Celebrating Tradition

Oldest, biggest and still the best, Charro Days celebrates its 72nd year in 2009 with all the parades, colorful costumes, music and dance that two nations can muster.

Born in the gray days of the Great Depression, Charro Days has always known how to lift spirits and delight the senses during trying times. That’s what a group of Brownsville businessmen had in mind back in 1937 when they first started planning this special binational salute to a shared culture.

From the very first celebration in 1938, the whole region got involved in the fun. People dressed in the traditional costumes of Mexico, and the men grew beards in honor of the Mexican cowboys – the Charros – who were heroes of the borderlands.

Horse-drawn, hand made floats delighted the crowds in downtown Brownsville in that first parade. Charros and Chinas rode by on horseback along with soldiers from old Fort Brown. The idea was to celebrate the traditions of Mexico and to cement the friendship of two cities.

Chickie Samano, a Charro Days volunteer known for her joyful "gritos" to launch the celebration each year, still wears the elaborate costumes her mother began collecting for that first Charro Days.

“When I was a kid everybody turned out in costume for Charro Days,” she said. It made you feel like you were really involved. I was 70 years old in December. I feel like I’m 15 right now because it’s Charro Days. WHOO!”

Fireworks, carnivals, street parties and elegant...
Costumes and Culture Highlight Charro Days

Swirls of skirts, delicate lace and silver embellishments – Brownsville decks itself in the colorful culture of Mexico during the 72nd annual Charro Days, Feb. 22 through March 1.

Parades, fireworks, dances and street festivals are all part of this unique binational festival, which celebrates the shared traditions and friendship of Brownsville and Matamoros.

Residents and visitors are encouraged to join in one of Charro Days’ oldest and most beloved traditions – wearing the authentic costumes of Mexico whenever possible.

“Every state in Mexico has its own traditional dress,” said Charro Days Inc. President John Patriarca. “Historically that was a part of the festival. Wearing authentic Mexican attire. It can be as simple as wearing the Aguila shirt with the eagle on the back, or as elaborate as a Charro suit with silver coins down the legs.”

Brownsville native Chickie Samano has her mother’s exquisite collection of Charro Days dresses – three cedar chests full. She prides the China Poblana costume her mother wore in 1989, during the very first Charro Days Fiesta.

Her favorite, however, is the China Talavera from Puebla, with its royal blue embroidery.

“You hardly ever see one of those; there are very few of them left,” Samano said. “I’ll probably wear it to one of the dances at Fort Brown!”

Samano actually begins dressing for Charro Days in early February – wearing one of the many embroidered Mexican dresses for sale in Brownsville and Matamoros. It delights her to see school teachers dressed for the festival, and Charro Days tourists with flowers in their hair.

“When I’m dressed in my different outfits, I feel like I’m really involved,” said the lively septuagenarian, known for her joyful “Gritos” in the festival’s opening ceremonies. “For me, this is the best time of the year – Charro Days. There’s nothing better than Charro Days!”

Patriarca said everyone is strongly encouraged to dress up for dances, parades and other events that spread across the city from the food booths and music of Sombrero Fest in Washington Park, to Matamoros and its Fiestas Mexicanos.

“It gets everybody in the spirit of Charro Days and shows that everybody recognizes what Charro Days is all about a celebration of both cultures,” Patriarca said.

Parades are a big part of Charro Days, including the Children’s Parade on Feb. 26. Brownsville school children dress in colorful traditional costumes and learn intricate dance steps in a performance that teaches them about the rich history of Mexico.

Sixteen Longoria Elementary students will perform La Danza de Los Concheros during Fiesta Folklorica, the kickoff celebration for Charro Days, and in the Children’s Parade. They will be among hundreds of Brownsville school children who get the afternoon off to march, ride or watch this beloved procession.

“I feel very nervous and scared because this would be the first time I will dance in front of all the people, but at the same time I feel very proud,” said fourth-grader Mario Davila, one of the Longoria dancers.

F o u r t h - g r a d e r Alina Gutierrez said performing in the parade makes her parents very proud.

“To come out in the parade is one of my dreams,” she said.

One option for watching the Friday Illuminated Night Parade is the third annual “Noche de Ninos,” hosted by the Children’s Museum of Brownsville. This parade-watching event takes place at the Law Offices of Frank Costilla, 5 East Elizabeth St. With a $25 ticket for adults, guests may park in the Palm Village Parking Lot on Palm Boulevard and a shuttle service will take them to the Costilla office.

The biggest parade of all, The Grand International Parade on Feb. 26, includes floats, bands and dancers from two countries.

Dances and costumed balls are another important part of Charro Days, starting with Baile del Sol at the Charro Days headquarters on Feb. 22. This free event also includes the traditional “Grito” yell to launch the festival.

Chorro Days enthusiasts will have other chances to dress up at the Baile Ranchero on Friday night and the Charro Days Dance Saturday night at Jacob Brown Auditorium.

And don’t forget the big Charro Days Carnival at the UTB/TSC ITEC Center, Feb. 26 through March 8. Rides and games for the entire family!