The first trail ride begins early in February, 386 miles away in the border town of Hidalgo, Texas. Later, the other trail rides begin on a staggered schedule, timed so that they all arrive in Houston’s Memorial Park on the same day. The following day, the trail

rides line up for the parade that officially opens the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. Some of the major rides are the Old Spanish Trail Ride from Logansport, Louisiana; the Mission Trail Ride from San Antonio, Texas; Sam Houston Trail Ride from Montgomery County; and Prairie View Trail Ride from Hempstead, Texas.



### The Salt Grass Trail Ride

The granddaddy of them all is the ninety mile long Salt Grass Trail Ride from Cat Springs that began in 1952 as a dare. Like so many Texas events, the history of the Salt Grass Trail began in the Cork Room of the Shamrock Hotel where one afternoon in 1952 over lunch, Reese Lockett, then mayor of Brenham, was complaining of a weather delay that had stranded him in Florida. “He said he’d never go so far away again that he couldn’t ride his horse back,” Maudeen Marks, daughter of rancher Emil Marks, recalled.

Someone at the table responded, “Reece, you couldn’t ride your horse from Brenham to Houston.” The gauntlet had been thrown down and the challenge accepted.<sup>1</sup>

In an article for the *Houston Chronicle*, Maudeen Marks remembered, “Reese said he had driven cattle all the way to the Salt Grass in winter time and, yes, he could ride from Brenham.”<sup>2</sup> That, of course, ignited all sorts of discussions and when all the bravado died down the ground was set for the Salt Grass Trail Ride. In winter months of the 1900’s, when ranches were open-range, cattlemen drove their herds of longhorns from Hempstead to the green nutritious salt grasses along the gulf coast. Accompanying them were cowboys and wagons that would pick up the calves when they tired. Converging on the gulf grasslands were other herds from as far away as Orange County and Brownsville. From November to February cattle were branded as they grazed and intermingled with other herds. At the end of the season the cowboys helped each other cut out their respective herds and began the trek home.

In February 1952, timed to arrive for opening day of the Houston Fat Stock Show, two horsemen, Mayor Reese Lockett and Emil Marks rode into town accompanied by two “wag- oneers.” John Warnasch, a hand from the LH7 Ranch, drove a wagon pulled by a pair of mules, and Pat Flaherty, a reporter from KPRC, rode in a second wagon sitting on a pillow nailed to the bench. This group of Salt Grass Riders drew a lot of attention and was enough to spark the interest of many others.

Two years later there were 100 riders, then 300, followed by 500 people on horseback settling into Memorial Park at the end of the trail. People lined the highways to watch the riders pass by as they made their way to the city. Today there are some 2,000 folks on horseback and 50 wagons.

### Los Vaqueros Trail Ride

In 1974 Larry Ramirez, who loved riding horses, decided that he might enjoy participating in one of the trail rides that converged on Houston during the Livestock Show and Rodeo. Since no Hispanic trail ride was currently in existence, he decided to



*As the trail rides began catching on, even those who did not participate in the ride, enjoyed the view—lining the trails, watching the riders making their way into the city.*

ride with the Southern Trail Ride that went from Bay City to Houston at that time. Later, he proposed his idea for a Hispanic trail ride to Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo officials who approved his suggestion. When he was asked where he was going to start the ride, Ramirez answered, “Mexico.” The next logical question was what part of Mexico? Ramirez explained: “I didn’t want to start from Brownsville, and I didn’t want to start in Laredo, so that’s the reason I started in Hidalgo, the center part of it [the border].”<sup>23</sup>

He named his trail ride “Los Vaqueros,” or the cowboys, and initially chose to start in Reynosa, Mexico, just across the border from Hidalgo, Texas, and 386 miles away from Houston. But he did not foresee the complications and time-consuming requirements of crossing an international border with a line of wagons and horsemen. Ramirez quickly solved that problem the following year by starting from Hidalgo. As it turned out, this made the trail ride the longest in distance and time (three weeks), two facts of which Ramirez is proud.

When asked why he wanted the trail ride to start from such a distant point, Ramirez replied, “It was just something different. I could have started in San Antonio . . . or Dallas . . . or anywhere in Texas, but since I called it Los Vaqueros, I figured it would be appropriate to start at the border.” Coincidentally, this decision echoes early centuries of Texas history when the European colonists from East Texas and the upper Gulf Coast of Texas were educated about the land by the colonists from Mexico who brought the ranching culture and the livestock—mustangs and longhorns—that have become Texas icons.

In addition to giving Ramirez the opportunity to ride his horse, the ride had another more practical purpose—it allowed him and his family time to share an endeavor that required cooperation to attain a common goal, i.e., family togetherness. Today Los Vaqueros trail ride is comprised of his children, grandchildren, and extended members of the family as well as other families who participate in the unique experience of the trail ride. David Ramirez, Larry’s son and now the trail boss, says that his father used to take the whole family fishing until he became interested in the trail ride. “Ever since I was twelve years old, he would bring us along on the trail rides. It kept us



*The trail rides compete for a trophy designating the best trail ride in each of three divisions--small, medium, and large--based on the number of riders. Judges observe the participants to be sure they are adhering to the Western heritage and take off points for tennis shoes, baseball caps, and t-shirts. As this group demonstrates, every trail ride wants to look its best for the parade.*

out of trouble and off the streets, and it helped us get his and my mom’s guidance our whole lives. We learned a lot of respect and discipline with a lot of family values and morals. Every single weekend there was a trail ride—I mean every single weekend. My daddy didn’t miss a trail ride for nothing. Now with our children we ride the Houston Show and Rodeo every year and we have fun.”

The logistics of this lengthy trail ride would be seemingly overwhelming were it not for the fact that the ride is made up, for the most part, of families, each of which is responsible for their own creature comforts, including food and shelter. At any given time the number of people on the trail ranges from eighty to one hundred. Aside from families, occasionally individual riders from other states journey to join the Vaqueros. “Very seldom do we get a guy riding by himself but we met a guy, Kevin Bowen, in Pierce, Texas, who asked if he could ride with us. ‘I heard about your trail ride and wanted to come out. I traveled over 1,000 miles to get here.’ So we invited him to join us. He said he’d really enjoyed the trip and told us he’d be back next year.”

Aside from the family fun and camaraderie, members of Los Vaqueros are involved with a lot of charitable work for handicapped children. Early on, they laid the foundation for “Go Tejano” segments of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo program by organizing a committee of Mexican Americans whose goal was to raise money for those less fortunate Mexican American students who could not afford to go to college. Later the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo broadened their scholarship program to help a wider range of students in the Texas Gulf Coast area.



ABOVE: Cowboy superstar Gene Autry led the 1942 Fat Stock Show parade down Main Street. Following behind is Reese Lockett, who organized the first rodeo and parade in 1938. To the right is W. Albert Lee, the second president of the Show. Photo courtesy of Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, at the University of Texas at Austin.



*A covered wagon winds through the streets of downtown Houston—reminding Houstonians of their heritage.*

### *The Grand Finale*

The thirteen trail rides from across Texas and Louisiana converge at Memorial Park where they prepare for the annual parade. Much has changed since 1952 to accommodate the logistics of such a large crowd. In 2006, Memorial Park required one hundred volunteers to direct the riders, sixty port-a-cans, thirty trash dumpsters, four ninety-kilowatt generators, two water trucks, and twenty-six travel trailers for committee members. Despite the size and no matter what the weather, the general consensus echoes the words of Yance Montalbano a trail ride committee chairman standing in the rain who said, “It’s been great. We have a good time. It’s been a little wet, but the spirits are still bright.”<sup>4</sup>

Thousands of people line the city streets to welcome the riders as they parade through downtown Houston—the grand finale at the end of the long trail. The parade winds through the modern buildings that stand juxtaposed to the horses, covered wagons, and mule-drawn buckboards from a not too distant past. In addition to the 6,000 riders, the parade includes 7,000 horses, approximately twenty floats, fifteen marching bands, huge helium balloons, Color Guard, rodeo officials, the mayor, senators, and representatives. The trail rides share several common purposes, the uniqueness comes from what each rider gains from the days on the trail—that, of course, is personal and perhaps beyond words.<sup>5</sup>

**Ernesto Valdés** has a B.A. from Trinity University, a J.D. from South Texas College of Law, and an M.A. in Public History. He serves as Director for the Oral History Project in the Center for Public History at the University of Houston.