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2014 – Flint Hills Land, Sky, and People (Cathy Hoy, Jim Hoy, Marty White, Editors)

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Jim Hoy

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Recommended Citation

Hoy, Jim (2014). "Open to the World: Countryman's Rodeo," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*.
<https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2014/people/8>

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The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

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Open to the World: Countryman's Rodeo

For many years to residents of Chase, Butler, and Greenwood counties, the Fourth of July and Countryman's Rodeo were synonymous. Many Flint Hills pasturemen, like the Pinkston brothers of Bazaar, were on horseback in a pasture every day of the week from mid-April until all the steers had been shipped in October—every day except for one and that day was the Fourth when they went to Countryman's Rodeo.

Wilber Countryman's rodeo grew out of the Cassoday rodeos, which trace back to roping and riding contests at Fourth of July celebrations in 1906 and 1907. These contests continued to be staged sporadically at Cassoday, known then as the Cow Capital of Kansas (and now as the Prairie Chicken Capital of the World), for the next quarter century, but the real string of Cassoday rodeos began in 1932, inspired by the big professional rodeos that were part of El Dorado's later Kaffir Corn Carnivals. Some of the locals got together and built pens, an arena, and a dance platform in a pasture bordering the town on the southwest. They gathered some cows, calves, and bucking horses and put out the word to area cowboys. For the next several years Cassoday had a Fourth of July rodeo. Contestants came from all over Butler and surrounding counties, as well as from Oklahoma and New Mexico.



Saturday Evening Post
Courtesy Gene Countryman

In 1938, Wilber Countryman took over the Cassoday Rodeo and moved it to his ranch half a dozen miles southwest of town. That first year's competition was a little unorganized. As it came time for the rodeo to start, Wilber gathered the cowboys together and said something on the order of "Okay, now, what are we going to do here? Who's going to rope calves and who's going to ride broncs?" The following year he filled out the program with other

events—bulldogging, bull riding, ribbon roping, and wild cow milking.

The extra-large, native-sod rodeo arena was located in the midst of a section pasture, which also held his house and ranch buildings. The area immediately in front of the chutes was soon worn down to dirt by the hooves of bucking stock and was littered with small flint rocks. Ticket takers were stationed at the cattle guards on the south and the north entrances to the pasture. Wilber

kept part of his Hereford cow herd here, along with fifteen or twenty brahma bucking bulls, some bulldogging steers, and thirty or forty broncs.

Two of Wilber's broncs are particularly memorable to me. One was a bareback bronc that usually threw his rider, after which he would be saddled in the arena and used to rope a calf. The other was Flying Saucer, a gray saddle bronc ridden only a couple of times in his long career. I came close to riding him in 1962, bucking off just at the whistle. It was so close that one judge marked the ride, but the other didn't. Good as Saucer was, he didn't have the fame of Saturday Evening Post, a dun-colored brahma that was a run-of-the-mill bucking bull until his photograph appeared in that magazine in a 1957 article about the Flint Hills. Seemingly the bull was inspired by this national exposure, and for the next ten years he was virtually unrideable.

Future world champions, such as saddle-bronc riders Bobby Berger and John McBeth, got their starts at

Countryman's, as did steer roper Sonny Worrell. Countryman's Rodeo was not sanctioned by the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, but was "Open to the World," and top area ropers and riders, such as Kurley and Don Hebb, Ernie Love, Don Berger, Benny Thompson, Johnny Farnsworth, and my uncle, Marshall Hoy, often competed there. Three of these cowboys (Bobby Berger, McBeth, and Worrell) are in the PRCA Hall of Fame, and they, along with Love and Hoy, are all members of the Kansas Cowboy Hall of Fame.

Early on rodeo morning Wilber, his hired hands, and anyone else who wanted to join in would ride out to the far side of the section pasture and round up the stock, drive them into the arena pens, and sort out whatever horses, cows, calves, and bulls were needed, then turn the others back out. My sister Rita and I would be up early on the Fourth, get our chores done, and be on our horses riding the half dozen or so miles to Countryman's in the early morning

light. We would ride past the stockyards at Aikman, then cross the railroad near Cornwell's, and enter Countryman's pasture through the high pole gate on the west side just in time to help gather.

After the rodeo was over, some of the cowboys would let kids like me and Al Plummer and Richard Young try to ride the roping calves. They would run a calf into the roping chute, put a pigging string around its middle for us to hang onto, and open the gate. We got our first taste of rodeo (and of dirt) on those calves.

The last Countryman Rodeo was held in 1968, but that's not the end of the story.

In 1993, Wilber was attending the Flint Hills Rodeo at Strong City.

Following the grand entry, the announcer pointed out E.C. Roberts, founder of that rodeo, who was sitting in the bleachers. Someone told the announcer that Wilber Countryman, who used to have a big Fourth of July rodeo on his ranch, was sitting beside Emmett. The announcer, misunderstanding, then introduced

Wilber: "Sitting next to Mr. Roberts is Wilber Countryman, who is going to have a big rodeo on his ranch this Fourth of July."

For the next month Wilber got dozens of phone calls and inquiries about the rodeo. It got so bad that he took out ads in several area newspapers saying that he was not having a rodeo. And when the Fourth came, he left home for the day so that he wouldn't have to explain to people who came there why there wasn't any rodeo. Even a quarter of a century after it had last been held, Countryman's Rodeo was a powerful force in the folk memory of the Flint Hills.

Adapted from *Flint Hills Cowboys*.

Jim Hoy, reared on a ranch near Cassoday, was inducted into the Kansas Cowboy Hall of Fame in 2004. He is a Professor of English and Director of the Center for Great Plains Studies at Emporia State University. His books on ranching history and folklife include Cowboys and Kansas, Flint Hills Cowboys, and Cowboys Lament: A Life on the Open Range. His PhD is from the University of Missouri.