

# Trail riders mount up, hoof it to San Antonio for the rodeo

## 150-mile traditional trek began last week outside Corpus Christi

*BY MEGAN RODRIGUEZ STAFF WRITER*



**Kin Man Hui / Staff photographer**

**Doug Johanson from Iowa offers water to his horse during a break Thursday as the South Texas Trail Riders make their way toward the San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo along U.S. 181.**



**Kin Man Hui / Staff photographer**

**Point scouts William Golden, left, and Coy Dunn lead the way followed by trail boss Michael Dunn, center, as the South Texas Trail Riders near San Antonio.**

FLORESVILLE — While the sun rose over Floresville on Thursday, the lyrics of “Cattle Call” by Eddy Arnold rang out through the cool morning air, prompting horseback riders to prepare for another leg of their long journey to the San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo.

The South Texas Trail Riders have heard the yodeling over the speakers of a sound truck starting about 5 a.m. each day since Feb. 4, when the 150-mile ride began just outside Corpus Christi. Thursday evening, the approximately 19 horse and mule riders were expected to arrive in Bexar County. They should get to San Antonio today.

This is Ray Garcia’s 54th time making the trek. He’s the group’s president and assistant trail boss.

He normally rides, but this year he volunteered to drive the “potty wagon” — a trailer equipped with portable restrooms for humans. Every few miles, the group makes pit stops for people to use the facilities. Longer breaks are taken for lunches, and every evening the team sets up camp to rest up for the following day. Riders travel between about 14 and 23 miles every day.

Garcia, 72, said he was just 18 when he first went on the ride. The memory returns each year.

“I had such a great time the first time that I couldn’t believe it — just keeping the cowboy tradition alive going down the trail,” Garcia said. “I had such a great time that every year it seems like I tried to relive that.”

Michael Dunn, the South Texas Trail Riders trail boss, said his group and 10 others are making their way to the rodeo. Nine riders from each group will arrive in the AT&T Center on Saturday evening as the festivities get underway.

This is not Dunn’s first rodeo. The 53-year-old’s love of horseback riding and the family of enthusiasts he’s formed have led him to be trail boss four times and make the trek 23 times. He stays at the front of the pack of riders, but there are also a couple of scouts assigned to go ahead of the group to watch for traffic. The sound truck travels in the front, too, alerting riders to any obstacles in the road. Law enforcement from each county through which the group travels also helps escort the riders.

“You always look forward to getting to San Antonio, but it seems to go by too fast,” Dunn said. “It’s just a big family, and you know you’re coming to the end of it for the week. You’re always excited to start but don’t want to see it end either.”

Aside from the usual stops, Garcia said that riders also have been spreading the ashes of a past trail boss and president, Terry Reichel, at a few locations along the way. He said those stops are a time to remember Reichel, who last served as president around the early 2000s.

Since the late 1980s, Linda Kay Murphy, 66, has been going on the ride when she can. This is her first time spending the whole time as the sound truck driver, going in circles around the campsite each morning playing “Cattle Call” and making announcements about that day’s ride and weather.

“It’s good people,” she said of the group’s members. “It’s a good fellowship. Everybody cares about everybody. Everybody is willing to help out and do things for the good of the program.”

This was 34-year-old Donald Love's first time joining the South Texas Trail Riders. The South Carolinian rode alongside his girlfriend, Kayla Williamson, 34. Love said he hoped the trip continued to go smoothly.

This year's trip was long awaited after the pandemic caused a cancellation last year. The pandemic and the cold weather at the start of this trail ride also led to a smaller turnout, especially in the out-of-state crowd. The number of riders fluctuates each day, but Dunn said it has reached almost 30 people at one point this year. Riders range from as young as 5 or 6 to 80 and higher.

The weather didn't deter Bill Paynter, 86, who made it in from Iowa despite getting delayed by snow at one point. This was Paynter's 22nd ride. The friends that Paynter has made over the years keep him coming back to Texas.

"Not everybody can do it," he said with a chuckle. [megan.rodriquez@express-news.net](mailto:megan.rodriquez@express-news.net)