

Rodeo 'trailblazer' celebrates 100 years

Legend marks birthday with many folks from the circuit

- **Shelley Shelton Arizona Daily Star**
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Rodeo legend Barton Clennon celebrated his 100th birthday Friday surrounded by more than 50 friends, family members and well-wishers at Marana's Cattlemans Cafe, 14901 W. Kirby Hughes Road.

Old Country Buzzards played bluegrass music as people streamed into the party, many of them old-timers of the rodeo circuit, some acknowledging they didn't know Clennon but definitely know of him.

Special guests included Paul Bond, 95, who has known Clennon since 1935, and Imogene Veach Beals, who traveled from Oklahoma for the party, and whose deceased husband, rodeo Hall-of-Famer Charley Beals, used to ride with Clennon.

Clennon's wife, Gerry, died in 1982, but their two sons, Bart Jr., 66, and Terry, 65, were there, along with assorted members of the press, from KGUN's Guy Atchley to Boston's Cowboy Spirit TV.

Yes, Boston.

It was there in 1936 that Clennon and 60 other rodeo contestants signed a petition demanding fair treatment from one of the biggest rodeo producers of the era in one of the year's most prestigious rodeos.

The petition would become the clarion call for the group now known as the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association, which is celebrating its 75th year.

Clennon is the only remaining living signatory from that day.

Bisbee author Lewis Bowman, 86 - who served as master of ceremonies at Clennon's birthday party - was there when it happened. His uncle, Everett Bowman, was one of the ringleaders of the group, along with Everett Bowman's brother-in-law, Hugh Bennett.

The men didn't realize what a big deal the petition would turn out to be, he said.

"Mainly they wanted their entrance fees," Bowman said. "One thing led to another when they got organized."

"Trailblazer" is the word Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association spokesman Jim Bainbridge used to describe Clennon in a recent article he wrote about him.

"He never won a world championship, but he was regarded by his peers as one of the best saddle bronc riders of his generation," Bainbridge said in an interview. "The thing that strikes me is that we tend to only think of him as this guy who survived to be 100 and is the last living signatory, but he really was one of the best of his day."

Clennon doesn't ride anymore, but he doesn't dwell on his age either.

"I try not to think too much about the 100 thing," he said.

Two years ago, he could still pull weeds for six hours in the sun, though now, not so much, he said.

He becomes animated when he talks about his old rodeo days, and he frequently punctuates his speech by pointing his index finger as he talks.

He was lured to the rodeo by what he saw as quick money, he said.

It was more worth it for him to ride a bucking horse for a few seconds and win \$35 than it was to do backbreaking work for a farmer or rancher from sunup to sundown for 50 cents or \$1 a day.

If not for Hugh Bennett and Everett Bowman, the rodeo would have gone away, he said. Forming the association not only kept the rodeo producers in line, it also kept the cowboys honest. If they acted dishonorably, they got fined or booted from the group.

Choosing that life wasn't without consequence, Bart Jr. said. His father has broken every big bone in his body at least once, including his neck, which has broken twice.

Not that it shows. Clennon has led a quiet existence in Picture Rocks for the last several years.

"He loves life. He's attached to it," Bart Jr. said of his father. "He's almost a caricature, he's so innocent. Maybe that's why he's lived so long. He doesn't have the madness of the 20th century in him."

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