

Last Roundup at the Astrodome

BY LARRY ALBERT



Kerry and I went to the Rodeo!

1



It would be the last Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo ever at the Astrodome. The Astrodome is the big round building on the left of this picture, across the street from K Mart.

2



On our way to the steer auction, we stopped at a big glass case people were staring into.

3



The case floor was littered with new and used eggs. Spent and sighing chicks sprawled steps away from their broken birthplaces, exhausted from their demolition work.

4



Taller cases nearby held chicks who could stand up and do okay without their shells. They huddled by space heaters and pecked occasionally at the controls.

5

Helpful signs shaped like chicks or broken eggs reported interesting facts. SOME HEN HOUSES PROVIDE THEIR HENS WITH ENTERTAINMENT — PIPED IN MUSIC, said one. Another read, THE IDEAL TEMPERATURE IS 99.5 DEGREES AND THE IDEAL HUMIDITY 86 PERCENT.

6



Later, we watched a man demonstrate a big round pan with a non-stick coating that was "guaranteed not to warp, chip, crack, peel, or blister." He broke an egg into it.

7



The secret, he said, was the dome-shaped lid, which allowed moisture to accumulate at the top. The pan heats to the exact same temperature all around, he said. He showed us his completed omelette. "See how evenly it cooks?"

8



At the auction we saw some cows, but didn't buy any. "A little kid makes the cow look bigger," Kerry told me.

9

We watched the Hampshire Sheep Show next, in the Astroarena. Actually, it's called the Reliant Arena now, and even the Astrodome has been renamed the Reliant Astrodome, because a big energy company bought the naming rights to all the buildings there, and maybe also because the big indoor spaces rely on air conditioning for much of the year.

10



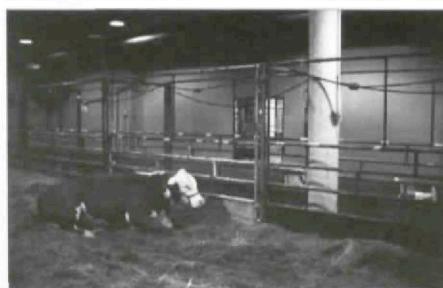
This was the last day of the rodeo, a man named Russell explained to us. The pigs had been here and gone, the lambs had come to take their place, and now only a few cows were left.

11

In a few days, Russell told us, the Astrohall would be torn down.

Russell said he was from Brownsboro, and that he had been coming to the Rodeo here since he was nine.

12



Every year he stayed overnight with his cows in the Astrohall. Otherwise, people might feed them things they shouldn't eat, he said. They had to stay within 5 percent of their weight to be sold.

13



Soon it was time for the main event, so we all herded into the Astrodome. Kerry took this picture from the ramps above, once we got inside.

14



We watched the finals for all the Rodeo events, including the steer wrestling and the calf scramble. We were pretty close to the front, but it was still easier to watch the big-screen TVs that hung in the middle.

15



This woman came by waving stuffed animals. "Get a horsey, they're housebroken," she growled.

16



The men's restroom had a trough for a urinal. A couple of jalapeño slices were floating in the one I used.

17

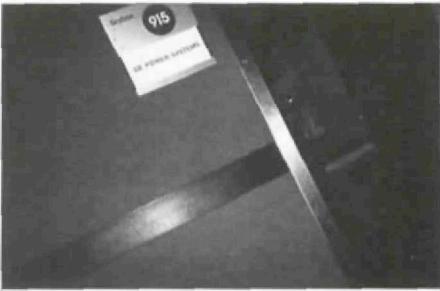


I decided to climb up to a higher level to get a bigger view. Wandering up the outside ramps, I stopped to take this picture of the parking lot, which had been turned into streets.

18

At the very top, I walked right past a security guard and into the skyboxes section. The skyboxes were closets filled with nachos and soda, and they had names of big companies on them, like Reliant Energy and Andersen.

19



Outside the skyboxes, private parties were going on, right in the corridor, next to tables covered with food and mostly empty seats. I walked almost the entire loop, feeling a little nervous.

20

I walked right through one crowded party, and as I was about to leave a woman stopped me and told me I couldn't, because I was carrying a water bottle. I had brought it with me. She said that Texas alcohol regulations prevented me from leaving with any kind of beverage, even water. So I finished it. I thought it was funny that I could sneak into the party, but I couldn't sneak out.

21



I asked her if she minded if I took a picture of the water bottle before I threw it away. She said that was fine, so long as I didn't include anyone at the party in my photo.

22

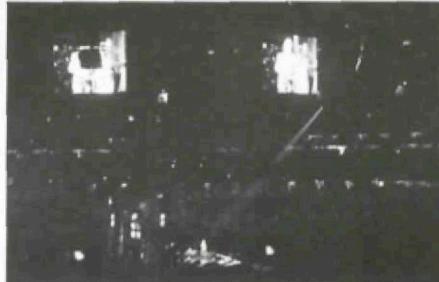
After some ceremonies commemorating the Rodeo's 37 years in the Astrodome, they brought out a rotating mobile stage for the concert. Then four workers dug into the dirt in the middle of the field to find outlets so they could plug it in. I liked this little ritual. I imagined that they were reenacting some historic event, maybe the discovery of electricity.

23



Drilling into the earth to find a power source is an important part of Houston culture.

24



Kenny Rogers introduced the acts: Legends of the Houston Rodeo. He thanked the Dome for being a "home away from home" for so long. Naomi Judd didn't sing, but she got the crowd to say "geodesic." Later I noticed Teleprompters below the stage.

25



"Baby, baby, don't get hooked on me," Mac Davis sang. "'Cause I'll just use you then I'll set you free." I started thinking about the chicks I had seen.

26



We got some ice cream on the way out. We also passed this truck that was dressed up to look like a microwave oven.

27



We waited more than an hour for a bus to take us to our parking lot. We stood in long, roped-off lines under a big tent. I asked a woman in front of us what she thought should happen to the Astrodome. Tear it down, she said. It's old.

28

We talked to a woman named Shelly, who said she had been on the barbecue committee. She said she had been at a party at one of the skyboxes. She said she liked the parties there because she ran into a lot of people she knew from previous years. She said she didn't like the new private boxes at Reliant Stadium, where the Rodeo would be next year, because they're closed off from each other, and you can't just run into people. She showed us her collection of Rodeo pins. She said she had worked at Enron, but was laid off last August, before the bubble burst. She said she loved working there. She also said she and some friends had teamed up to buy a lamb at the auction this year.

29



A few months went by. Kerry organized a softball game at a park off Bering Drive. It was her birthday, but she didn't mention it.

30



Her friend Bill brought along a radio so we could listen to the Astros game as we played. They were playing the Cardinals.

31



During a break in the game, two boys with radio-controlled racecars took over the field. They made the cars spin around in the dirt.

32



The next day I went back to see if the Astrohall had been torn down yet.

33



It hadn't, but there were construction fences all around, and giant excavating machines poised outside, looking like they were ready to do some damage.

34



Some buildings are just temporary, I guess.

35



The Oilers had left, the Astros had left, and now the Rodeo had too. I wandered through the new Reliant Center, past the Auto Show inside, and out to the Dome. There was a three-on-three basketball tournament.

36



Somebody was sitting on rolls of AstroTurf, making a phone call.

37



Workers were dismantling a hospitality tent. One of them folded it up and carried it away on his shoulder. It seemed symbolic at the time, but now I think they might have just realized that a tent wasn't necessary inside the Dome.

38



As I started home, I passed a big bubble hovering across the street. I hadn't seen it before.

39