

Famed Rodeo Photographer Louise Serpa Dies at 86

February's Tucson Rodeo will be absent a beloved friend of 50 years.

(Tucson, Ariz.) – Internationally acclaimed photographer Louise Serpa died peacefully at her home in Tucson on January 5, 2012. Serpa, who battled cancer for over three years, photographed the Tucson Rodeo for the final time in February 2011. Serpa is survived by daughters Lauren Serpa and Mia Larocque, and grandson Taylor Grammar.

Gary Williams, general manager of the Tucson Rodeo and Serpa's long-time friend said, "I saw Louise last Sunday and she asked him how long the two had been sparing back and forth—over 30 years." "Damn, that's not long enough," quipped Louise, "So I guess I'll stick around a bit longer." she said. "I wish she would have made just one more rodeo," said Williams. "Her passing represents not only a personal loss, but a professional loss as well. Louise did more to promote the sport of rodeo, and specifically the Tucson Rodeo, than anyone," he added.

Serpa's daughter, Mia Larocque, a professional photographer who learned her trade from her mother, believes, "There's no better way to experience the action and emotion of rodeo than through the eyes of Louise Serpa."

Serpa has been widely credited with spurring the international notoriety of the sport of rodeo through her gallery-style images; she was often been referred to as "the Ansel Adams of rodeo". "Rodeo fans and art lovers have paid attention to our sport, our town and the glory of the cowboy through Louise's remarkable images of the Tucson Rodeo," said Joan Liess who has handled communications for the annual event since 1990. "She was so admired by her professional peers, and loved by generations of cowboys and cowgirls who were the focus of her work."

A tribute to Serpa will be scheduled at the Tucson Rodeo in February; the 87th annual event (Feb. 18-26) would have been the 50th time Serpa photographed the action at the event. A collection of Serpa's images are currently featured in the photo gallery at www.tucsonrodeo.com.

"Spirit of Rodeo Shared in Images", an exhibit of Serpa's photographs, along with the works of her protégé and daughter, professional photographer Mia Larocque, opens Friday, January 6 at the Tucson Airport's Lower Link Gallery. The exhibit is free and open to the public.

About Louise Serpa

Serpa was born in 1925 and grew up in the high society world of New York City. But a trip to Nevada when she was just a child made a lasting impression. "I thought I had died and gone to heaven," she recalled.

In 1943 she revealed her "inner-cowgirl" when she rode sidesaddle down the banister of the Waldorf-Astoria in Manhattan and ripped the back out of her floor-length dress at her debutante ball. At 17, she took a summer job working at a Wyoming dude ranch where she met Lex Connelly in 1943. Connelly introduced her to the world of rodeo, a world she would come to love.

Serpa returned East and studied opera at Vassar, where she graduated with a degree in music, often interrupting her studies to watch rodeos at Madison Square Garden. She sang and danced in nightclubs and performed at USO shows on the East Coast during World War II, but decided music was not a career for her.

Serpa headed West in search of opportunities and a fresh start, a place where she could exercise her freedom and exert her independence. In Nevada, she married a local cowboy, Gordon "Tex" Serpa, in 1953 and they had two girls, in 1956 and 1959. When the marriage ended in 1960, Serpa and the girls moved to Tucson, Ariz. where she turned a hobby into a career. She first began taking pictures of cowboys competing in local rodeos. "They bought the film and bought me beers," she quipped. A little desperate for money, Serpa turned *pro*, taking photographs one weekend and selling 5x7 copies the following weekend for 75 cents each.

"I shot from the side and through the fence, and I did anything I could to make money with a camera," she said.

Serpa was the first woman to be allowed to enter the rodeo arena to photograph action shots on film. She also was the first woman allowed on the courses of the Grand National in England, and the first to cover the Dublin Horse Show. In 1963, the Professional Rodeo Cowboy Association (PRCA) bestowed on her a pink press card marking her debut to photograph RCA rodeos inside the arena.

"I was told I could get in the ring, but not to get in the way. So I learned pretty quickly not to get in the way. If you do, you get run over," Serpa said. She had her share of kicks, bruises and tight moments. An angry bull once broke her sternum in Boulder City, and she was once "squeezed like a tube of toothpaste" up against a fence. In her book, *Rodeo*, she warns, "Never don't pay attention." Serpa took a horn again at the 2010 Tucson Rodeo while standing behind the bucking chutes. The encounter landed Serpa in the emergency room where the staff wanted their photo taken with the "crazy grandmother" who was hooked by a bull. "So much for never don't pay attention," lamented Serpa.

The television show, *To Tell The Truth*, got wind of this East Coast girl inside the rodeo ring and invited her to appear on the show. "I didn't fool the panel. So, I asked Kitty Carlisle how they knew? She told me 'You look like a Vassar girl!' And I've been trying to live that down ever since."

Serpa's lifetime of work was recognized in 2002, when she received the Tad Lucas Memorial Award at the National Cowboy Museum in Oklahoma City. Serpa was grateful to the entire rodeo family. "They were kind and supportive" and "let me be a part of so many peoples' lives, their children, grandchildren, and now great grandchildren. Rodeo has been the greatest thing for me. I loved the people and the sport. But it never occurred to me that I would be any part of it. I shot it because I loved it!" Serpa donated her body of work to the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City.

The Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association honored Serpa with its PRCA Excellence in Photography Award in 2005; Serpa is also an inductee of the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame in 1999 and the Pima County Sports Hall of Fame in 2005.

A national documentary, *When the Dust Settles*, was shown on PBS, and in 1995, Aperture published *Rodeo*, which also includes commentary from Larry McMurtry. The book is available on Amazon.com.