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Stories of South Texas

Frank Yturria Joins Gene Autry Rodeo

by René Torres¹

Franks Yturria was a Brownsville High School athlete that participated in football, basketball, and track. But the full range of his athleticism was developed on the Yturria Ranch. Frank's final football season with the Brownsville Golden Eagles ended in the fall of 1940. By the spring of 1941 he joined a traveling Wild West show and rodeo.

The days of horsing around with his buddies and visits to the "Snake" King wild animal farm in Brownsville were over for Frank. Manuel King, who had been known as the world's youngest lion trainer, a classmate and friend of Frank, recalled when Frank and some of his football teammates would come over to the wild animal farm. "The guys used to have a blast riding the wild donkeys and swinging on the circus trapezes," recalled Manuel.

So, after young Frank meets Rex Rossi, who was part of the Tom Mix Circus and Wild West show that went broke while in Brownsville in 1938. As a result, Rossi found himself without a job and hungry with his thumb pointing north on the highway out of Brownsville when he met with Frank's father.

During this era circus tents folded or were absorbed by creditors in conjunction with other harsh conditions of the post-Depression years. The unsung "King of the Cowboys," as Tom Mix had been known since the silent movie era, was stamped by the younger cowboy acts such as Gene Autry. Mr. Yturria pulled up and asked Rossi "Where are you going?" Rossi responded, "Where ever you want to take me." After Yturria learned who Rossi was, he offered him a job teaching his son Frank how to perform trick riding and trick roping.

By 1941, Frank secured a spot in one of the most famous rodeos at the time. He, along with Rex Rossi, were invited to join the Gene Autry Flying "A" Rodeo show, with a 12-week contract to perform trick riding and roping. So, when he was given the opportunity to travel along the east coast – it was an experience of a life time for the young Yturria. At the age of 17, his tour with the rodeo opened a new world for him. The youthful amateur, after gaining some experience on the big stage, soon after his performances elevated to the professional level.

Frank was well prepared to meet the challenge as an apprentice to one of the best in the



Frank Yturria's rodeo experience gave him the opportunity to meet some of the nation's most famous rodeo cowboys. Pictured in the left photo are Roy Rogers, Frank Yturria and Col. Jim Eskew. Gene Autry and Frank Yturria are shown in the picture on the right.

business, Rossi. Rex had appeared as a trick roper in 1960 at Madison Square Garden where he won the title of World's Champion Trick Roper over numerous competitors.

Gene Autry described his shows as an extension of Hollywood when he said "I kinda figured on streamlining a rodeo, using blackouts, special lighting and a couple spectacles like we put in Hollywood. And why not, even a square dance." For you young buckaroos that have never heard about the yodeling cowboy – between 1936 and 1942, no entertainer in the world was more popular than Gene Autry.

John Ringling had changed the American circus with a variety of acts that brought music and spectacle to the Big Top and Autry's rodeo was a version of that trend. These shows drew record crowds at every stop and Frank was smack dab in the middle of many standing ovations. Their performances were closely directed by the well-known Colonel Jim Eskew, who made the east coast of the United States rodeo-conscious in the early days of rodeo. Eskew was one of the first producers to use such stars as Roy Rogers, The Sons of the Pioneers, The Cisco Kid and Pancho,

Hopalong Cassidy, Lash LaRue, Dale Evans and Andy Devine to entertain rodeo crowds. By 1941, the names of Rossi and Yturria were added to the names of celebrities that he directed.

Opening March 15 in Washington, D. C., at the Uline Ice Arena, the Brownsville pair traveled with the Jim Eskew Wild West Show featuring Gene Autry. The show performed in Pittsburg, Philadelphia, Toledo, Cleveland and Buffalo. Gene Autry left the rodeo after Cleveland and was replaced by a new young cowboy star, Roy Rogers.

Frank left the show in early May, but Rex continued with the group going to Toronto, Canada and then to Madison Square Garden, returning to Brownsville in June. Frank returned to participate with his graduation class of 1941 at Brownsville High School. "I always wanted to walk the stage in a cap and gown with my classmates, and I did," said Frank. Rex leaves Brownsville for Hollywood in 1946 to perform as a double and stuntman for Gene Autry, Roy Rogers, Bob Steele and others. He married a trick rider cowgirl and together they traveled all over the United States and Canada performing at rodeos and fairs. Once they led the Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena, California. When 94-year-old Frank Yturria is at the ranch you can bet he's "back in the saddle again," with the memories of what it was like to be a young rodeo performer.

His brushes with rodeo dignitaries still inspires a conversation for this old cowboy—and rekindles the spirit of yesteryear. Today, the youthful looking 94-year-old, still, daily, retreats to his private refuge, his office. It is there, that Dr. Frank Yturria, who graduated in 1947 with a Veterinary degree from Texas A&M, is surrounded by a gallery of fond memories of a journey that continues to inspire others.

Cowboys never die—they just fade away!

Endnotes

1. Interview with Frank Yturria 2008. Rene Torres is a retired Asst. Professor from the University of Texas at Brownsville. He has a long history in Brownsville, Texas, as an athlete, scholar and humanitarian. In 2007, he was inducted into the Rio Grande Sports Hall of fame. Through his written work, he has single handedly recovered the history of baseball on the Texas borderlands. In his service to meeting the needs of his community was acknowledged when he received the Jefferson Award for Public Service in Washington D.C., in 2008. Some of his work is housed under the Jaime Chahin Collection at Texas State University, San Marcos, Texas. Rene, faithfully and with honor, integrity and with great distinction served as a member of the Texas Southmost College Board of Trustees from 2008-2014.

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