

Book Review: Mitchel P. Roth, *Convict Cowboys: The Untold History of the Texas Prison Rodeo*. Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2016. ISBN: 9781574416527 (Hardback). 436 Pages. \$32.95

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In his book, *Convict Cowboys*, criminal justice historian Mitchel P. Roth analyzed thousands of pages of archival data and conducted extensive face-to-face interviews in order to tell the story of the Texas Prison Rodeo (TPR), a tradition which began in 1931 and would continue every October (except 1943) for the next 55 years. Roth contends that Americans have always had a fascination with correctional facilities, an observation which has been made by other scholars (Ross 2015; Welch 2015). He refers to this as “prison tourism” and argues this phenomenon dates back to 1839, when up to 7,000 people per year paid 25 cents (roughly eight dollars today) to visit New York State’s Auburn Prison. In its early years, TPR, which was also referred to as “The Battle of the Outlaws,” attracted considerable public attention, not solely because it featured inmate performers but also because it paid homage to cowboys and the Wild West, a subject matter that has traditionally been of interest to Americans and particularly to Texans.

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Although many historians, most notably Robert Perkinson (2010), have written extensively about Texas's convict leasing system, Roth begins the story of the TPR by pointing to a 1927 state constitutional amendment passed by the 40th Legislature, which essentially removed politics from the penal system. As a result of this amendment, a new prison board, which consisted of nine private citizens, was created. The board, along with an appointed general manager, controlled the Texas prison system and its vast properties. Roth asserts that it was this unification and consolidation that would, indeed, help to set the stage for creation of the TPR four years later. With the establishment of the prison board, a new organizational culture would flourish, one that would value both prison athletics and legitimate recreational opportunities for inmates.

Though the first TPR in 1931 was a modest affair, at which only 10 to 15 convicts performed in front of 200 spectators, Marshall Lee Simmons, the Texas Prison System general manager, quickly realized that it had the potential to generate revenue that could be used for rehabilitation programs that the Texas legislature would not support. Roth argues that correctional administrators made plans for future prison rodeos to take place in October, when the Texas heat was usually in retreat. Also, it was decided that Sundays would be the best day to hold rodeos, since this was typically regarded as a day of rest and leisure for most inmates. Interestingly, the Texas Prison System general manager realized fairly quickly that it would be crucial to gain the support of local religious leaders; therefore, he sought and received the blessing of every preacher to hold the rodeo on a Sunday.

According to the book, in the early years of the TPR, correctional officers and local peace officers were given free passes while outside visitors were expected to pay an admission fee of 25 cents for children and 50 cents for adults. Nevertheless, this was a very low price, especially since similar rodeos typically charged \$1 for adults. In its seventh year, the TPR began to offer reserved seating for one dollar; however, the author leads the reader to believe that this was done primarily as a way for management to accommodate repeated requests for reserved seating arrangements. By this time, the rodeo had approximately 30,000 visitors, with 2,800 of them being inmates (which was roughly 44% of the entire Texas prison population). Only inmates with good conduct records were permitted to travel under the watchful eye of the Texas Highway Patrol to Huntsville to attend the rodeo. It was around this same time that a new prisoner classification system was

established in order to enhance safety and institutional security (Trulson and Marquart 2009).

In his book, Roth notes that in its early years, the TPR permitted inmates of all races to compete. As the author explains, this is nothing short of extraordinary given that “during the 1930s, racial segregation was a fact of life almost everywhere in America; everywhere that is, except for the TPR arena” (98). Around this time, African American prisoners comprised roughly 40% of the inmate population and were overrepresented in prisons by a rate of three times their statewide population (see Perkinson 2010). In addition to competing for cash prizes, African American inmates also sang in the rodeo choir (known as the “Cotton Pickers’ Glee Club”) and performed as rodeo clowns. The first (and only) convict cowboy to die from injuries sustained in the prison rodeo was H. P. Rich, an African American prisoner, who was thrown from a steer and dragged around on the ground before the other riders could come to his rescue. The author asserts that little news coverage was devoted to this incident and opines that this may have been because of the inmate’s race.

Even though prison officials declared that many of the inmate contestants were seasoned performers who had competed in outside rodeo shows, Roth argues that inmates rarely had true cowboy experience, with the exception of those who worked as farmhands prior to their incarceration. Given the contestants’ lack of experience, it is not surprising that inmate convict cowboys had to pass a physical exam and sign a release in order to absolve the prison system of any potential liability. In spite of the potential danger, many inmates eagerly auditioned for a chance to perform in the TPR. Roth suggests that prisoners may have been motivated to participate for the chance to win prize money, which could often be substantial. He asserts that convict cowboys were also given “day money,” which could be used to purchase items in the commissary. For example, at the ninth annual TPR in 1940, “each rider was guaranteed three dollars per day...as they competed for even more prize lucre while proudly garbed in traditional cowboy regalia” (109).

While the TPR initially had the approval of local religious leaders, beginning in the 1940s, several of the state’s largest religious denominations became disenchanted with the rodeo and urged the Texas Prison Board to abolish it. Roth maintains that these groups were critical of the fact that the rodeo occurred on a Sunday. According to the book, some of these religious groups went as far as to petition the governor to hold the rodeo on weekdays rather than on a day of worship.

Nevertheless, initially little was done to placate religious critics, and tens of thousands of patrons continued to attend the Sunday rodeos from virtually every part of the United States. The TPR, in fact, began to generate a substantial amount of money that was used to fund ventures integral to the lives of inmates. Ironically, Bibles, hymn books, and Sunday school lessons were even purchased with rodeo-generated dollars. According to Roth, the October 1941 rodeo would add \$50,000 to the prisoner welfare fund. This is, indeed, substantial, considering that a brand new Ford pickup could be purchased during this time for around \$625.

According to the book, inmate escape attempts rarely occurred at the TPR. The author, in fact, suggests that civilians were often more likely to create trouble than the prisoners, who were seated together in a large cage with oversized chicken wire. Indeed, some inmates even worked as peanut and soda vendors, ushers, ticket sellers, and stock boys. As the author insightfully observes, there is little doubt that visitors paid not only to watch the rodeo but to experience the thrill of being in close proximity to hardened convicts. Inmates seemed to sense this and often lived up to their stereotypes by scowling at female patrons or booing each time a uniformed police officer entered the stands. Surprisingly, it was also not uncommon for former prisoners (also known as “Texas exes”) to frequent the rodeos. Roth contends that these individuals were particularly known for wreaking havoc from the free world grandstands and would often toss coins, bills, and tobacco to the inmate performers.

In its 55-year history, the TPR was held outside of Huntsville only once. As it states in the book, the 20th rodeo was held at the Texas State Fair in 1950 and proved to be quite successful. Roth notes that advance ticket sales alone generated \$30,000, more than any other attraction in the Texas State Fair history, besides *Annie Get Your Gun* in 1947. Though the rodeo was a financial success, it was a daunting task for correctional officials to transport almost 150 convict cowboys (11 of whom were serving life sentences) to Dallas. As the author asserts, the inmate performers were escorted by a caravan of 25 police vehicles. Also, as a special precaution, a double fence was built around the arena, and shotgun-toting guards were stationed throughout the facility. Although there was heightened security at the 20th TPR, Roth points out that “nothing contrasted more with the prison regime than the quality of chow consumed by the trucked-in convicts, especially that first Friday night as they feasted on fried chicken, mashed potatoes, cream gravy, peas, salad, ice cream, cake, and coffee and milk—more akin to a last meal on death row than the normal prison fare (177).

Although much of the South was racially segregated during the postwar 1950s, the author argues that the prison rodeo continued to be perhaps the only competitive sport in Texas that encouraged African Americans to compete side-by-side with Caucasian performers. In fact, of all the convict cowboys ever to grace the stage of the TPR, “Daredevil O’Neal Browning,” an African American inmate, would become the most successful, winning the coveted Top Hand prize not once, but seven times. As it states in the book, Browning competed for 30 years and became a bona fide TPR legend. Even after suffering a broken leg from a bull ride in 1970, he managed to show up only one week later (on a brace of crutches) and ride in the prison rodeo. It is, indeed, fitting that African Americans were permitted to participate in the early prison rodeos, especially when one considers that they were crucial to the success of cattle drives in the late 19th century, a fact that is not lost on Roth. The author even suggests that at the pinnacle of the trail drive era, as many as 25% of the 35,000 cowboys who took part may have been African American. This is one of many examples throughout the book where the author employs a unique historical methodology to examine the underpinnings of Southern culture and the cowboy mystique.

According to Roth, at the January, 1959 Board of Corrections meeting, one of the first orders of business was the resolution to hire a talent agent to book celebrity appearances for the prison rodeo. As it states in the book, the talent agent was paid from the Inmate Educational and Recreational Fund (E&R Fund), which was perceived by board members as a “calculated risk” to attract more spectators to the prison rodeo. The 1959 show featured country music singer Johnny Cash, who was paid \$2,000 to make an appearance. Also, Steve McQueen, who was at the time an up-and-coming actor on the Western television show *Wanted Dead or Alive*, appeared at the 1959 show for \$1,500. The following year, John Wayne made a guest appearance on the fourth Sunday in October at the 1960 TPR. Wayne appeared pro bono (after learning that he was to be paid from the prisoner’s E&R Fund) and reportedly showed up to the rodeo inebriated, refusing to shake hands with any of the inmates. In a letter between the oil tycoon and Chair of the Texas Board of Corrections, Pete Coffield, and the soon-to-be Director of the Department of Corrections, Dr. George Beto, the movie star’s visit to the TPR was described as follows: “Wayne was like a fleeting deer when here...As usual, full of Hootch—only stayed 1 ½ hours, but he did bring us some business, and that was all we wanted anyway” (238).

One of the joys of reading *Convict Cowboys* is that Roth includes excerpts from private correspondence, which is now publicly available

through the George Beto Collection at Sam Houston State University. The author even provides readers with humorous, albeit slightly inappropriate, written exchanges that occurred between Coffield and Beto. For example, when Candy Barr, a voluptuous and buxom inmate, made her first appearance at the TPR, Beto (who was also a Lutheran minister) wrote to Coffield and playfully inquired whether Candy put on a private show for the board members. As Roth observes, Candy Barr “proved to be a topic of jovial conversation among Beto, Coffield, and their confidants, and whenever she performed there was sure to be good-natured badinage between the old friends” (240). Indeed, Candy Barr captured the attention of virtually all the male spectators (especially the inmates) when she made her debut singing performance with backup from the Goree Girls Band. Even though the ex-stripper received one of the biggest standing ovations in the history of the TPR, Roth maintains that Barr only agreed to sing on the condition that she be permitted to work in the prison library. After being released from the Texas prison system, Candy Barr was in demand and made frequent appearances throughout the Hollywood night club circuit. Nevertheless, the author notes that Ms. Barr still found time to sing at the rodeo, making her “only the second former TPR convict performer to return as a free world attraction” (245).

In 1962, George Beto became the director of the Texas Department of Corrections and was responsible for managing 12,190 inmates in 13 correctional facilities. While his friend and mentor, Pete Coffield, had an affinity for the TPR, Beto had a love-hate relationship with it at best. As one of Roth’s interview subjects stated, Beto adamantly believed that the “state should pay for stuff the rodeo paid for” (252). Because the TPR generated profits, which were deposited into the Inmate E&R Fund, the legislature was likely prevented from providing more resources to the prison system. At times, the rodeo also proved to be an unwanted distraction for Beto, who preferred to spend his energies working to slowly desegregate the inmate population and hire African American correctional officers (also see Horton and Nielsen 2005). Aside from the logistical challenges of transporting inmates to and from the rodeo, prison officials also had to contend with wild convict cowboys who often had a proclivity toward gambling and drinking homemade chock beer. In fact, even the injured performers posed security risks, as many made every effort to smuggle narcotics and barbiturates out of the prison hospital. According to the author, the director’s wife, Marilyn, was also extremely busy every year during the TPR. As noted in the book, Mrs. Beto spent countless hours entertaining guests who dropped by the

mansion before and after each rodeo and even put her tailor skills to work by fixing costumes or sewing buttons when the need arose. Roth writes, “like her husband, she was not overly enthusiastic once October rolled around each year and would invariably check the calendar to see whether there were four or five Sundays that particular October” (255).

Prior to the 1960s, prison officials were able to operate with virtually no outside interference. However, 1964 marks the beginning of what prison legal scholars refer to as the “hands-on doctrine,” when the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Cooper v. Pate*, gave prisoners the right to sue state officials in federal court (Smith 2015). As a result of this landmark ruling, inmate writ-writers aggressively challenged the status quo of the Texas prison system throughout the late 1960s and 1970s. Given this, it is unsurprising that the Prison Board began to devote less and less attention to the TPR and instead focused on managing the turmoil surrounding various inmate lawsuits. Roth contends that during this same period, there was a sharp decline in Western-themed entertainment across America. For example, by the 1970s, network executives made few attempts to launch new Western television series. Instead, Americans were becoming consumed by the glam world of the disco movement, which was attributed to the success of films such as *Saturday Night Fever*.

As it states in the book, in the early 1980s, prison officials began to discuss ending the TPR. One of the board members suggested that the rodeo cost more than previously believed and may have even resulted in a cash loss. Also, even though inmate performers continued to sign release forms, it became questionable whether they would actually protect the prison system from lawsuits if an offender was seriously injured. During 1984 and 1985, Texas correctional facilities also became extremely violent, with 52 inmates being murdered and 700 stabbed. Indeed, there was more violence in this two-year period than during the entire previous decade (also see Marquart and Crouch 1985). Not surprisingly, some prison officials began to believe that the rodeo carried enormously high liability and security risks. On top of this, there was the very real possibility that animal rights groups would soon create problems for the prison system, as virtually every rodeo since the 1930s featured injuries to livestock. When engineers declared that the rodeo stadium was unsafe, this proved to be the straw that broke the camel’s back, and the rodeo soon came to an end. The final TPR was held in 1986, marking the end of a 55-year tradition.

Convict Cowboys is a must-read for anyone who is interested in topics ranging from prisons and punishment to Texas history to popular culture

to the sociology of sports. The author includes several intriguing facts throughout the book, which readers will enjoy immensely. For example, I was interested to learn that country music icon Johnny Cash played at the TPR more than a decade before recording his legendary live prison albums at Folsom and San Quentin. *Convict Cowboys* is likely to resonate with scholars who are both critical and supportive of the mass incarceration movement. At times, Roth condemns the Texas Prison System (as he should) for some of its egregious practices involving inmates. Yet, the author is fair. Although Roth is certainly not an apologist for Texas prison officials, he does credit them for using the TPR as a means to provide inmates with recreational, educational, and rehabilitation programs that the state legislature simply would not pay for. Anyone who picks up a copy of Mitchel Roth's latest work is likely to finish it within a couple of days. *Convict Cowboys* is, without question, one of the finest academic books I have read within the past several years, and I am delighted to recommend it to others.

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