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Casey Tibbs: "America's Most Beloved Cowboy"

John M. Duffy

In 1949, at the age of nineteen, South Dakotan Casey Tibbs became the youngest cowboy ever to earn the title of national saddle-bronc champion. Over the next decade, he went on to win a grand total of nineteen national bronc-riding championships, a record six Rodeo Cowboys Association saddle-bronc awards, and various titles at hundreds of smaller rodeos around the country. By 1955, about ten years after starting to ride competitively, Tibbs had established himself as the greatest bronc rider ever, a reputation that still stands today. Retiring from rodeo at the age of twenty-six, he went on to market his fame and good looks in Hollywood as an actor, stuntman, and director. A consummate promoter as well as competitor, Tibbs spent his later years staging western events around the world. His life was a rare ride filled with flamboyance and risk-taking, and his rise to fame coincided with a surge in the popularity of rodeo that catapulted him into superstardom. The rags-to-riches story of Tibbs, "America's most beloved cowboy,"[1] has become a South Dakota legend.

Casey Duane Tibbs was born on 5 March 1929 on a ranch on Mission Ridge in central South Dakota where his parents, John Tibbs and Florence Leggett Tibbs, and their nine other children raised horses. Home births were the only option for families living in the area, two days ride from the nearest hospital, especially on the muddy trails of early spring. Florence Tibbs almost died during the difficult birth of her last child, and family lore still recalls the midwife explaining to

1. "America's most beloved cowboy" is a term Tibbs used to identify himself and sought to promote, using it, for example, on his telephone answering machines. U.S., Congress, House, *Congressional Record*, 101st Cong., 1st sess., 1989, 135, pt. 8: 1072.

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Casey's older siblings that a coyote had brought their new baby brother during the night.[2]

Times were lean for ranchers in Stanley County on the eve of the Great Depression, but the Tibbs family, like many others, was no stranger to adversity. Descended from Irish immigrants who had moved to Virginia before the Revolutionary War, members of the family served on both sides in the Civil War and later migrated west in search of new opportunities. Tom Tibbs, Casey's grandfather, went to Iowa, married a part-Chippewa cousin of P. T. Barnum, and raised Morgan horses before settling in Highmore, South Dakota, in 1892. His son, John Tibbs, moved across the Missouri River, worked as a hired hand, and eventually bred his father's stock with wild ponies to sell to the United States Army and to east-river farmers. When the depression hit, there was neither a place to go nor any money to get there. This branch of the Tibbs family had reached the end of the trail, and the breaks of the Cheyenne and Missouri Rivers remain their home today.[3]

In the four years after Casey Tibbs's birth, more than 150 South Dakota banks went out of business and 39 percent of state residents were on relief, the highest rate in the country. Conditions were even worse in central South Dakota, where watering holes dried up, locusts devoured family gardens, and 80 percent of the residents of one county were living on relief. In desperation, John Tibbs finally released most of his horse herd onto the western plains, which homesteaders had largely abandoned, in the hope that some animals would survive. Only one, Red River, a horse the family kept for years and Casey Tibbs's favorite, returned when the drought broke.[4]

World War II, which arrived on the heels of the depression, also shaped the life of the young cowboy. On the South Dakota home front, automobile travel and public gatherings were curtailed as the use of gasoline, metal, and rubber was restricted to supply the military. Rural residents like the Tibbs family, stranded with limited fuel and poorly maintained roads, continued their struggle to survive. The kind of fame Casey Tibbs would one day enjoy must have been incompre-

2. *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 2 Feb. 1990; Dayle Angyal, Mission, S.Dak., telephone interview with author, 23 Aug. 2001; Sunny Holloway, "Tibbs Family History Produced a Champion," *Golden Times* (June 1995): 9. The author's paternal grandmother, Elizabeth Ann Duffy (1883-1956), homesteaded near the Cheyenne River and served as a common midwife and nurse for the Tibbs family and other area ranchers.

3. Holloway, "Tibbs Family History," p. 9.

4. Herbert S. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, rev. ed. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), pp. 277, 291-92; *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, 27 May 1956.

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hensible to the scrawny cowboy who graduated from eighth grade at the one-room East Orton School in 1942 as battles raged in Europe and the Pacific. At thirteen years old, he was too young to fight. Because many area cowboys were at war, Tibbs found a niche breaking

Casey Tibbs with mother Florence Tibbs (left) and sister Dolly Muir (right), 1949

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horses for his father and for local ranchers like Bud Anis and Albert Lopez, taming sixty-three head in his first year.[5]

Dreams of prize money prompted the young hired hand to hitchhike south to White River for his first rodeo competition in 1942. When Tibbs arrived at the arena to enter, the rodeo promoter told him he was too young to compete. After the teenager "threw a fit of cussin" and demanded to speak to the organizers, the promoter picked a particularly rank horse and offered him five dollars to ride it. Tibbs rode the horse, collected his money, and drank himself sick on soda pop purchased with his winnings. He never rode in White River again.[6] The following year, Tibbs secretly procured a permission slip from his mother and officially entered his first rodeo in Fort Pierre. The four first-place awards he won that day marked the start of one of rodeo's greatest careers, but John Tibbs believed his son was "getting enough riding at home" and worried about him becoming a ruffian, like the rodeo cowboys of his generation.[7]

The sport of rodeo had grown from informal competitions among wranglers on the frontier to become part of the carnival-like Wild West shows that toured the country beginning in the 1880s. Following the demise of the traveling shows around the time of World War I, individual promoters stepped in to take over the business of staging cowboy contests, which quickly grew in popularity. By the 1920s, however, corrupt judging, fights over decisions, and prize money that failed to materialize had tarnished the sport, giving rodeo cowboys a reputation as hoodlums and rodeos as events for decent people to avoid.

Recognizing that management of the sport had to be reformed if rodeo was to survive, a group of concerned sponsors formed the Rodeo Association of America (RAA) in 1929 to oversee local rodeo committees throughout the country. The group went to work to improve the organization of individual shows, standardize the scoring system, and ensure that the prize money advertised was actually paid out. The events offered at RAA-sanctioned events were also formalized to include bronc riding, bull or steer riding, calf roping, steer roping, steer decorating, steer wrestling, team roping and wild-cow milking. At the same time, the cowboys themselves were in the process of organizing to protect their interests, forming a union called the Cowboys Turtle

5. Interview with Ancel Tibbs, Fort Pierre, S.Dak., 6 Nov. 1999.
6. *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, 27 May 1956.
7. Shirley Wells, "Casey Tibbs," *Western Horseman* 54 (Aug. 1989): 80.

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Association (CTA) in 1936 to improve working conditions and increase rodeo prize purses to help contestants meet the expenses of traveling to events. Throughout the 1930s the two interest groups struggled to forge a compromise that would allow rodeo to gain a reputation as a respectable and legitimate sport.[8]

Into this turbulent time in rodeo history, Casey Tibbs set out to follow his dreams of success and fame. Like the baseball player immortalized in the poem "Casey at the Bat," for whom he was named, he first needed to experience the minor leagues before he could hope to reach the "world series" of rodeo events at Boston Garden and Madison Square Garden in New York City. Competing in dozens of local "brush rodeos," Tibbs worked hard to repeat the success he had experienced in Fort Pierre. He was regularly bucked off and injured and struggled to stay in food, clothes, and transportation, at times resorting to lying across the highway in order to get a passing motorist to stop and give him a ride.[9]

While Tibbs had the will of a champion, he did not yet have the maturity, skills, or strength he needed to become a great bronc rider. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when or where his first breakthrough came. It may have been at McLaughlin on 18 September 1944 when he won his first "day money" (cash for the day's best rider), eighty-seven dollars, on a horse called South Dakota.[10] In any case, 1944 was the year Tibbs really started to rodeo.

Although he competed mostly in local rodeos, Tibbs made it to a few of the larger shows, where he watched great cowboys like the Roberts and Linderman brothers, observing how professional cowboys rode, took falls, and managed the hectic life of a traveling competitor. He also met rodeo champion Bill McMacken, a valuable contact with whom he would later log thousands of miles and from whom he would learn a great deal. In 1944, however, the young bronc rider was still developing his unusual method of "floating" a horse, in which he used a combination of precision reactions, balance, and timing, rather than power, the method favored by most rodeo riders before him, to keep from being thrown.[11]

8. Kristine Fredriksson, *American Rodeo: From Buffalo Bill to Big Business* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1985), pp.10-16, 21-22, 36-40.

9. Ibid., p. 112; *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, 27 May 1956.

10. *McLaughlin Messenger*, 1 Feb. 1990.

11. Interview with Carl Huckfeldt, Fort Pierre, S.Dak., 30 Oct. 1999; Wells, "Casey Tibbs," pp. 81-82.

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Tibbs "floats" a saddle bronc

That autumn, Tibbs fractured his ankle at the Timber Lake rodeo. Too proud to return to his parents both broke and broken, he spent the winter at the home of his sister Regina ("Murphy"). In the spring of 1945, Tibbs reembarked on his quest for rodeo fame. At age sixteen, he made as many shows as possible but struggled to pay entry fees and overcome injuries.[12] He was learning the hard way, as his father had cautioned, that the life of a traveling cowboy offers rewards for only a lucky, hardy few.

In early August 1945, the United States bombed Japan, and World War II was over. A sense of relief swept the country as rationing ended and wartime restrictions ebbed away. Tibbs, having worked the brush rodeos during the war without much success, headed east amidst the postwar euphoria. He and Jack Buschbom, a fellow South Dakotan

12. Colin Lofting, "How to Get Rich on a Horse," *Saturday Evening Post* 229 (25 Aug. 1956): 85.

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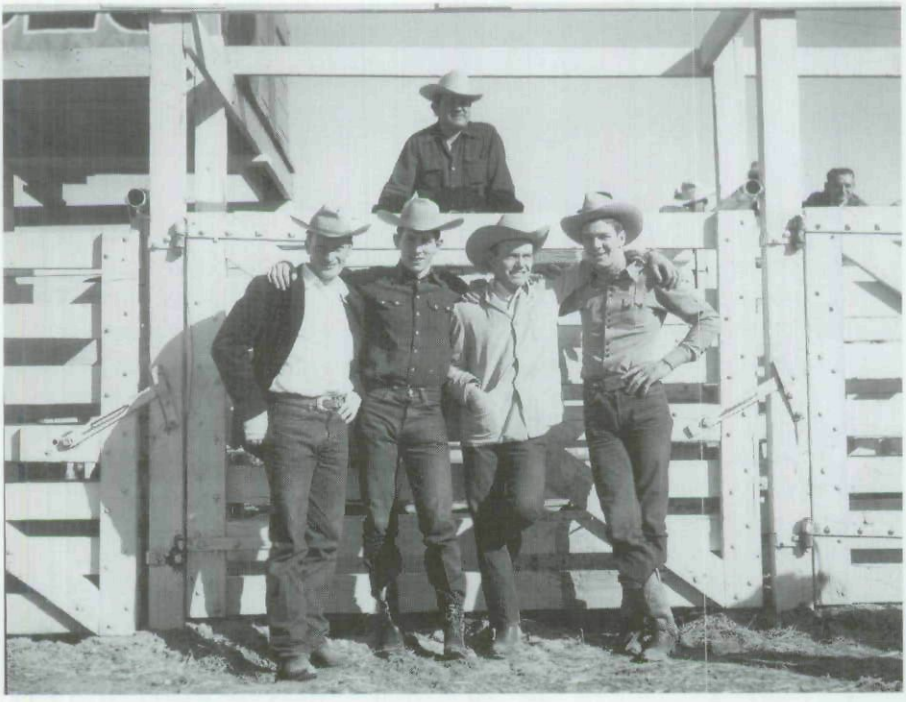
who would later become a world champion bareback bronc rider and Rodeo Cowboys Association spokesman, spent the fall of 1945 working for Joe Greer in Wisconsin on a Wild West show.[13] "Those were the days when money didn't mean a thing," Tibbs recalled of his early days spent crisscrossing the country. "We were young and we were lookin' for excitement and danger."[14] The Wild West show work exposed Tibbs to the entertainment aspect of rodeo, an experience he would draw on later in life.

Tibbs and Buschbom returned to South Dakota for the winter of 1945-1946 to break horses for the Diamond A Cattle Company, a legendary outfit operating on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation in the north-central part of the state. The work paid six to ten dollars per

13. Interview with Huckfeldt.
14. Casey Tibbs, "Let 'er Buck," *Dakota West* 12 (Mar. 1986): 9.

Cowboys Sonny Lavender, Jim Shoulders, Jack Buschbom, and Casey Tibbs in Yuma, Arizona, 1949



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broken horse and kept both men riding and sharp. South Dakota had finally recovered from years of economic hard times, and by war's end there were more cattle on farms and ranches than there had been in 1920.[15] It was a good time to be a working cowboy.

Tibbs was with the Diamond A when he sold a string of bucking horses to the E. C. Roberts family, rodeo-stock contractors from Strong City, Kansas. The family patriarch was the father of two champion cowboys, Gerald and Ken Roberts, one or the other of whom won rodeo bull-riding or all-around championships every year from 1942 to 1948. Tibbs came along just when the family was using its championship reputation to promote an expanding rodeo-contracting business. The South Dakota cowboy offered the Robertses not only a string of bucking horses but also a top-notch hand. Working for the family in 1946 and 1947, Tibbs matured into a professional cowboy. He learned how to study bucking horses and take notes on individual animals. He discovered how to spur a horse and maximize his scores. He figured out how to take a fall without breaking an ankle or tearing a muscle. He learned, too, about rodeo as a business and what it took to promote and stage a western event. His newfound skills paid off when, at age sixteen, he won his first trophy saddle in Newton, Kansas.[16]

No longer restricted to the brush rodeos of central South Dakota, Tibbs did well during the 1946 season, finishing the year at two of rodeo's premier events, Boston Garden and Madison Square Garden in New York City.[17] After spending the winter of 1946-1947 recuperating from his punishing travel schedule, he hit the road in the spring, attempting to repeat the previous year's success. While at a Fourth of July rodeo in Mobridge, he again met Bill McMacken, who had been all-around champion during the war years at major rodeos like Frontier Days in Cheyenne, Wyoming, and the Pendleton Round-Up in Oregon. McMacken knew rodeo, not to mention people an up-and-comer like Tibbs would want to meet. Furthermore, he had a car and

15. Interview with Huckfeldt; Lofting, "How to Get Rich on a Horse," p. 85; Schell, *History of South Dakota*, p. 302.

16. Interview with Huckfeldt; William H. Porter, *Who's Who in Rodeo*, (Oklahoma City, Okla.: Powder River Book Co., n.d.), p. 162; Bev Pechan, "Casey Tibbs: 1930-1990: 'Best Bronc Rider Ever' to Be Memorialized," *South Dakota Magazine* 6 (May/June 1990): 20.

17. Lura Bruce, "Casey Tibbs—Tophand Cowboy," *Hoofs and Horns* 18 (Mar. 1948): 27. Unlike professional cowboys of today, who must work their way up through a system that includes Little Britches, 4-H, high school, college, and circuit ranks, Tibbs went from Fort Pierre to Madison Square Garden in three years.

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offered to take Tibbs along to some of the big shows he planned to ride in that year.[18] McMacken knew talent when he saw it, telling the Fort Pierre Times in 1947 that Casey Tibbs was "the best young prospect to come along in years."[19]

Slender and six feet tall, Tibbs had honed the unique riding style that allowed him to "float" a horse with his rein arm out and away from

Tibbs on Powder River, Klamath Falls, Oregon, 1955

his body. The technique allowed the bronc to buck more naturally, earning the cowboy more points for a ride, but it also required innate timing and knowledge of individual animals. In his rides, Tibbs seemed to follow the lead of a dance partner, much to the amazement of older, stronger competitors, who held their rein arms tight to their bodies

18. Interview with Huckfeldt.
19. "Rodeo Mag Lauds Local 18 Year Old," *Dakota West* 12 (Mar. 1986): 2.

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and attempted to control a horse's bucking repertoire.[20] "I never saw anybody ride who was so balance-wise," said the great cowboy Jim Shoulders. "Casey was unreal, the way he rode."[21]

In 1948, Tibbs's ability won him third-place honors in the nation for saddle-bronc riding. Just eighteen years old at the time, he earned the label "Kid Wonder" for his performances at the national finals in New York City. His talent and drive to win paid off again the next year when he became the youngest saddle-bronc champion in the history of rodeo. At the tender age of nineteen, Tibbs captured bronc-riding crowns from both of the sport's major organizations—the Rodeo Cowboys Association (RCA) and the International Rodeo Association (IRA). He also finished third in the race for the IRA all-around crown and completed the season with twenty-one thousand dollars in purse money.[22] It was an incredible year for the young cowboy from Mission Ridge, as well as the dawning of what many historians of the sport describe as the "golden age" of rodeo.

Throughout the 1940s, rodeo organizers and cowboys alike worked to complete the transformation of the sport from the rough-and-tumble world of dishonest promoters, corrupt judges, and brawling to a pastime that would rival baseball in the hearts of Americans. As rodeo gained legitimacy, spectatorship grew, prize money increased, and competition among contestants became keener. What had once been a way for cowboys to relieve the boredom of life on the cattle trail was becoming a full-time, money-making profession.[23]

Contributing to the popularity of spectator sports like rodeo was the prosperity that had arrived with the GIs returning from World War II. Tibbs's ascent to national fame paralleled one of South Dakota's longest periods of economic expansion, almost to the year. From 1946 to 1955, as Tibbs was working his way up the rodeo ladder, cash income from crops and livestock reached all-time highs. Roads and power lines were being constructed, and the state's farms and ranches bore little resemblance to their prewar days when only 3.4 percent had central-station electricity.[24] Good times had arrived, and South Dakotans proudly followed the progress of the dashing lad from Stanley

20. M. M. Hightower, "Champion Bronc Rider," *Hoofs and Horns* 23 (Sept. 1953): 9.
21. *Rapid City Daily Journal*, 29 Jan. 1990.
22. Pechan, "Casey Tibbs: 1930-1950," p. 20; Hy Peskin, "Champ Rider: Casey Tibbs Has Rip-Roaring Time On and Off the Broncs" *Life* 31 (22 Oct. 1951): 124.
23. Fredriksson, *American Rodeo*, pp. 57, 79-80.
24. Schell, *History of South Dakota*, p. 304.

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County who wore purple satin shirts and chaps appliqued with four-leaf clovers.

From 1949 to 1955, Tibbs's flamboyance and winning record would help to launch rodeo into the nation's popular consciousness. After stumbling in 1950—winning the IRA championship but finishing runner-up in the race for the RCA crown—Tibbs came out of the chute in 1951 with something to prove. As summer ripened into autumn and cowboys prepared for their final run at a major title, Tibbs was beyond the reach of any other bronc rider. He had traveled hard and ridden 280 horses, 274 of them for the required ten seconds.[25] No rodeo fan or performer had ever witnessed such a feat or thought it possible in saddle and bareback bronc riding.

Such amazing consistency filled a trophy case with awards. In 1951, Tibbs won the RCA and IRA saddle-bronc championships, the RCA and IRA bareback championships, the RCA all-around championship, and the IRA high-point championship. But for an IRA rule change that required all-around champions to compete in one roping event, Tibbs would have been all-around champion for both organizations. He collected $29,104 in purse money, had an estimated total income of one hundred thousand dollars, and was the first and only cowboy ever featured on the cover of *Life* magazine.[26] After just three years of riding at major rodeos, he had become the undisputed king and a mainstream hero.

Tibbs's luck held into the 1952 season, and he ended the year with another RCA saddle-bronc championship, his second straight and career third. Despite a bad spill in Nampa, Idaho, the twenty-three-year-old bronc king spurred on to a world championship in 1953, winning both the RCA and IRA saddle-bronc championships and the IRA all-around championship. Nineteen fifty-four came and went with Tibbs successfully defending his world title. He also won his fourth straight RCA saddle-bronc championship (a feat yet to be repeated) and carried home three IRA World championships in the saddle-bronc, bareback, and all-around categories.[27]

Not only had Tibbs rewritten the book on bronc riding, but he had done it with flair. He flew to shows, drove purple Cadillacs or Lincoln

25. Peskin, "Champ Rider," p. 127.

26. Fredriksson, *American Rodeo*, p. 87; *Sioux Falls Daily Argus-Leader*, 20 Mar. 1955; *Life* 31 (22 Oct. 1951).

27. Lofting, "How to Get Rich on a Horse," p. 86; Hightower, "Champion Bronc Rider," p. 9. For a summary of Tibbs's career titles, see http://www.caseytibbs.com/championships.htm.

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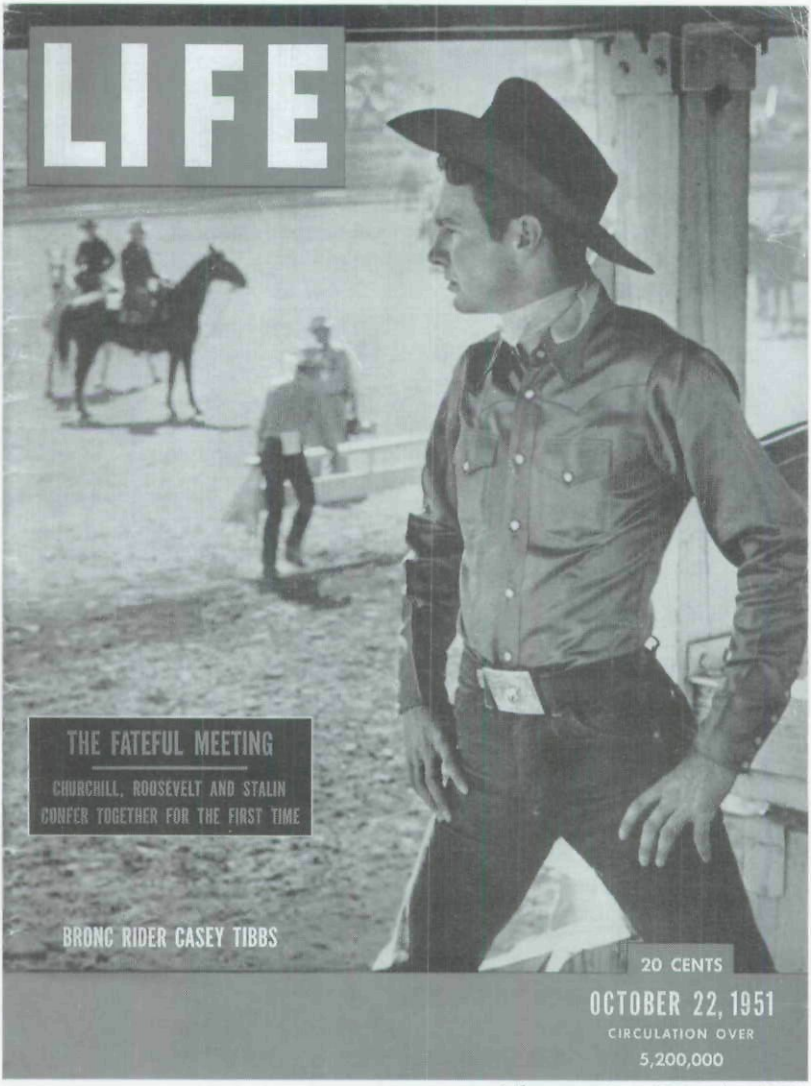

Life *magazine, 22 October 1951*

Continentals, wore hand-tailored suits and the finest hats and boots, and caroused in high-society circles. One reporter chronicled a week with Tibbs this way:

> Puyallup, Washington, on a Thursday, two performances. Fly to Omaha to ride there Friday. A rented car and a dash to St.

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> Joseph, Missouri, for Saturday afternoon and night. Fly back to Omaha, Sunday, and then to Albuquerque, New Mexico, for the first go-around there. Fly to New York. Fly back to finish Omaha, and to Albuquerque to finish there—with a side trip to Kansas City to make the Strike It Rich program. Then rush back to catch the next go-around at New York. But he won the bronc riding, bareback and all-around at Puyallup and Omaha, the bronc riding at New York and the bronc riding at Albuquerque. The run was worth $12,000 and expenses were $896.[28]

Although the rodeo star enjoyed a hard-driving lifestyle, he also turned his new-found wealth and status to good advantage, embarking on what would become a long fund-raising career. Eventually he would use his superstar status to raise money for a broad range of causes, including down-and-out cowboys, museums, rodeos, golf tournaments, Wild West shows, and politicians. He started small, though, in 1952, with a 4-H rodeo in Fort Pierre to raise funds for a youth center.[29] It was during the 1955 inaugural ball for Governor Joe Foss, for whom he had helped to raise campaign funds, that Tibbs met his future wife, Cleo Harrington of Colman, South Dakota. Harrington, Miss South Dakota for 1955, was serving as a hostess, and Tibbs suggested that they pose together for a photograph as "Miss South Dakota and Mr. Rodeo." The pair started dating, became engaged in 1956, and were married in 1959.[30] Tibbs seemed to have it all: world championships, money, a beautiful fiancée, and more success on the horizon.

Tibbs's continued hard work and travel paid dividends in 1955, when he won $42,064 out of a possible $2 million in prize money, the largest total purse ever won by a professional cowboy to that time. In addition to his large income, Tibbs was named the 1955 RCA all-around champion.[31] At the relatively young age of twenty-six, he had nothing left to prove to the rodeo world or the nation's sports fans. There were no higher awards to win, no greater purses to collect, and no need to prove further that he was the greatest bronc rider ever. It was time to look for greener pastures.

28. Lofting, "How to Get Rich on a Horse," p. 86.

29. *Fort Pierre Times*, 28 July 1955. The match-riding contests Tibbs began in Fort Pierre continue today as fund raisers for the Casey Tibbs Foundation, headquartered in Fort Pierre.

30. "Cleo Ann Harrington-Casey Tibbs Engagement Announced" (unidentified newspaper clipping), 22 Dec. 1956, Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA) Archive, Colorado Springs, Colo. Joe Foss, a World War II flying ace, is the state's only other native son to be featured on the cover of *Life* magazine.

31. Edmund Christopherson, "World's Roughest Sport," *Holiday* 17 (June 1955): 48.

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The first cowboy—and one of the first athletes—to make lucrative commercial endorsements, Tibbs had been modeling jeans, boots, hats, and shirts since the start of the decade, and offers from Hollywood started to roll in. His perfect smile, athletic build, and handsome features made him a favorite of photographers. He signed a contract with Trezona and Schiller Management of Los Angeles and formed his

Tibbs as 1955 RCA all-around world champion

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own company, Casey Tibbs Enterprises. For the next two decades, he worked in Hollywood as a director, actor, stunt man, and stagehand, appearing in the television series *Gunsmoke*, *The Sacketts*, and *Paradise*, as well as the miniseries *Lonesome Dove*. He also worked on twenty-five feature films, among them *Support Your Local Sheriff, Support Your Local Gunfighter, The Cowboys and Junior Bonner, Born Wild,* and *Once Upon a Texas Train.*[32]

While working in Hollywood, Tibbs began plans for an overseas Wild West show. He had gained experience as a show hand with Joe Greer in Wisconsin in 1946, and the scheme perfectly melded his two passions, western life and entertainment. In 1958, Tibbs set out to make himself known as "the *world's* most beloved cowboy," launching his American Wild West Show and Rodeo featuring himself and many other South Dakotans on a European tour that began in Belgium. Shortly after the debut, however, financial difficulties forced the

32. Lofting, "How to Get Rich on a Horse," p. 84; *Ramona (Calif.) Sentinel*, 15 Feb. 1990.

Tibbs in Hollywood publicity shot

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promoters to abandon the show, leaving the hired cowboy and American Indian actors to find their own way home.[33]

Upon returning from Europe, Tibbs went back to the professional rodeo circuit to win an unprecedented sixth national RCA saddle-bronc championship in 1959. He would ride professionally again but never at this level.[34] The man who had made bronc riding an art by rhythmically responding to the horse beneath him had won his last championship. He had suffered dozens of broken bones from innumerable falls, and his particular style of riding required the flexibility and precision reactions of a younger cowboy.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Tibbs dedicated himself to staging Wild West shows, rodeos, parties, horse roundups, match rides, and anything else that promoted the western way of life, real or imagined. His job titles varied as the objects of his promotion changed and he pursued yet another aspect of western entertainment. In 1965, for example, he staged the first annual Casey Tibbs Rose Bowl Rodeo in Pasadena, California, billing it as "the largest single day rodeo event in the world." According to the program, Tibbs had conceived the idea when he retired in 1959 and had spent five years putting together the "banner event."[35]

In 1967, at the age of thirty-eight, Tibbs staged yet another brief rodeo comeback, placing in twenty out of the twenty-eight rodeos he entered and at one point winning nine straight. At the same time, he also rekindled an interest in breeding bucking horses and built up a sizable herd in South Dakota, in addition to the four hundred cows he kept in California. Like many people in rodeo, he considered bucking a genetic trait that could be bred and developed. Based on this idea, he wrote a screenplay, formed his own distribution company, and filmed the movie, *Born to Buck*, in South Dakota. Henry Fonda and Rex Allen narrated the picture, which on its opening weekend outgrossed *The Graduate* five to one in South Dakota theaters. In an interview with the *Sioux Falls Argus-Leader*, Tibbs discussed his hopes to produce at least one film a year in the state. He ultimately made one more movie in South Dakota, *The Young Rounders*.[36]

33. Hank Fine, "Born to Buck: Casey Tibbs: Biography" (undated typescript), p. 2, PRCA Archive; interview with Huckfeldt.

34. *ProRodeo Sports News*, 7 Feb. 1990.

35. Program, Casey Tibbs' First Annual Rose Bowl Rodeo, 24 Jan. 1965, p. 5, PRCA Archive.

36. Wells, "Casey Tibbs," p. 82; Diane Ciarloni Simmons, "Casey Tibbs Profile: Rodeo Circuit Survives Changes That Give New Cowboys 'an Edge'," *Agriculture* vol. (Sept. 1980): 51. *Sioux Falls*

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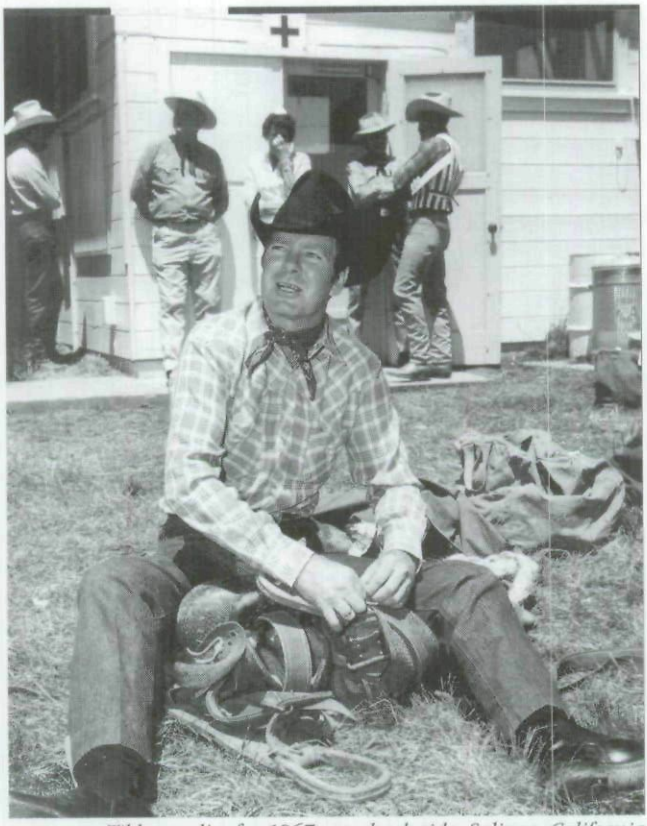

Tibbs readies for 1967 comeback ride, Salinas, California

A tireless promoter of the western way of life, Tibbs returned to South Dakota in June 1971 to stage a wild-horse roundup on the Cheyenne River Indian Reservation. Billed in a promotional brochure as a "cowboy safari of approximately 100 miles," the adventure included Tibbs's Hollywood friends and eight paying customers who seized the opportunity to ride with the cowboy. The party spent eleven days romping through rugged river breaks and prairie, drinking beer and telling tall tales. During one river crossing, Tibbs, never a good swimmer, almost drowned when he became separated from his horse.

Daily Argus-Leader, 27 Sept. 1968. Ironically, as the ProRodeo Hall of Fame was unveiling its statue of Tibbs in 1989, the Oscar Award-winning *Dances with Wolves* was being filmed near the rodeo star's birthplace in Stanley County.

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Reaching trail's end, the group drove a pack of broncs down the main street of Fort Pierre for a match-riding competition at the Stanley County Fairgrounds.[37]

Tibbs's fondness for orchestrating big entertainment events also found an outlet in 1973, the year he staged the Casey Tibbs Rodeo and Cowboy Reunion in Pueblo West, Colorado. Tibbs organized a five-event rodeo featuring appearances by nine current world champions as well as trick riders and rodeo queens. The "cowboy jamboree" also included twenty-six former world champions, many of them from the 1950s, representing the largest such gathering ever. In the same year, Tibbs hosted 162 rodeo performances in Japan, where audiences considered him not only a superstar but also the quintessential American, born in a log cabin and raised on the back of a horse.[38]

At the age of forty-five, Tibbs was starting to slow down and lead the life of an executive-desk cowboy. "If my old man knows about this," he told one newspaper interviewer, "he must be spinning in his grave." In 1974, Tibbs began working as director of western activities at Country Estates, a southern California resort complex that offered paying guests various forms of recreation, including lessons from America's best saddle-bronc rider. There he supervised a rodeo school, roping competitions, and trail rides. "People come to Country Estates just to see him sit on a horse," reported the *San Diego Union*.[39] Tibbs also lent his name to various business ventures, engaged in a search for Christopher Columbus's *Pinta* and its treasures in the Caribbean, sponsored annual golf tournaments in Las Vegas, served as spokesman for various organizations, and enjoyed the good life. He had one final rodeo comeback, beating out cowboys half his age to win the 1979 saddle-bronc competition in Salt Lake City at the age of fifty. Tibbs never left the rodeo world completely, but Salt Lake City was his last professional ride.[40]

His first marriage having ended in divorce in 1967,[41] Tibbs married Sandra Clark on 17 November 1980 in a lavish wedding with five

37. Bill Gilbert, "Where the West Has Gone," *Playboy* 20 (June 1973): 172-74, 177-78; interview with Edward Duffy, Fort Pierre, S.Dak., 30 Oct. 1999; publicity brochure, Casey Tibbs Wild Horse Roundup, PRCA Archive.

38. "Casey Tibbs Rodeo and Cowboy Reunion" (undated news release), and "Casey Duane Tibbs" (memorial service program), both in PRCA Archive.

39. *San Diego Union*, 6 Oct. 1974.

40. Gordon Hanson, "Casey Tibbs Finds Today Is As Good As Ever," *Dakota West* 12 (Mar. 1986): 19; Wells, "Casey Tibbs," pp. 82-83.

41. Wells, "Casey Tibbs," p. 81.

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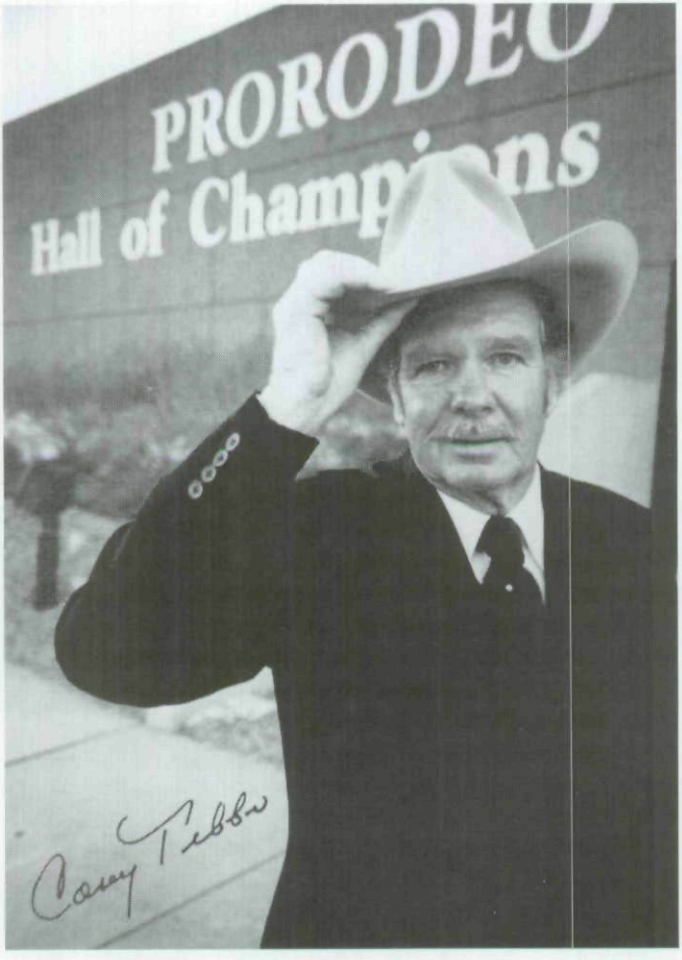
hundred members of the "Western nobility" in attendance. Like all Casey Tibbs productions, it was an extravagant affair. Roy Rogers was his best man, Rex Allen and Steve Ford (son of former President Gerald Ford) were groomsmen, and the Sons of the Pioneers provided entertainment.[42] His flamboyant rodeo days over, but still fascinated with

42. "Sons of the Pioneers Sing, Sandra & Casey Tibbs Tie Knot Under Old Oak Tree," *Pioneer News* 3 (Summer 1980): 3-4.

Tibbs at ProRodeo Hall of Champions, Colorado Springs



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cowboy life, Tibbs spent his later years breeding cattle, bucking stock, and racing horses. He excelled at these endeavors, and a 1986 photograph in *Western Horseman* shows him standing proudly next to his horse, Ya Dig, a winner at the Santa Anita track, one of horse racing's most prestigious venues.[43]

In 1989, a "Tribute to Casey Tibbs" gala was hosted in Beverly Hills to raise a quarter-million dollars for a larger-than-life statue of the champion to be placed at the ProRodeo Hall of Fame, an organization for which Tibbs served as fund-raising chairman. The two-hundred-fifty-dollar-per-plate banquet featured musician Charlie Daniels, cowboy poet Baxter Black, and actor Wilford Brimley entertaining and conducting an auction of Tibbs memorabilia. One saddle the rodeo champion had won at Madison Square Garden fetched ten thousand dollars, contributing to a total of one hundred fifty thousand dollars raised at the event. Tibbs, while in good spirits, masked the fact that he was ill with bone cancer and this celebration would be among his last.[44]

The statue of the legendary cowboy astride the horse Necktie was dedicated on 10 August 1989 in a ceremony that drew fifteen hundred people to the hall of fame in Colorado Springs. In typical Tibbs style, it was a grand affair. In his speech, Tibbs thanked the artist, Edd Hayes, for making him look good but then quickly reminded the audience, "Hell, I *was* good."[45] Later in 1989, Tibbs received the prestigious Golden Boot Award from the Motion Picture and Television Relief Fund for his efforts to promote western movies and television shows.[46]

Less than a year after the barrage of awards and honors, Tibbs succumbed to cancer. He died on 28 January 1990 while watching one of his favorite events, the Super Bowl, on television. Memorial services, widely covered by the local and national media, were held on 2 February 1990 at the Fred Grand Arena in Ramona, California. A South Dakota memorial service drew hundreds of family and friends to the Parkview Auditorium in Fort Pierre on 5 February. Tibbs was buried later that day in the family plot at Scotty Philip Cemetery, situ-

43. Wells, "Casey Tibbs," p. 80.

44. Program, Charlie Daniels and the ProRodeo Hall of Fame Tribute to Casey Tibbs, 12 Apr. 1989, PRCA Archive; Mary Anne Pentis and Laura Brien, "Casey Tibbs Loses His Toughest Battle," *San Vincente (Calif.) Valley News* 2 (Feb. 1990): 1, 27.

45. *Mountain-Plains Museums Association Newsgram*, Sept. 1989, p. 2; *ProRodeo Sports News*, 7 Feb. 1990. The statue can be seen from Interstate 25 in Colorado Springs. A statue of Tibbs riding War Paint can be seen along U.S. Highway 83 in Fort Pierre.

46. Wells, "Casey Tibbs," p. 83.

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ated in the river breaks between Fort Pierre and his birthplace at Mission Ridge.[47]

Newspapers around the state and country carried memorial tributes, personal reflections, and commentary on the rodeo cowboy's life. As a local hero, he was mourned personally. As a state hero, he was remembered as a famous native son. As a national hero, he was honored as a great American. Born to buck, Tibbs had ridden his way to the top and thrived in the limelight. He was the nation's consummate, not to mention most beloved, cowboy and one of South Dakota's most colorful figures.

47. *Pierre Daily Capital Journal*, 29 Jan. 1990; *Ramona Sentinel*, 15 Feb. 1990.

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