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# The Tale of the Bull that couldn't be Ridden

BY DENNIS GAUB  
FOR THE BELGRADE NEWS

"Hometown legends are quite frequently stories ranging from the Herculean feats of some quiet, soft-spoken giant, to the gunfight at the O-K Corral, but few frontier towns can boast a story like that belonging to Belgrade."

That's how Ronald J. Iverson began "The Story of the Belgrade Bull," his lengthy account of the non-rideable Holstein bull — or rarely ridden bull, take your pick — that brought statewide and national fame to the fledgling town in Montana's Gallatin Valley starting more than 120 years ago. The narrative anchors Iverson's 1965 book, "The Princess of the Prairie — a History of Belgrade, Montana."

Iverson let his readers know what to expect in the opening paragraphs of the story about the bull, nicknamed Andrew Jackson Corbett, its last name derived from James J. "Gentleman Jim" Corbett, the famed boxer who won the world heavyweight title in 1892 when he knocked out John L. Sullivan in 21 rounds in New Orleans.

"Since many articles of humorous and interesting fashion were to be recorded during the life of the bull, the author has decided to serve simply as an editor of the original accounts, which are so well spiced with what an unsuspecting stranger may well suspect the story to be — a lot of bull," Iverson wrote.

The story started in the spring of 1893 when a young Holstein bull, raised by Annie Miller and sold to Al and Pres Johnston, first gained renown. The Bozeman Courier reported on March 11 that two Willow Creek men tried to ride the bull, "but it seems the bull rode them."

A week later, the Courier published a longer report headlined "Couldn't Ride The Bull - Exciting Exhibition Made by a Cowboy at Belgrade." Readers were told about a bull trained to buck as a calf, which "with experience and age has become such an expert in the art that no cowboy has been able to stick to him for more than three jumps, and most of

them are landed on the ground after one or two jumps."

The owners realized they had a magnet for Montana's many cowboys, so they offered a "standing wager" (amount not specified) that the bull couldn't be ridden. Hopefuls came from as far as 100 miles away to try and, once bucked, didn't try again. A cowboy named Pannell was one contender; he traveled 40-50 miles and was ready for a go in front of about 300 spectators. Pannell reportedly had practiced bull riding for several months; he had driven bulls into chutes, mounted them bareback and rode them out onto the prairies at high speed. At first, Pannell offered a \$50 bet that he could ride the Belgrade Bull, but he backed off and opted for the Johnstons' standing wager.

Here's what happened, according to the newspaper account of the time:

"At 1 p.m., the bull was led out west of town with two long ropes on his head, with six to eight men holding to each rope. The crowd gathered mostly upon the lumber yard nearby where they might witness the performance. The bull was blindfolded, and the work of saddling was begun.

"The bull, not being entirely satisfied



with the programme (sic), cut up a few antics and

delayed the operation, but soon quieted down and the saddle was adjusted to the satisfaction of Mr. Pannell, who soon mounted. When his feet were well in the stirrups and one hand clasped the buck straps in front and the other in the rear of the saddle, the word was given and the blind was taken from the bull's eyes.

"Then the fun began, and at about the second or third jump the rider landed in the snow, an easy fall without bruise or blood. The shout that went up from the spectators could have been heard half a mile, and Pannell retired the scene a sadder and wiser man."

The bull-riding business showed promise, so much that a March 25, 1893, Courier article quipped that the Johnstons brothers' profit from the animal could bankroll ventures into banking or railroad-building if they chose. Emboldened, the Johnstons presented a standing wager, which was published in the paper's April 1, 1893 issue.

Anyone who could ride the bull would win "a small fortune" of \$100. That prompted a cowboy from Crow Creek, its whereabouts uncertain, who purportedly was the best rider in the state, to try riding the bull. Although the young man had gone east with horses and was not due back for a few weeks, his father offered a \$4,000 bet that his son would succeed.

While everyone waited for the outcome, Belgrade took some ribbing from the Bozeman newspaper. The April 8, 1893, issue of the Courier ran this headline: "Entertaining gossip from a Bovine City Correspondent," followed

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by a caption that read, "The City of Bovine Fame." Next, the Courier stated without clearly specifying who said this: "It was been suggested that the name of our town be changed from Belgrade to Bullgrade — we object!"

(Iverson's account leaves unclear the fate of the Crow Creek cowboy.)

Corbett's saga continued for a couple decades. He rated a story and illustration in the Saturday Evening Post in its September 10, 1910 issue, and newspapers across the country carried the tale. A search of newspapers.com, a digital archive of U.S. newspapers, for the period 1893-1915 found 30 articles about the bull. Besides newspaper articles in Montana papers published in Anaconda, Billings, Butte and Helena, newspapers in Los Angeles, Rock Island, Ill., Pendleton, Ore., Salem, Ore., Portland, Ore., and St. Joseph, Mich., carried accounts. Curiously, some of the out-of-state papers said the bull's name was Starkey. Also, the Montana Historical Society archives include accounts in other Treasure State papers, among them ones in Kalispell and Fort Benton.

Iverson's account concludes by listing four men who were said to have ridden the Belgrade Bull: Starkey Teeplees, Joe Kirkwood, Bill Sitton and Jake Ross. Another 14 men said to have tried but failed are included in the chronicle.

At some point, the bull was sold to a Wild West show that toured the United States. The show went broke in Indiana where the bull was sold to a dairy farm; there his days ended as a regular non-bucking bull.