Inmates at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola are thrown from their seats as a bull charges into them at the Angola Prison Rodeo in October 1997. The event is called "Inmate Poker," and is a competition between four inmates who are required to sit as long as possible as a bull charges at them. Every weekend during the month of October, hundreds of visitors cheer on the inmates in a variety of rodeo events.

**It's rodeo season at Angola prison**

ST. FRANCISVILLE (AP) — From the shady porches of St. Francisville, patches of the two lanes of La. 66 are visible as they weave their way westward into the muscled, hilly Angola. Known as the Tunica Trace, the road cuts 20 miles through a lonely part of the state, a large expanse of rolling hills, shaded trees, and quiet creeks.

For many men, this tranquil road is their last look at freedom. La. 66 ends at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola. Death Row is in the building on the right on the other side of the security checkpoint.

Every Sunday in October, hundreds of outsiders go to the prison to cheer on some of the inmates, who, at least for an afternoon, become wild men battling wild beasts in one of the wildest shows in the country: the Angola Rodeo.

Spawning more than 15,000 acres, all the way to the Mississippi state line, Angola is the largest maximum-security prison in the United States. It once had a reputation as the nation's bloodiest, and while conditions reportedly have improved drastically under the direction of Warden Burt Cain, the statistics still paint a somber picture.

Eighty-six percent of the 5,000-plus inmates here are violent offenders; 32 percent of them will grow old and die at Angola, most without regular visitors. Family and friends tend to drift away after the first few years, say prison officials.

Those who arrive at Angola without handcuffs can explore the Angola Museum just outside the gates to get a glimpse of the history of life on the "Farm."

Exhibits include handmade weapons machetes and hatchets, even a gun made from a pipe. "Old Sparky," the actual electric chair, is on display; on the right wall beside the chair are portrait photos of inmates who died in this chair. On the opposite wall is a life-size color photo mural of the gurney where death row inmates now are strapped before an IV line is inserted and lethal chemicals are injected into their bodies.

There also are photos from movies made at Angola, items of clothing worn by the movie stars and by inmates, registration books listing from 100 years ago when both men and women were imprisoned here, clothes worn by prisoners — and movie stars — and lots more photos. A few can buy baseball caps and cups with the prison's name on it.

While Angola is now regarded by many as a model maximum security prison, the museum takes no shame in documenting its violent past.

The annual rodeo, which often sells out, is one of the few ways that outsiders can get a glimpse of Angola.

Some see the rodeo as a brutal gladiator event, others look at it as a dangerous sport, but whatever the reaction, when inmates risk their lives for entertainment and money people are fascinated, and show up by the thousands.

It's the longest running prison rodeo in the United States, dating back to 1965, when some inmates and prison personnel started it for the entertainment of those who lived and worked at Angola.

According to the rodeo Web site, a few outsiders were allowed to watch in 1967; they sat on wooden crates. It was such a hit that the prisoners built an arena with seats. One year the bleachers collapsed; another year rain drenched everyone — but both times, people stayed to watch.

Now it's professionally produced, with contractors providing the bulls and other animals and professional clowns on alert to create diversions in case of problems.