

# Calgary Stampede celebrates 100 years of history in Alberta

## How the annual rodeo changed Calgary – and Alberta – forever

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**by Myrna Kostash**

There was a time in Alberta when Edmonton was considered the real city, with a long-established university, a vibrant Francophone community as old as Fort Edmonton, a rooted arts scene, pro hockey – the champion Flyers – and, of course, the regal legislature, seat of the legislative assembly for all Alberta.

By way of contrast, Calgary signified herds of cattle mired in manure-strewn stock pens, weekend ski jocks and, well, a better climate when the chinook winds blew through. But that was nature's gift. The halcyon days of the oil patch, the swagger of the Peter Lougheed Boys in political power and Calgary's economic ascendancy over Edmonton were still on the horizon.

Fast forward to 2012 and Calgary is having the last laugh. Celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Calgary Stampede, it's now Cow Town with a multimillion-dollar brand, "the community's cradle of western heritage and traditions," to quote from the official website. It was in 1912 that Guy Weadick, an American cowboy working the Canadian prairie as a trick-roper, produced the first Frontier Days and Cowboy Championship Contest in Calgary with the help of four Calgary businessmen. In 1923, the event became known officially as the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede.

Today we all just call it the Stampede, or the Calgary Stampede to orient the clueless, and even royalty arranges visits to Alberta to coincide with the chance to lead the parade. For those of a certain generation, who can forget the "good old boy" image of then-prime minister Pierre Trudeau in 1971, wearing the obligatory white Stetson over his big hair, slouched comfortably on his steed, loping in the parade accompanied by squealing crowds of Trudeaumaniacs? Everyone wanted to be there.

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I confess that I have never been to the Stampede, but even so I can feel a certain gnawing envy of the Calgarians and southern Albertans who passionately identify with it. These are the folks

who get into the spirit of the thing in their outfits and shindigs and barn dances, not to mention the contributions of the rodeo riders, the princesses and Indian Princess, the Blackfoot horsemen in full-feathered regalia, the judges, the volunteers, the fundraisers. It's a huge enterprise – 2,000 community volunteers, 45 volunteer committees, 1,200 year-round employees – dedicated to promoting the Stampede brand and with an economic impact on the Calgary economy alone of \$300 million annually.

Such successful branding would not have been possible without lots of money. Stampede operations include property acquisitions for Stampede Park, expansion and development plans, “greening” projects, sponsorships such as BMO Financial Group’s naming rights to the Roundup Centre (“the largest corporate sponsorship in Stampede history”) and new investment revenue from the sale of the Stampede Casino to an outside partner.

But here’s the kicker: according to Geo Takach’s book *Will The Real Alberta Please Stand Up?*, the Global Petroleum Show held at Stampede Park every second year generates an estimated \$11 billion in oil-and-gas-related sales within the global marketplace.

It’s the oil, stupid. Behind all the hee-hawing in downtown Calgary is the incontrovertible fact of the wealth of the oil and gas sector and the political and social power it wields. And if some of that power is reflected in the annual fest of nostalgia for the heart-warmin’, hand-shakin’, tongue-loosenin’ spirit of the vanished heartland of the cowboy on the lone prairie, well, no harm done.