

The Williams Lake Stampede

History of the Stampede

Because the Cariboo Wagon Road built to the Gold Fields of Barkerville in 1861 bypassed Williams Lake, this small collection of ranches was a sleepy place until word was received that the Pacific Great Eastern Railway would be coming through Williams Lake. As the rails were laid down on the other side of the lake, it was considered great cause for celebration and somehow it got around that there would be a big get together and a day of cowboy sports. People began to arrive from miles away and camped with tents and wagons on the old Pinchbeck ranch property, now the site of the Stampede Grounds.



Photo courtesy Jesse Madden/CCCTA

At the time there was no proper arena, only open fields and corrals, but cowboys from surrounding ranches were eager to participate in roping, riding and racing their horses against each other. All that night, folks visited and danced up at the ranch house, the precursor for all Stampede dances that have followed.

The Stampede is Born

Within months the Premier's engineers had laid out the streets of the new village to be and people had begun to swarm into the valley, among them the new banker and his clerk for the Bank of Commerce. Though their bank was nothing more than a shack too small to fit a safe and had only been built in the fall of 1919, they had discovered that if they were identified with everything that 'came along' it was very beneficial to their ability to pick up new customers and get them to open savings accounts. As a result, they were keen to push for three days of horse racing and cowboy sports for the following year, (1920) finding that being associated with such good times was very good for business. Thus, the Williams Lake Stampede was born.



Photo courtesy Ria vander Klis



Photo courtesy Laureen Carruthers

While the Stampede remained a small amateur rodeo, it didn't lack for danger. Racing in any form was a popular event and there were several including the 'War Bonnet' Race, Pony Express, Chariot Racing and the Roman Race where riders ran the race standing on the backs of two horses.

The most dangerous race of all was the famed Mountain Race down 'Suicide Hill'. Only eight riders could fit at a time on top of a ridge and horses and riders would plunge down 300 feet through a narrow gully, fight their way through brush, fallen logs and stones to another ridge and down yet another gully to the bottom where they leaped the Cariboo Road and raced the last quarter mile to the Stampede Grounds.

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