

Las Vegas' Keepers of the Rodeo Flame

By Bryan Painter

Certainly time can change things. However, that doesn't mean the past and present can't have similarities and connections.

Mindy Johnson easily sees one connection between the Wrangler National Finals Rodeo (WNFR) upon its 1985 arrival to Las Vegas and the WNFR of today. Johnson thinks first of the late Benny Binion of Horseshoe Hotel & Casino fame, who was instrumental in bringing professional rodeo's premier event to Vegas. She also talks about how what he started in the mid-1980s has been kept alive and moves forward because of people such as Michael Gaughan, owner of the South Point Hotel, Casino and Spa.

Johnson is the wife of Rodeo Hall of Fame saddle bronc rider Clint Johnson, the daughter of Brenda Binion-Michael and granddaughter of Benny Binion. She called the latter "Granddad" and has long called Gaughan her friend. Both have been tremendous friends of rodeo.

"Their generosity is a similarity that comes to mind first," she said. "Michael Gaughan has been so generous toward the NFR people, the fans, the cowboys and the stock contractors. My granddad was the same way. He wanted to get more purse money for the cowboys. Everybody came to the steakhouse at the Horseshoe and ate, and people like to go down to the South Point and eat and they like to stay in those rooms."

A cowboy from his hat to heart

On a late December's morning in 1989, a funeral procession approached the cemetery. Binion, a Las Vegas gaming

pioneer, had passed on Christmas Day.

Waiting at the entrance to lead them in was the eye-catching red Binion's Horseshoe Hotel & Casino stagecoach with Scott Smith handling a hitch of six beautiful black horses. The stagecoach was a statement about three of the things Binion had strong beliefs in: Las Vegas, rodeo and good horses.

"I really think it was more about the people, and the cowboy was someone he could really identify with, being a cowboy himself," Smith said.

Because of that passion, the NFR's early December run marked the start to the holidays for Binion who would visit day and night. During the days, he'd often stay in his room at the Horseshoe, and friends would go up to see him, Johnson said. At night, Binion would take a seat at a round table downstairs in the steakhouse.

"He loved people and all of his best friends would come into town," Johnson said. "When he was there, it was the place to be when the rodeo was over."

Those friends readily understood that Binion was someone who had valued horses and the Western way of life well before the first go-round of the 1985 NFR at the Thomas & Mack Arena, its new home in Las Vegas.

Unbridled

Binion, born in north central Texas at the dawn of the 20th century, was only 10



PHOTOGRAPH BY ORNLANCE STUDIOS

For 20 years, this bronze statue of Benny Binion stood at the corner of Casino Center Boulevard and Ogden Avenue. In 2008, it was moved to the South Point Hotel, Spa & Casino. The plaque reads "One of the City's Founding Fathers and the man who brought the National Finals Rodeo to Las Vegas."

when he started trading horses. As he aged, that love never dwindled.

Through the years, Binion raised some of the best bucking and pickup horses in rodeo. ProRodeo Hall of Fame stock contractors such as Harry Knight, Lynn Beutler, Harry Vold and Mike Cervi owned some Binion horses. But daughter Brenda explained that although her father enjoyed that, it wasn't his original intent.

"My dad always raised too many horses, and we didn't have the housing in Montana to put up a lot of help," she said of the ranch at Jordan, Montana. "You

breed 125 to 200 mares a year, you're going to get a 100 horse colts. The next thing you know when you can't get enough help, they're not halter broke. They're weren't broke to ride. Then you look up and here's a big stout gelding and nobody's done anything with him, so they take them and buck them. Daddy didn't try to raise bucking horses, but that's how he got involved."

Longtime friend Shawn Davis met Binion when Davis was in the amateur bronc riding at Calgary in the early 1960s. Davis came to know the family better with time. And it's a well-known fact that in 1984, there was a split vote between keeping the NFR in Oklahoma City and moving it to Las Vegas. Davis, the PRCA president at the time, cast the deciding vote in favor of Vegas.

And to that, Davis, who is the current Wrangler NFR general manager, recently said, "It would have never happened if I wouldn't have known Benny Binion, because I wouldn't have had confidence to move it."

To understand that confidence, Davis said you have to back up to see what he saw in Binion. Take for example those times Binion would have Davis, the rodeo coach at College of Southern Idaho, bring vanloads of students to the ranch. They would arrive to cooks who fed them and teepees to sleep in, but they'd soon earn their keep.

"We'd gather all them horses, three or four hundred head of horses," Davis said. "Benny had good equipment and when we'd get all the horses in, we'd sort them in the alleys. We had a kid on every gate, he'd have the sets that we kept to buck and we'd turn the rest out. He had three chutes. We'd run all of them horses in there and those kids would ride them."

They'd buck those hundred head of horses over the course of two days and Benny and son Ted Binion would sit in a

road bus and act as the judges.

When it was over, Binion would give the rodeo team 33 head of horses to take back to the school.

"We'd take some of them to the National Finals Bucking Horse Sale and then Benny, in most cases, would give us all of that money, too," he said. "If I called Benny and said, 'We really need this' or 'We need that,' he would help," Davis said.

And Davis said that has been carried on by Gaughan, who looked up to Binion and who has accomplished so much.

Binion was inducted in 1988 into the ProRodeo Hall of Fame in Colorado Spring, Colorado, as a notable. In 1985, Binion was named the PRCA's "ProRodeo Man of the Year." His involvement in rodeo included sponsorship of a Winston Tour team, his support of the NFR and his sponsorship of NFR contestant entry fees.

Now, not only his influence, but his name as well, remains a part of the WNFR each year through "Benny Binion's World Famous Bucking Horse & Bull Sale," produced by stock contractors of the PRCA. Gaughan and the South Point Hotel and Casino host this event in their Equestrian Center.

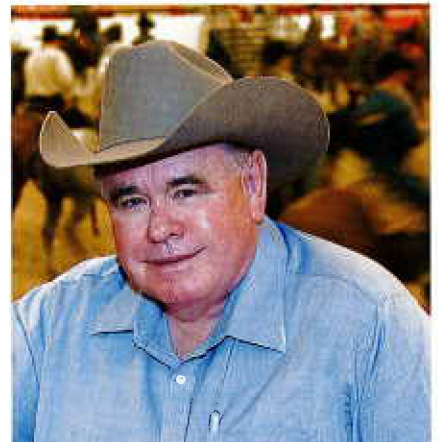
Gaughan was inducted in 2007 into the ProRodeo Hall of Fame as a rodeo notable. His bio states, "Michael Gaughan played a pivotal role in bringing the National Finals Rodeo to Las Vegas in 1985 and in negotiating multiple contract extensions that assured the NFR's position as the richest prize money rodeo in the world." Gaughan's service to rodeo includes serving on the Wrangler NFR Committee. He's a longtime sponsor of the NFR and the PRCA. Gaughan also is a board member of the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum.

"Benny made it happen and then it took Michael Gaughan to follow and make it as successful as it is," Davis said. "He has given us the support to carry on with."

Then and now

Johnson, Binion's granddaughter, said she thinks for her granddad and Gaughan it comes down to a common appreciation of good horses and admiration for the people of rodeo.

"For instance, Michael has all of those bronc halters displayed on the wall and he didn't have to do that," Johnson said. "And Granddad had the stagecoach, and he didn't have to do that. I can see that love for rodeo, back then in my granddad, and now in Michael." ■



Michael Gaughan owns South Point Arena and Equestrian Center which hosts the World Series of Team Roping simultaneously with the NFR each December.

Bryan Painter is a 29-year award-winning journalist whose career has included covering 16 seasons of PRCA rodeos.

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