

The Williams Lake Stampede

The Dances

Nearly as famous as the events during the day were the dances at night that often went on over a week's period of time and going all night long. It didn't take long for the original ranch house to be filled to capacity so alternatives were found. Sometimes a tent covered pavilion housed the dance floor, sometimes a large warehouse.

Numerous Natives from around the area would come into Williams Lake for the Stampede, the young men to compete, the families to visit, but there was not a place for them to go or have entertainment at night, so in 1947 the Stampede Committee, ever on the lookout for more ways to make money, commissioned an open air dance hall to be built. It became a popular place for everyone from VIP's to Rodeo Queens until later in the 70's when outsiders instigated violent clashes and disturbances and the place was burned to the ground in 1975.



Photo courtesy Greg Sabatino/WL Tribune

Wagons and Outriders

For up to a week before the Stampede started, you could see horses and wagons streaming in from outlying areas as far away as 200 miles, loaded with women and children and Elders, outriders on saddle horses prancing along beside them. A huge tent encampment would spring up around the Stampede grounds where ranchers, cowboys and families slept where they could over the several days of competition and festivities.



Photo courtesy Erin Hitchcock/WL Tribune

At night you could see the wink of many campfires, hear music and laughing in the dark. During the day people watched the rodeo events from the corrals or the hillside that ringed the grounds until bleachers were eventually built for folks to sit on and so that admission could be charged as the Stampede grew.



Photo courtesy Erin Hitchcock/WL Tribune

Professional Rodeo

Today the Williams Lake Stampede is a highly professional event and is considered one of the best in Canada. Competitors arrive from all over Canada and the US to participate in bareback and saddle bronc riding as well as the ever dangerous Bull riding, steer wrestling, barrel racing, roping, and many other sanctioned rodeo events. Racing is still a favorite with spectators and organizers make sure there's a race of some sort. The perennial favorite, the Mountain Race, still exists in a less dangerous form and there's still the pony chariot race, chuckwagon race and wild horse race. Held on the first weekend of every July, the Stampede generally runs for four days and includes a parade, pancake breakfasts, barbecue dinners and dances. A Rodeo Queen and her Princesses, and the Cariboo Cowgirls, a precision drill team wowing the audience on horseback, kick off the Stampede events.

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