86R5716 ST-D

By:  Bailes H.C.R. No. 47

CONCURRENT RESOLUTION

WHEREAS, For more than 50 years, the Texas Prison Rodeo stood as a beloved institution known throughout the Lone Star State and beyond; and

WHEREAS, Established in 1931, the Texas Prison Rodeo took place annually at the Texas State Penitentiary at Huntsville, with the event traditionally being held on each Sunday in October; the rodeo was created by state prison system general manager Marshall Lee Simmons to serve as a source of income for the penitentiary and to provide entertainment for prisoners, employees, and their families, but its popularity immediately exceeded all expectations; the competition soon grew to become one of the largest sporting events in Texas and helped reveal rodeo's widespread appeal among the general public; and

WHEREAS, "The Wildest Show Behind Bars" was held on the baseball field outside the "Walls" Unit during its early years; in 1950, a $1 million open-air arena with a capacity of over 20,000 was constructed; the new venue was able to accommodate more people, and attendance continued to surge, totaling close to 100,000 during peak years; the profits from ticket sales helped fund education, recreation, and medical programs for inmates across Texas; and

WHEREAS, In the early 1950s, the rodeo began featuring celebrity entertainers during intermission; a host of legendary stars took the stage through the decades, including Johnny Cash, Willie Nelson, Loretta Lynn, Dolly Parton, and George Strait; in addition, many inmates demonstrated their dancing and musical talents for the thousands of spectators who filled the venue; and

WHEREAS, Above all else, the prison rodeo highlighted the exceptional riding and ranching skills possessed by numerous individuals in the corrections system; vying for the "Top Hand" award, inmates from various units in Texas participated in tryouts, and between 50 and 100 of the best contestants got the chance to show their abilities in Huntsville each year; they took part in standard rodeo events, such as bull riding, horse racing, and bareback bronc riding, as well as in a number of novelty competitions; these included wild cow milking, bull dogging, and the perennial favorite, "Hard Money," in which participants tried to snatch a tobacco sack filled with cash from between the horns of a rampaging bull; the winners of these challenges were regarded with great esteem, and those who didn't qualify had other opportunities to get involved by serving as staff members or assisting in making the uniforms worn by the competitors; and

WHEREAS, The end of the rodeo came in the mid-1980s, after the arena was deemed structurally unsafe and it was decided that repairs were too costly to undertake; the final Texas Prison Rodeo took place on October 26, 1986, and the facility then remained empty and unused for a quarter century until being demolished in 2012; and

WHEREAS, From the time of its establishment during the Great Depression to its conclusion five and a half decades later, the Texas Prison Rodeo was an unforgettable chapter in the saga of the Lone Star State, and this fascinating event is indeed deserving of special recognition; now, therefore, be it

RESOLVED, That the 86th Legislature of the State of Texas hereby pay tribute to the history of the Texas Prison Rodeo.