



Above: Canadian Indians and American Cowboys at the 1939 Show
Right: Canadian Indians arriving in Sydney for the 1939 Show

When the Wild West came to town



Real live cowboys, cowgirls and Indians at the Show in the 1930s? Sure. All the way from the USA and Canada, they thrilled the local crowds.

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When the Royal Agricultural Society of NSW (RAS) scours the world for the latest and greatest acts to bring to the Main Arena at the Sydney Royal Easter Show, it's largely done with the click of a mouse, through specialist entertainment websites and YouTube videos. But in July 1938 when two RAS representatives were sent to North America to bring back ideas and secure new acts, the task was epic. Fifteen weeks and 29,000 miles later, Councillor TB MacFarlane and Assistant Secretary AV Skidmore returned, having signed up a package for the 1939 Show of the best trick

riders, rough riders and rodeo stars ever seen. It was the 'high noon' of a decade of Western style entertainment which had been growing in appeal. The novelties of an America which was brash and energetic were increasingly welcomed to our shores.

The trip which MacFarlane and Skidmore made in the shadow of war was really born out of an earlier gloom – the Great Depression. By 1931 Australian farmers and graziers were severely affected, and with the business sector also reeling, the RAS was hit on all sides. New and interesting features at the Show were urgently

needed to lure people through the gates. The Society looked particularly at improving ring events and so introduced rodeo, with campdrafting following a few years later.

These innovations proved popular, but when the RAS swooped opportunistically to persuade half a dozen American stars from a touring Wild West troupe to stay on for the 1935 Show, they struck gold. The three cowboys, two Indians and one cowgirl were all champions of the US rodeo circuit and had appeared as actors and stunt riders in Hollywood Western films – then hugely popular with Australian audiences. The

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combination of real daring and skill, mixed with the exoticism of Hollywood, was irresistible to the press and public alike, and from that point on, overseas acts were brought out each year.

By 1938, up to 60,000 people packed the stands at night glued to the action. 'Suicide' Ted Elder and his trick-rope thrower wife, Pearl, were the main drawcards, along with Jasbo Fulkerton, the cowboy clown. Jasbo, rodeo's first barrel-man, was the best clown in the business. He rode bulls backwards and grabbed steers by the tail, hanging on while being dragged around the ring on his face.

'Suicide' Ted, most famous for jumping from one horse to another over an automobile going 60 miles per hour, did a wounded cowboy act which apparently drew unstinting applause, as much for the intelligence of the horse as for its rider.

As the appreciative audience well knew, the riders who so entertained them were only as good as their mounts. These were local horses, procured by MacFarlane, and trained by the visitors on his property at Merriwa for six weeks prior to the Show. MacFarlane, who was pushing to professionalise rodeo in Australia, made the perfect host.



Above: Sioux Red Indians with a Canadian Mountie at the 1939 Show

Right (from top): Indian Pony Express Riders at the 1939 Show; Ted and Pearl Elder arriving in Sydney for the 1938 Show

The 1938 Show was a smashing success but it had to be topped. Moving swiftly, the RAS selected MacFarlane and Skidmore for the three month research tour to the United States and Canada to secure new entertainment, primarily equestrian. Additionally, they were to promote trade and tourism and publicise the activities of the RAS.

By train, they turned the rails hot, crossing the USA to attend state fairs and major rodeos, and meet with officials. Everywhere they went they handed out brochures about the RAS and New South Wales and were glad to do so. Americans, they were shocked to discover, were almost totally ignorant about Australia.

In New York the two men appraised the talent at the Madison Square Garden rodeo and visited the World's Fair, still under construction. It fired their imagination and they urged the RAS to consider staging a World's Fair wrapped around the Sydney Royal Easter Show in 1941 or 1942. It would be an exceptional opportunity, they believed, to develop the Showground, and for the Federal and State governments to launch a campaign drawing international attention to Australia. It was a big idea, perhaps too big for its time, but doomed in any case because of disturbing events unfolding in Germany. Already, the news had been worrying enough to prompt the two men to make tentative bookings should

an early passage home be necessary.

In Canada, MacFarlane and Skidmore's primary task had been to finalise a deal to bring eight Canadian Indians, or 'First Nations' people, out to perform and compete along with the other handpicked cowboys. The First Nations cowboys were all accomplished professional athletes. Joe Crowfoot and Joe Bear Robe were from the Blackfoot Reserve; Edward Onespot and Jim Starlight from the Sarcee Reserve; Frank Many Fingers and Joe Pine from the Blood Reserve; and Johnny Lefthand and Douglas Kootenay from the Stoney Reserve.

Escorted by a Royal Canadian Mountie, the party was contracted to appear in costume on arrival and live onsite during the Show in an Indian village comprising eight tipis which they were to bring with them. It was the Canadian officials who insisted on the staged historical pageantry, apparently to promote tourism. They also arranged for a consignment of beadwork to be sent for sale.

When the *SS Niagara* arrived on 11 March 1939 with the First Nations cowboys on board, Sydney turned out to greet them. After a civic reception on the steps of the Town Hall, the men travelled 245 miles by train to MacFarlane's property, to join in training with the Americans who had arrived earlier. Together they were treated to dinners and picnics and trips to neighbouring stations; photo opportunities for visiting pressmen abounded.

As always the cowgirls made great publicity. "Don't ask us if we like Australia," said one. "We are tired of saying 'yes' and meaning it. I think your country is wonderful ... and the people are so friendly and kind to us all."

The visitors were diplomatic, generously praising the horsemanship of their Australian counterparts, and the quality of the local horses. "Why," said cowgirl Ivadel Jacobs, "your horses actually think."

Returning to the city, the North Americans made countless public appearances and their images were used to advertise any number of products from nerve tonic to motor oil.

When the Show finally got underway, the innovations MacFarlane introduced from the States were well received. There were chuck wagon races, Indian bareback races and wild cow and wild horse races. Campdrafting and buckjumping attracted the biggest purses at the rodeo with first prizes of £100. Demonstrations included a musical quadrille on horseback called 'Dance of the Ranges', and the First Nations cowboys, in traditional dress, headed up the



Grand Parade. The flag which Frank Many Fingers held in the Parade remained in his family and was proudly carried again by a nephew at a Canadian rodeo in 1997.

The information and ideas which MacFarlane and Skidmore gathered on their trip were thought to be ample to invigorate the Show for several years to come. Now, with US rodeo contacts forged at the top level, the RAS need no longer rely on contracting individual competitors and performers; agents would export the very best in Western entertainment for the next decade.

Of course, it wasn't to be. The next Americans to make their mark on Australian shores were servicemen.

When the Show reopened after the war in 1947, the world had changed; grown up,

modernised. In Australia, poor battered Britain was still beloved, but the cultural slide towards America which had begun in the 'thirties was irreversible. So too was the trend towards the increasing professionalism of arena entertainment presented at the Show.

While rocket men and car eating robots have had their turn in the spotlight since, the appeal of skilled horsemanship has proved perennial, with the Man from Snowy River and similar performances continuing to enthral contemporary crowds. No longer the supporting acts, our own marvellous bush men and women take the centre of the ring. But let's not forget those visiting celebrities from the 1930s – 'Suicide' Ted and Pearl Elder, Jasbo, Frank Many Fingers, Joe Crowfoot and all the rest – who risked their necks to lift the spirits of Depression-era crowds. They sure could ride. ■

