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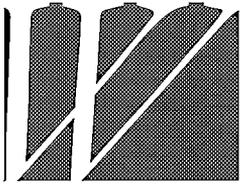
The Wildest Show in the South

The Politics and Poetics of the Angola Prison Rodeo and Inmate Arts Festival

by **Melissa R. Schrift**



Angola Prison became infamous as a site of brutality and death. After a long and troubled history, though, the prison is today considered a model prison, not least because of its popular Angola Prison Rodeo and Inmate Arts Festival, held every Sunday in October and one weekend in the spring. Inmates participate in the festival's rodeo hoping to make money by winning events, spend time outdoors, see the public, and briefly interact with loved ones. Photograph courtesy of the author.

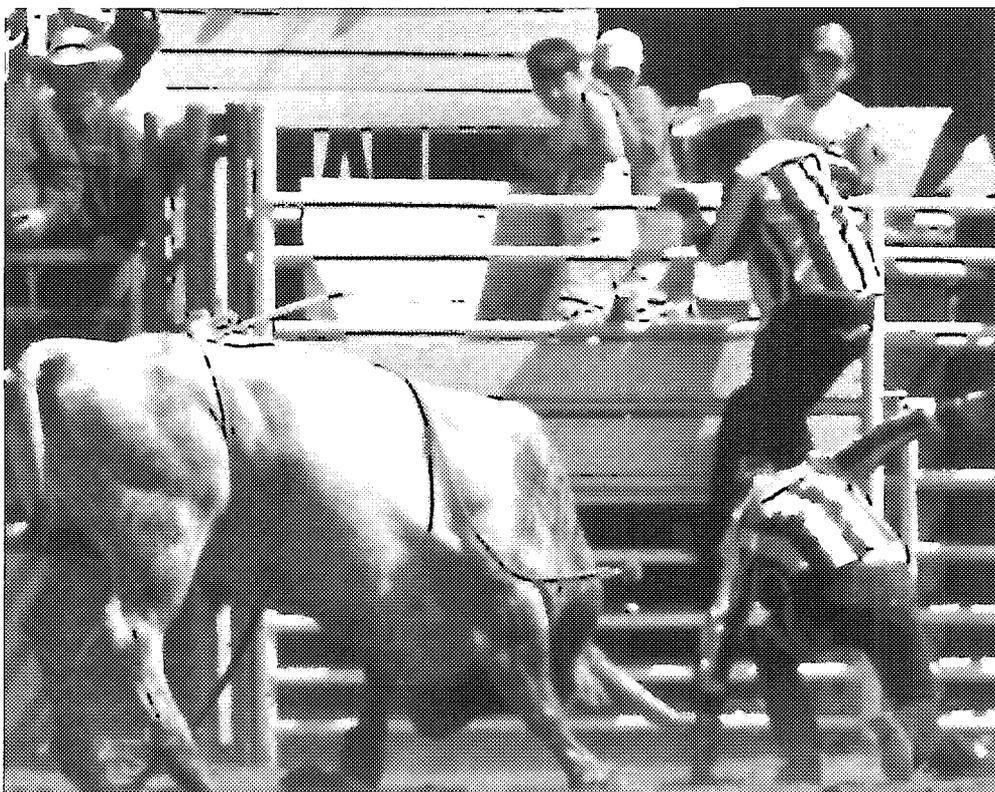


When I entered the grounds of Louisiana State Penitentiary, I saw a maze of rawhide belts and purses, paintings reminiscent of a back aisle thrift store, and elaborate wooden objects that evoked the country crafts of my southern childhood. I passed a robust woman sniffing a perfumed wooden rose with “Mother” etched in lavish script on its heart-shaped stand. Above her hung a copied print of John Wayne next to Tupac Shakur. Brightly airbrushed bible covers praised the Lord in oversized letters. Larger-than-life cartoon characters decorated heavily-shellacked furniture. Men with leather faces and white coats hovered near the crafts and sat amidst the crowds visiting Angola. Some talked with abandon; others hung back and smoked cigarettes, stealing glances at the women who passed.

This was my first trip to Louisiana State Penitentiary in West Feliciana Parish, fifty-five miles northwest of Baton Rouge. The prison, better known as Angola, sits on former plantation land named for the country from which its slaves came. In 1880, former Confederate major Samuel James bought the Angola plantation with three others and ran it with convicts leased to him from the state of Louisiana. Under James and, later, the state—to whom he sold the plantation in 1901—Angola became infamous as a site of brutality and death.¹ After a long and troubled history, the prison is today considered a model prison, not least because of its popular Angola Prison Rodeo and Inmate Arts Festival, held every Sunday in October and one weekend in the spring. As a cultural anthropologist interested in folk art and popular culture, I pursued research at the Angola Prison Rodeo and Inmate Arts Festival, visiting six times in total. During my third and fourth visits, I secured permission from the warden to bring a tape recorder and camera to interview inmates, despite the usual prohibition against recording equipment at the festival.

A child of the South, I was familiar with the phenomenon of rural festivals deemed offbeat by outsiders. During the summers of my youth, I spent at least one sweltering day wandering around downtown during Hillsborough (North Carolina) Hog Day. Like other teenage girls, I followed the standard courtship rituals of flirting, sweating, and eating barbecue, laughed at the vulgarity of the old farmers’ hog-calling contests, and danced with their sons to the tunes of amateur musicians. From hillbilly days in Kentucky to rattlesnake roundups in Georgia, festivals are the very fabric of public life in the South. Indeed, the ubiquity and pageantry of public events often intrigue cultural anthropologists and folklorists. For them public festivals serve as a ritual display that communicates deeper cultural meanings through which a collective group asserts its history and identity.²

The Angola Prison Rodeo and Inmate Arts Festival is a compelling model of this kind of public display, communicating complex and disturbing messages about crime and incarceration to a curious public. One inmate cowboy’s experi-



Warden Burl Cain often frames his penal philosophy as a dramatic departure from Angola's infancy as the "South's bloodiest prison" at the same time that he plays on that past to hype the rodeo as the "Wildest Show in the South." Photograph courtesy of the author.

ences reveal how the rodeo poses as a progressive recreational reform at the same time that it exploits and ridicules inmate participants, while the perspective of an inmate artisan demonstrates how the Inmate Arts Festival offers a more salient, though still questionable, avenue to prison reform at Angola. Although the Inmate Arts Festival provides creative and economic benefits to inmates, the festival also presents a sanitized version of prison life, and the festival atmosphere eludes any serious critique about the growing prison industrial complex in the United States. Furthermore, the cultural messages available to spectators at Angola resonate more profoundly in the American South, where a legacy of conservatism on issues of crime and punishment has shaped the public imagination, and, perhaps more significantly, where the prison industrial complex has had the most profound impact.³

THE SOUTH'S BLOODIEST PRISON

Burl Cain became Angola's warden in 1995 and serves as the longest-standing warden at Louisiana State Penitentiary. Warden Cain often frames his penal phi-

losophy as a dramatic departure from the days of Angola's infamy as "the South's bloodiest prison" but plays on that past to hype the rodeo as the "Wildest Show in the South." Historically, Angola epitomized the horrors of the southern prison system. Although northern prisons had their fair share of problems, southern prisons reflected a death rate at least three times higher than their northern neighbors in the nineteenth century. The high numbers of African American convicts in post-Civil War southern prisons resulted in even less concern about inmate welfare and penal reform. The South relied heavily on prison work camps, using wire fences, chains, guns, dogs, and torturous methods of punishment and restraint.



Guts and Glory is one of the most anticipated and dangerous events at the Angola rodeo. An angry bull with a chit between his horns is unleashed on a couple to several dozen inmates. The winning inmate must retrieve the chit from the bull's forehead, and the result is usually a mix of men fleeing or putting themselves directly in the bull's path to win. Photograph courtesy of Keith Pilkey.

Southern inmates were leased out to provide low-cost labor on chain gangs and were forced to live and work in substandard conditions, including overcrowded cells, doctorless hospitals, and prison guard abuse. The system both mimicked and perpetuated the slavery mentality, with Angola serving as the penultimate example.⁴

Abuses at Angola culminated in 1952 in one of the most dramatic protests in penal history. Thirty-one white inmates severed their Achilles tendons with razor blades to bring attention to Angola's oppressive conditions. Following the incident, Angola improved for a brief period, only to lapse into its old patterns a decade later. In the mid-1970s, four inmates successfully sued the prison in federal court, citing abuses such as beatings by guards with mop handles; rampant rape and murder; racial segregation—with African Americans picking crops while whites were promoted to other fieldwork; arbitrary discipline; and a doctorless hospital. Within two years of operating with federal oversight, Angola made considerable improvements. Finally removed from federal oversight in April 1999, Angola's administrators today consider it a "model" prison that can serve as a standard for inmate behavior management and control.⁵

Currently, Angola houses slightly over five thousand male prisoners, approximately two-thirds of whom are serving life sentences. Angola holds almost all of Louisiana's violent criminals, roughly fifty percent of whom are serving terms for homicide, twenty percent for robbery, and sixteen percent for rape. The majority of Angola inmates are African American and under forty years of age. Angola sits on eighteen thousand acres of land, and all inmates who are mentally and physically able maintain forty-hour-per-week jobs associated primarily with the prison's farming operations. In return, they receive incentive wages that range from four to twenty cents per hour. Inmates at Angola can participate in a variety of programs during their free time, including a four-year degree program through the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and a number of vocational, educational, and self-improvement programs.⁶

THE WILDEST SHOW IN THE SOUTH

It is against the brutal backdrop of its own history that Angola now poses itself as a progressive prison. The media, as well as Warden Cain himself, regularly laud Angola's penal innovation. Cain promotes the Angola Prison Rodeo and Inmate Arts Festival as a facet of the prison's unique reformist strategy—an example of good, clean, family fun that benefits inmates by allowing them exposure to the public and by generating revenue earmarked for rehabilitative programs. In Warden Cain's well-rehearsed words, there are four things that make for a good prison: good food, good medicine, good prayin', and good playin'. The rodeo and festival are the good playin' part. The difficulty with this portrayal of the rodeo,



Buddy Pickup is a traditional rodeo event adapted by Angola, in which one inmate rides bareback to pick up his "buddy," who waits atop a moving barrel. This event requires a high skill level, but the complete lack of skill among inmates results, more often than not, in the buddy clutching his partner in any way possible to achieve balance. Photograph courtesy of Keith Pilkey.

of course, is that it belies its dubious origin. The Angola Prison Rodeo began in 1965 as entertainment and fun for local residents, prison staff, and—according to the prison administration—for inmates as well. While this version of the rodeo's history is not entirely disingenuous, the rodeo also is a hangover from pre-reform Angola, when, by the prison's own admission, inmates had little voice and were subject to a wide range of callous treatment by prison staff and fellow inmates. Thus, it is highly questionable just how voluntary and enjoyable the rodeo could have been for inmates in 1965.

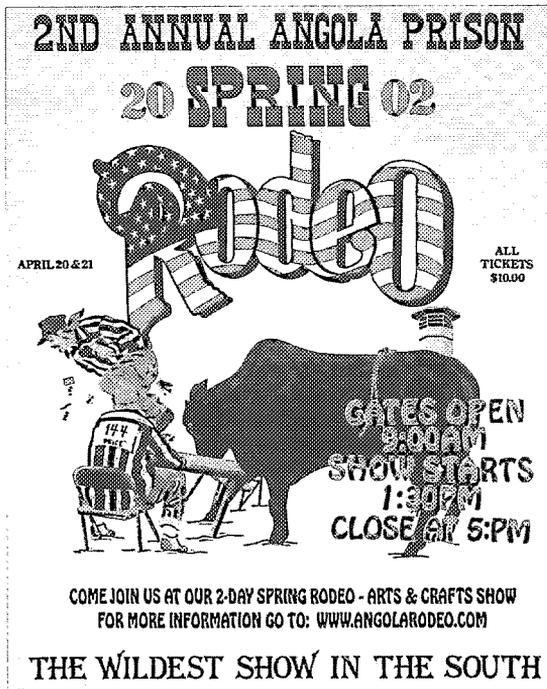
Today the rodeo takes place in an inmate-constructed, 7,500-seat arena and is layered within Angola's promise of penal reform. Spectators are assured that inmate participation is voluntary and are thanked for their support in allowing inmates to become "cowboys for a day." During the rodeo, inmate participants are divided into two large groups in an adequate but relatively small—and ardently guarded—space. The area behind the chutes is, perhaps, even more sacrosanct than at the typical rodeo—a place for participants to assemble, prepare themselves, and encourage one another, as well as a containment area separating inmates from the public.

Warren was the first inmate cowboy that I met behind the chutes. Dressed in full cowboy regalia, he almost could have been the real thing. His black cowboy

hat set off his puffy black eye, and he proudly sported a brass belt buckle won in a previous rodeo at Angola. Over his blue jeans he wore leather chaps decorated heavily with the aesthetic so common to prison art. On his right leg, the chaps featured an eagle on an American flag, wrapped in the text, "Real men love Jesus." On the left, a Confederate flag rippled below the words, "Fear not, I am with thee." The black and white broad-stripped shirt worn by all Angola cowboys, however, visually interrupted Warren's cowboy persona. A throwback to southern chain gangs and pre-reform prison garb, the symbolically-loaded shirts were revived only for the rodeo and unmistakably mark the inmates to the public. The shirts make caricatures out of the inmate cowboys and reassert the supremacy of prison authority. Warden Cain has asserted that the decision to wear broad-stripped shirts was the result of a democratic vote; however, he had marketed the shirts to the inmates in a pre-vote speech as a chance for the riders to stand out, and the "vote" itself was actually a show of hands that Cain took as democratic assent.⁷

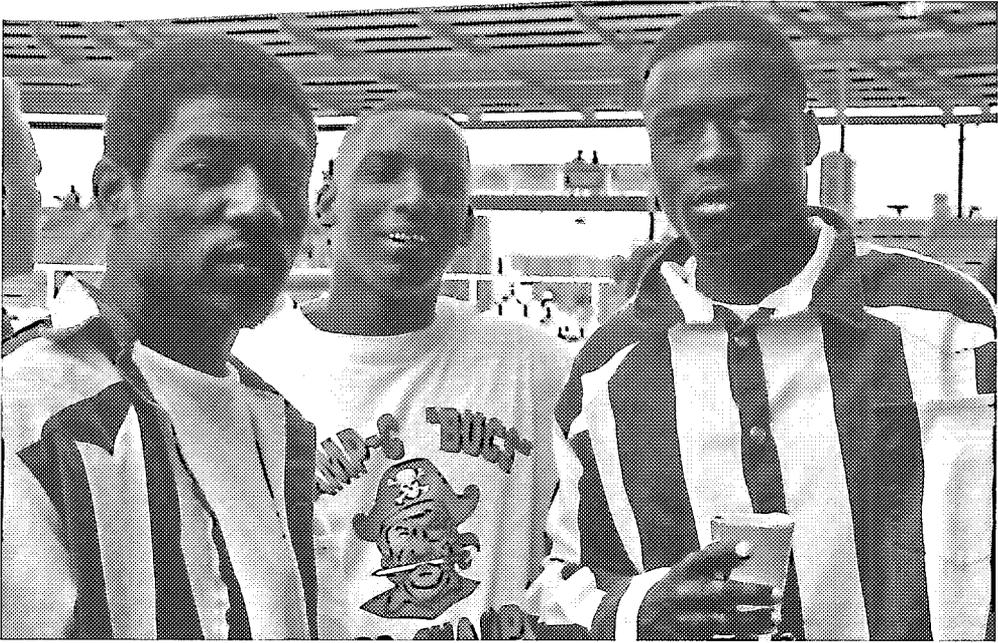
Warren offered a tour of his scars and retold his rodeo experiences with the quiet bravado of the most experienced cowboy. He grimaced as he explained the black eye, pointedly commenting on his disregard for personal injury. Very few inmates, including Warren, have had any exposure to, much less experience with, the animals they ride in the rodeo. Angola cowboys have minimal protective gear, are not trained, and do not have the opportunity to practice. This inexperience most often results in frantic, fearful, and fumbling maneuvers in competition. At these moments in the arena, any status Warren and other "cowboys for a day" have attained begins to diminish. Indeed, most of the rodeo events lapse into a theater of the absurd, the program mocking inmates as "city boys" who have "more guts than brains"—and who, through participation in the rodeo, are vulnerable to injury, at best, and an "early discharge," at worst. When I asked Warren what he gained from participating in the rodeo, he appeared to have perfected the cowboy cliché of careless innocence as he shook his head and told me, "I'm caught somewhere between being the reckless man in the world and the little kid crying out for help."⁸

The mockery of the inmate "Cowboy for a Day" is particularly evident in three of the rodeo's most famous events: Convict Poker, Guts and Glory, and Buddy Pickup. In Convict Poker, four inmates sit at a table playing cards, while a bull is unleashed upon them. Inevitably, the inmates flee, provoking laughter from the audience. If an inmate remains seated, he wins, entitling him to \$200 and, often, the trauma of being flipped or gored by the bull. Guts and Glory works on a similar theme. An angry bull with a chit between his horns is unleashed on an arena of a couple to several dozen inmates. The winning inmate must find a way to retrieve the chit from the bull's forehead, typically by throwing himself on the bull. Again, the result is usually a mix of men fleeing from the bull or putting themselves directly in the bull's path to win a modest monetary reward.



The poster advertising the 2002 Angola Prison Rodeo featured a cartoon illustration of men playing Convict Poker with one of the inmates in midair, the seat of his pants torn and positioned directly above a phallus-shaped bull's horn. Photograph courtesy of Keith Pilkey.

The third event that also serves to lampoon inmate cowboys and prison life more generally is Buddy Pickup, a traditional rodeo event adapted by Angola, in which one inmate rides bareback to pick up his “buddy” who waits atop a moving barrel. To be successful, the buddy must mount the horse with the other inmate and ride across the arena to the finish line. This event requires a high skill level and the complete lack of skill among inmates results, more often than not, in the buddy clutching his partner in any way possible to achieve balance. The effect is that inmates who “succeed” appear to be engaging in a somewhat frantic and clumsy sexual act, evoking issues of consensual and nonconsensual sex in prison and prompting roaring laughter from the audience. I watched this event with fascination a number of times before I finally gathered the nerve to ask my guide (the correctional officer required to accompany all media and other formal visitors) if my interpretation made sense. Laughing, she rolled her eyes and nodded, “Of course. That’s what it’s all about.” This kind of sexual parody is not limited to Buddy Pickup. The poster advertising the 2002 Angola Prison Rodeo featured a cartoon illustration of men playing Convict Poker. In the picture, one of the inmates is in midair, the seat of his pants torn and positioned directly above a phallus-shaped bull’s horn covered with a dripping substance. Because the posters for the rodeo are inmate created, this is not an example of institutional mockery (like that of Buddy Pickup). The inmate artist of this poster might have been mocking the inmate cowboys himself or might have created an image intended to be provocative enough to be chosen by the warden.



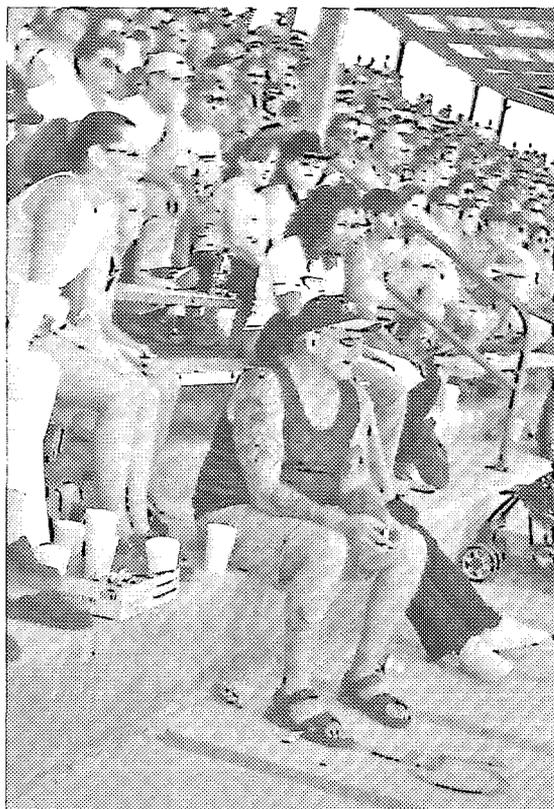
Most of the time, African American participants in the rodeo do not attempt, in any way, to adopt the cowboy image. The broad-striped shirts that all rodeo participants wear are a throwback to pre-reform prison garb, resurrected by Warden Cain to add to the spectacle. Photograph courtesy of the author.

Compounding the sexual politics of the rodeo are racial politics that are equally complex. Inmates who choose not to participate in the rodeo are often more critical of it. Some inmates, particularly African Americans, assert that the rodeo ridicules its participants as “clowns” or “monkeys.” As a result, despite the overwhelming majority of the inmate population at Angola being African American, rodeo participants are disproportionately white. Given the historical legacy of derogatory representations in popular culture, African American inmates may be more aware of the aspect of ridicule that pervades participation in the rodeo and the particular iconography of the white Western cowboy. In fact, the majority of African Americans in the rodeo do not attempt in any way to adopt the cowboy image. Instead, these participants tend to wear do-rags and tennis shoes, eschewing the boots and cowboy hats of their white counterparts. The incongruity of an urban look—combined with less prior exposure to livestock—seems to exacerbate the mockery from the audience. In one rodeo where an African American inmate was running from a bull (with laughter abounding), a spectator commented to me that the rodeo offered one of the last “acceptable” ways to make fun of black people.⁹

The obviously provocative parading of the Confederate flag during opening ceremonies (often by an African American inmate) before majority white spectators and participants contributes to a racialized climate. In addition, there is a

partitioned section reserved for inmate spectators and, more accurately reflecting the population of the prison, it is dominated by black inmates. The effect is striking—a confined group of African American inmates in white t-shirts, in contrast to an almost all-white unbounded audience. Thus, at the same time that African American inmates are spectators of the rodeo, they are part of the spectacle for visiting crowds.

Warren, a white participant, appeared completely unconcerned with racial representations, and like so many inmate cowboys, he did not put a lot of stock in the more general critiques of exploitation. Instead, he was quick to remind me of the significance of the rodeo for the participants—an opportunity to make a little money when they win events, to see and perform for loved ones, and a chance to be outdoors. The rodeo program notes another benefit: rodeo proceeds have contributed to the construction of a new arena, a multi-million-dollar education building, a new chapel, and a four-year bible college. Warren himself is a student at the college and is hopeful that his degree will reflect favorably upon him to members of the parole board. Inmate participants less enthusiastic than Warren explained that the only half-muted ridicule much of the audience directs at inmates (of which all inmates seem to be aware) is simply not that significant in their hierarchy of concerns. The chance to make money, be outdoors, challenge



Warren, a rodeo participant, explained that the ridicule from the audience (of which all inmates seem to be aware) is simply not that important. The chance to make money, be outdoors, challenge themselves, see family, and stare at beautiful women—which seems to include all women visitors at Angola—trumps temporary humiliations. Photograph courtesy of the author.

that “many a convict cowboy has eaten dirt from the arena floor.” The program refers consistently to the inmate cowboys’ lack of skill, crediting the animals with more intellect, as in “Buddy Pickup” where the horse has “other ideas” when a cowboy attempts to manage it. The rodeo presents inmates as brutish and dumb, and, most importantly, implies they need taming through incarceration, which Angola effectively provides.

THE BEAUTIFUL HEARSE: ART AT ANGOLA

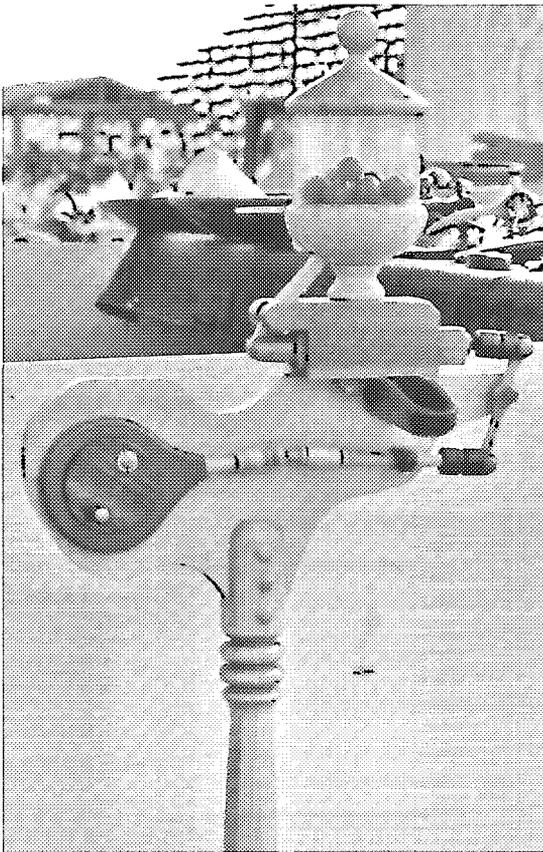
Warden Cain initiated the first Inmate Arts Festival in the spring of 2001 as a solo enterprise and soon after combined the festival with the rodeo to provide visitors with an entire day of festivities. The Inmate Arts Festival represents a more plausible claim of Angola’s reform. Inmates have a realistic chance of making small amounts of money, clearly gain a sense of accomplishment and self-worth in creating arts and crafts, and interact with the public without obvious denigration or injury. The Inmate Arts Festival, however, also imparts more implicit cultural meanings that serve to normalize incarceration through a selective presentation of the prison experience.

Beside the rodeo arena, the booths for the Inmate Arts Festival snake liberally around the prison grounds. Various inmate organizations, such as the Students of Islam, Toastmasters, and AA Sober Club, run the booths directly outside the arena, selling a range of local culinary treats, such as boudin balls (sausages with pork blood added), chicken on a stick, jambalaya, and crackling pig tails—all made by the inmates themselves. An inmate band takes center stage amidst the booths, and recently, the prison added a “kiddieland” with pony rides, assorted games, and activities, also operated by the inmates.

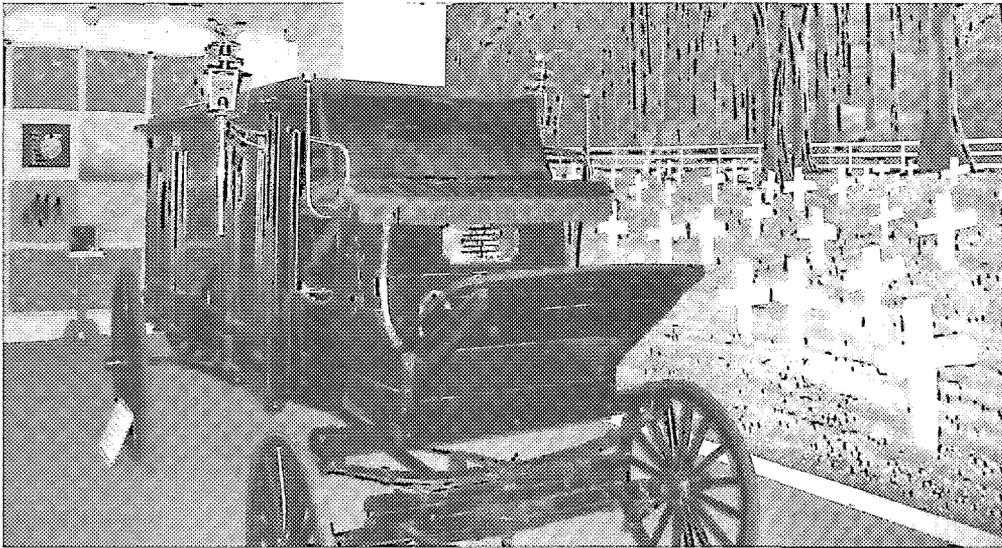
The expansion of the festival creates a more carnivalesque atmosphere, though one with undertones that could exist only within the context of a prison environment. For example, one of the most recent additions is a dunking booth that holds an inmate—in the traditional broad-striped shirt—who taunts youngsters and their parents to approach the event and try to dunk him. Similarly, the pony trot is run by inmates who, at times, appear awe-struck by young children, and understandably so, given that inmates rarely interact with children without immediate time limits and correctional officers. And parents who submit to pleading children hold a vigilance atypical of the average carnival ride. Another booth, standing alongside the rides, distributes free cartons of cigarettes, with long lines of inmates taking a break from working the festival to stock up on cigarettes. This part of the festival serves as a kind of warped funhouse where customary social roles and meanings are inverted, and *everyone*—inmates and tourists alike—appears wary.

The Inmate Arts Festival generates tens of thousands of dollars in a single

day—with a percentage of the profits earmarked for the Inmate Welfare Fund and the remainder for the inmates based on individual sales. The Inmate Welfare Fund commits money to projects deemed significant for the prison, but inmates—perhaps unfairly—resent the prison’s cut. Detailed expenditures from the fund are not readily available, although prison officials advertise some of the more visible results, such as the new church on prison grounds. Inmates do not handle money directly, and only “trusties”—inmates who have special work-related privileges as a result of long-term good behavior—interact with the public face-to-face. At Angola, trusties are typically lifers, and, like other crafts fair participants, they value the arts program as a venue to explore their talents, fill time, and interact with the outside world through the festival. Warden Cain has been very clear that any problems during the festival will result in its termination; thus, trusties have a vested interest in the positive presentation of themselves, the penitentiary, and their handicrafts. They serve informally to encourage good behavior among other inmates, ensuring that the festival runs smoothly, and they often communicate a desire to shape the public perception of inmates. A disproportionate number of trusty vendors are white, contributing to questions of institutional racism and to the impression that whites benefit more than African Americans in garnering pro-



Sandy's craft is wood turn, and he considers straight angles pedestrian. The inmate's most improbable seller is a wooden gumball machine made of light hardwood with dark accents. Smaller pieces of the machine show scrupulously carved details and dove-tail elegantly. Photograph courtesy of Keith Pilkey.



"Dignity and Death at Angola" features a large, beautifully handcrafted hearse, as well as an equally impressive handmade wooden casket. The placard at the exhibit reads, "Made By Inmates For Inmates." Photograph courtesy of Keith Pilkey.

ceeds from selling arts. Inmates who do not have trusty status sit behind a razor-edged fence at the festival, hawking their wares from a distance and appealing to visitors with an air of desperation, staring, shouting, pointing, laughing, and smoking.

Despite all the reminders of incarceration, the arts festival allows Sandy, an inmate and participant, to think of himself as a workingman. He views his wood-working craft as a continuation of his longstanding work ethic. Even though he acknowledges that he probably would not be woodworking "in the streets," he is sure he would have been good at his job whatever it would have been. He attributes this to what he sees as his "Cajun" approach to work—his craft an extension of himself rather than something he does only to earn money. In prison, he spends every minute possible in the hobby shop, collecting and experimenting with all kinds of materials, mostly wood, and the more unusual the better. He is only minimally tolerant of cherry, oak, and maple, but what he cannot accomplish in accessing rare materials, he makes up for in mechanical expertise and technique. His craft is wood turning, and he considers straight angles pedestrian.

Sandy began the informal tour of his work with his most improbable seller: a wooden gumball machine made of light hardwood, accented with darker woods. Smaller pieces of the machine bore scrupulously carved details. Individual pieces dove-tailed elegantly. The shapes bowed and curled, sensuous and strong. Wooden gumballs sat in a crowning glass urn, descending in seamless succession with the turn of the handle, finally perching on the hardwood platform. Sandy treated their arrival like a small miracle.



Inmates magnify the simple and make the mundane spectacular in attempts to create and convey meaning. They readily appropriate utilitarian objects representative of the “free” world—in this case paper scavenged from magazines, cigarette packs, and trash—and infuse them with new value, crafting commodities in ways that render both the products and their makers useful and distinctive. Photograph courtesy of Keith Pilkey.

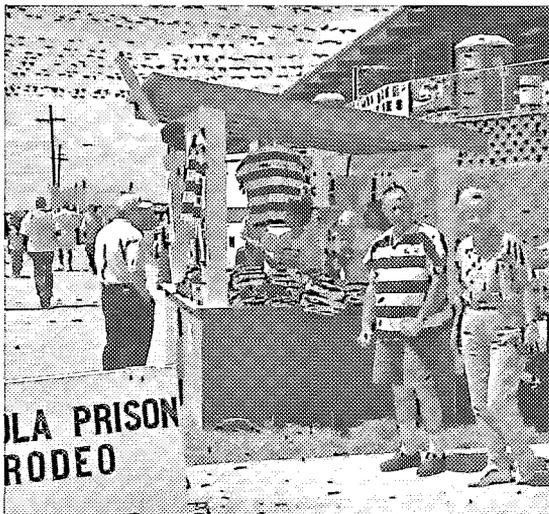
He also showed me a beautiful necklace, the beads made from deer antlers, and a second fashioned from olive trees. He was selling both for hundreds of dollars, but he did not really care if they sold immediately. In fact, he did not really want to sell to somebody who did not understand what he had created. Each necklace featured smooth rounded beads held by delicate, perfectly-sized rings. He talked animatedly about the rings and the difficulty of crafting each one expertly enough to secure the bead. He repeatedly explained the purpose of the rings and took obvious pleasure in the notion of holding the beads captive. He challenged me to push a bead through a ring. I couldn’t, of course, and his eyes gleamed.

We moved to his most popular seller, handmade wooden tops. They were elegant, more like antique bedpost finials than toys, and they spun forever, which delighted his eager audience. He explained that the duration of the spin is directly related to the turn of the wood, to onlookers who did not seem to care. When someone commented about the tops that Sandy makes, he smiled graciously, then murmured to me that he did not simply “make tops.” He raised his eyebrows as if we had shared secret. “You know what I mean? When I see a piece of wood, I don’t look at it and say, ‘I’m gonna make me a top,’” he explained in his distinct Cajun accent. “I’m gonna remove the wood that’s not a top.”

Sandy’s take on Michelangelo’s famous quote, and the self-regard with which he

approaches his work, is quite common among inmates at the Inmate Arts Festival. As with many inmate artists, Sandy expresses a poignant sense of the value of his work. This value has little, if anything, to do with western notions of originality or authenticity. Instead, the aesthetics of Angola prison art encompass quite different ideals of ingenuity, innovation, studied calculation, mechanical precision, and exquisite detail. At Angola, everyday objects are transformed into aesthetic enigmas, and, with time, commodities are laboriously crafted, painfully detailed, every detail infused with significance. Inmates magnify the simple and make the mundane spectacular, readily appropriating utilitarian objects representative of the “free world” and infusing them with new value in ways that render both the products and their makers useful and distinctive. Through the Inmate Arts Festival, inmates are able not only to create, but also to communicate newfound perspectives, creating new realms of interaction rather than reinforcing their removal from the social realm on the outside. Such sociability occurs both among inmates and between inmates and the public. Consequently, the festival gives inmates the unprecedented opportunity to present their handmade arts and crafts—and, perhaps more significantly, their carefully prepared identities—to a public that, at best, retains some combination of interest, hostility, and indifference in matters of crime and punishment.

Thus, on an individual level, inmates derive significant benefits from the Inmate Arts Festival; at the structural level, however, the Inmate Arts Festival is problematic. Like the rodeo, the festival clearly demarcates inmates from visitors, presenting inmates as a kind of live exhibition. Although this is more explicit in the rodeo, where inmates wear broad-striped shirts and participate in an actual performance, the distinction between inmates and visitors is nonetheless apparent in the arts and crafts area, too, even if it is more subtle. Inmates are dressed uni-



Flyers encouraged visitors to come to Angola to spend some “time” in the “big house,” but time in the big house during the festival is highly selective, sanitized for public consumption.

Photograph courtesy of Keith Pilkey.

formly in white jackets reading “Rodeo Worker” and do not stray far or for long from their assigned booths. This distinction is even less subtle, of course, with the majority of inmates who remain behind the prison fence.

Beyond issues of voyeurism, though, the Inmate Arts Festival creates an illusory impression for the public that inmates are content and that the prison system works. Prison theater, sports, and open houses create an “institutional display” in which the public at large is invited to inspect the institution and affirm the maintenance of high humane standards and dispel anxiety about involuntary establishments.¹⁰ This is even more evident in light of Angola’s free museum, which sits in a small house directly beyond the gates and which many tourists visit at some point before, during, or after the festival. A recent addition to the museum is an expanded exhibit entitled “Dignity and Death at Angola,” featuring at its center a large, beautifully handcrafted hearse, as well as an equally impressive handmade wooden casket. The placard at the exhibit reads, “Made By Inmates For Inmates,” and a wall of photographs features the workshop inside the prison with the inmate artisans busily at work. The exquisite craftsmanship evident in the hearse and casket called to mind the care and precision of Sandy’s wood-turning work. Visitors admired the beautiful hearse and repeatedly mused aloud, often with attempts at wry humor, about the talented inmates whose skills were not doing much for them now. Others commented on the humanity of the prison and its programs in making inmates feel useful. Enshrined within the museum’s tireless rhetoric of its ingenuity in penal reform despite its bloody history, the beautiful hearse is a staged symbol of inmate productivity and humane penal progress.

The festival as a whole further enhances this assessment, advancing an aura of rehabilitation that is, practically speaking, meaningless for most of the inmates it promises to serve at Angola. The crafting of a hearse and the workshop of caskets are not accidental. Owing to Louisiana’s enactment of natural life laws, the overwhelming majority of inmates at Angola will die there. The participants operating solo booths in the Inmate Arts Festival are trustees, most of whom are serving natural life sentences, and will only exercise any skills and benefits gained from the festival within the walls of the prison. Although this allows inmates a modicum of humanity—as well as a self-contained social order that promises benefits to everyone living and working in the prison—in the end it is a very limited notion of penal reform.

“Penal reform” at Angola actually amounts to displaying select inmates who appear to be content, as evidenced by their complacent productivity and contingent on their obeying prison rules and capitulating to the system. This is not necessarily without reason, particularly for Angola’s staff and administration who no doubt find relief in a smoothly operating prison. The danger, however, lies in mistaking a prison-sponsored festival for public discourse on penal politics. The opportunity for visitors (and ethnographers) to walk freely on a section of

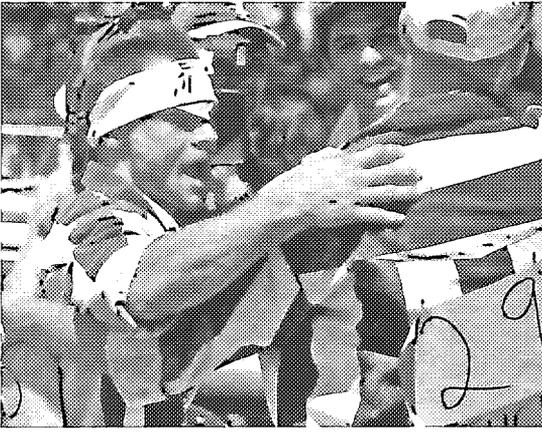


In many ways, the Angola Prison Rodeo and Inmate Arts Festival serves as a large and pre-arranged peephole. Inmates are on display, and the rodeo, in particular, is public theater, where inmates earn a number of fringe benefits for participating, including free soft drinks, tobacco, and a steak dinner with the warden. Photograph courtesy of the author.

the prison grounds, to watch the rodeo, to browse and buy arts and crafts, to talk to inmate vendors, and to cheer for or laugh at rodeo participants all contributes to the sense of experiencing a traditional festival environment. Yet, unlike other festivals, the environment is an active prison, suggesting that attendees are also, even to the smallest degree, *experiencing prison*. Flyers encourage visitors to come to the festival to spend some “time” in the “big house” — time which is, of course, highly selective and sanitized for the public. The festival environment leaves little room for critical reflection on incarceration at Angola. Instead, it is a chance for visitors and inmates alike to have fun. Being there and seeing inmates legitimates Angola prison reform for tourists who “experience” prison life and leave with impressions based on a stage-managed experience.

CONCLUSION

In one of the earliest and most enduring critiques of penal institutions, Michel Foucault discerned the public’s persisting fascination with inmates and prisons. Foucault was contemptuous of the early practice of public hangings and peepholes into prisons and asylums among the privileged elite.¹¹ In many ways, the Angola Prison Rodeo and Inmate Arts Festival simply represents a larger, more accessible,



The festival conjures a smoke and mirrors spectacle of complacency and complicity. And while inmates appropriate it for their own benefit—finding fellowship and support through their participation in the rodeo, for instance—their willingness and enthusiasm also becomes an integral part of a performance that normalizes incarceration. Photograph courtesy of Keith Pilkey.

and pre-arranged peephole. Inmates are on display and, in the rodeo in particular, the events are a public theater whereby inmates assume the role of brutes and buffoons. The Inmate Arts Festival, considerably more beneficial to participating inmates, elicits a more complicated critique in light of its exploitative *and* beneficial aspects. While the Inmate Arts Festival presents a more sustainable version of “good playin’” at Angola, its success contributes to a vision of penal reform that becomes falsely representative of the prison industrial complex.

The prison industrial complex constitutes a significant part of economic development initiatives, especially in the rural South, the region that outpaces all others in new prison construction.²² In addition to ethical questions regarding the prison economy, prisons have caused a range of social problems, including the perpetuation of racism and prison-dependent economies in small communities. In the face of mounting issues related to the prison industrial complex in the U.S., and in the South in particular, the activities at Angola must be viewed within a larger political economy. By laying claim to a self-professed innovative penal management and reform, the Angola Prison Rodeo and Inmate Arts Festival organizers conjure a smoke and mirrors spectacle of complacency and complicity. Inmates mediate that display, to be sure, appropriating it to some degree for their own benefit, but their willingness and enthusiasm become an integral part of a performance that further normalizes incarceration.

I concluded my work at Angola prison just as it announced its newest economic initiative—the Prison View Golf Course. An advertisement in the Prison Rodeo program boasted a nine hole, par 72 course located on the grounds of the prison. The golf course promised a “challenging round of golf,” a practice facility, and clubhouse. For ten dollars, visitors would be able to “tee off behind bars,” with the promise that the number one tee box offered a “spectacular view of Louisiana’s only maximum security prison.” As prisons spread like kudzu throughout the rural South, we can now ponder their impact over a leisurely game of golf on their grounds.

Read More About It

- Daniel Bergner, *God of the Rodeo: The Quest for Redemption in Louisiana's Angola Prison* (Ballantine, 1998).
- Anne Butler, *Angola: Louisiana State Penitentiary and a Half Century of Rage and Reform* (Center for Louisiana Studies, 1995).
- Celeste Ray, ed. *Southern Heritage on Display: Public Ritual and Ethnic Diversity within Southern Regionalism* (University of Alabama Press, 2003).
- Melissa Schrift, "The Angola Prison Rodeo: Inmate Cowboys and Institutional Tourism," *Ethnology* 43.4 (2004): 331-344.
- Melissa Schrift, "Angola Prison Art: Captivity, Creativity and Consumerism," *Journal of American Folklore* 119.473 (2006): 257-274.
- More information about the Angola Prison Rodeo can be found at the prison's website at <http://www.angolarodeo.com/>.

NOTES

1. Anne Butler, *Angola: Louisiana State Penitentiary and a Half Century of Rage and Reform* (Center for Louisiana Studies, 1995); Daniel Bergner, *God of the Rodeo: The Quest for Redemption in Louisiana's Angola Prison* (Ballantine, 1998), 59.
2. For discussions of the role of festivals in the U.S. South, see Rodger Lyle Brown, *Ghost Dancing on the Cracker Circuit: The Culture of Festivals in the American South* (University Press of Mississippi, 1997); Celeste Ray, ed., *Southern Heritage on Display: Public Ritual and Ethnic Diversity within Southern Regionalism* (University of Alabama Press, 2003); Helen Regis, "Second Lines, Minstrelsy, and the Contested Landscapes of New Orleans Afro-Creole Festivals," *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2002): 472-504; Melissa Schrift, "The Angola Prison Rodeo: Inmate Cowboys and Institutional Tourism," *Ethnology*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (2004): 331-344; Melissa Schrift, "Angola Prison Art: Captivity, Creativity and Consumerism," *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 119, No. 473 (2006): 257-274.
3. Joseph Hallinan, *Going up the River: Travels in a Prison Nation* (Random House, 2003), 203-218; Tracy Huling, "Building a Prison Economy in Rural America," *Invisible Punishment*, ed. Marc Mauer and Meda Chesney-Lind (New Press, 2003), 197-213.
4. Carl Sifakis, *The Encyclopedia of American Prisons* (Checkmark Books, 2003), 241-243.
5. Burl Cain and Cathy Fontenot, "Managing Angola's Long-Term Inmates," *Corrections Today*, Vol. 63, No. 5, 119-124.
6. Bergner, *God of the Rodeo*, 17-53.
7. *Ibid.*, 283.
8. Author interview, Louisiana State Penitentiary, April 2002.
9. Author interview with unidentified African American inmate, Louisiana State Penitentiary, April 2002.
10. Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Anchor Books, 1961), 101.
11. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (Vintage Books, 1995), 3-72.
12. Hallinan, *Going up the River*, 203-218; Huling, "Building a Prison Economy in Rural America," 197-213.



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