



Professional rodeo clown Ralph Fisher brings along a brace of "bull-fighting" buzzards as part of his bag of tricks.



Wild cow milkers try to convince a very discontented cow that being milked isn't so bad.

## Cowboys behind bars

By **LEE ROY LESCHPER JR.**

They are cowboys. They sit quietly atop and around the rodeo chutes. Occasionally they talk among themselves, low and slow, or to the too-eager photographers standing in the arena. But mostly they wait. Wait and watch the first bulls being loaded into the bucking chutes. Wait and think about the rides to come.

The action begins with a vengeance. First comes the Mad Scram-

ble — 10 Brahma bulls released at the same time, taking their riders on a mad race across the arena. Three riders stay aboard, with the first across the ring earning \$40 for his aches.

Then come bareback bronc and saddle bronc events, and a wild horse race where four-man teams must saddle and then "race" unbroken horses, and another contest where teams must milk an untamed cow into a soda bottle.

Through it all the cowboys stay somehow aloof — intensely alert and taut as well-tuned guitar strings, but with the calm one finds on the faces of men who challenge deadly animals and deadly odds on a Sunday afternoon.

It is also the look of convicts. For these are not ordinary cowboys. They are the convict cowboys of the Texas Department of Corrections' Prison Rodeo. They are serving sentences of two years to life for crimes against the State and its citizens.

But every Sunday afternoon in October they are cowboys.

There are rookie cowboys who look too young to have ever shaved, but who are old enough to do time in Texas' "Big House."

And there are the "red-shirts" and "Goree Girls." The red-shirts are convicts who didn't qualify for bucking stock events. So they are not given the measure of prestige the cowboys enjoy. They are "cannon fodder" for the wild cow milking contest and the Hard Money event. Hard Money gives them a chance to snatch \$250 in cash tied between the horns of an enraged Brahma bull. The bull stomps, hooks and throws red-shirts right and left.

The Goree Girls are women prisoners from the Goree prison unit who add a touch of sex to the show. Most look very young and very dehumanized in the glaring brightly-colored shorts and shirts they are issued for the day. They chase greased pigs, and then ungreased but very burly calves around the arena.

Through the afternoon, the bucking bulls and all the rest, the announcer keeps up a steady chatter of redneck convict humor.

"That's all right, folks," he chuckles as one cowboy is thrown by a bull. "The judge says he's got 20 more years to come back and try again."

When it's all over and the crowd heads for the gates and home, the convicts gather their gear and boots and hats and slowly file out of the arena. But today they're not just convicts.

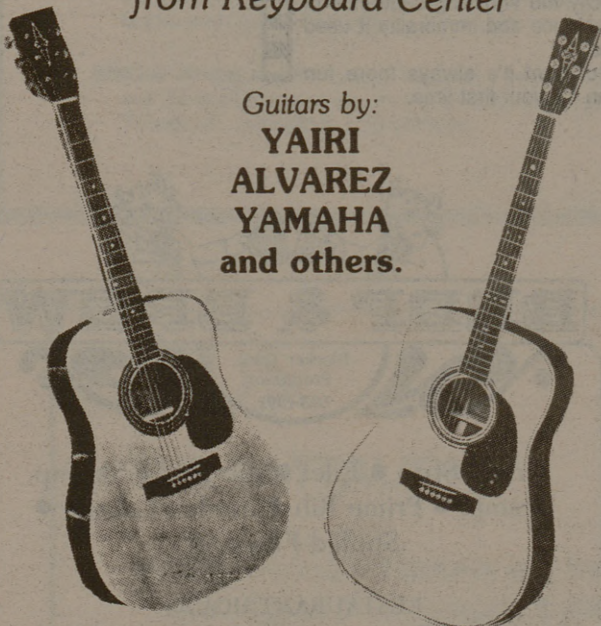
They are cowboys.

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