

Cow Palace Events Timeline

Lions, and tigers, and bears and much more

Just like the Bay Area, the Cow Palace has a story full of the serious, the funny, and the controversial.

The Big Show

Starting in 1948, **Ringling Bros. & Barnum & Bailey Circus**—the Cow Palaces' 1st non-agricultural event—returned annually for over 50 years.

The Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus returned to “The City by the Bay” annually for over 50 years on or around Labor Day weekend. With its extravagant arena performances at the Cow Palace as well as outdoor sideshows, for many years the Circus was an enormously popular and affordable entertainment.

Folklore has it that the Cow Palace was the first facility in the U.S. that because of the 50,000 sq ft North Hall and 50,000 sq ft South Hall could accommodate the circus indoors without tents. This was a great convenience for Ringling.

The circus train was stationed at the foot of Geneva Avenue. All the animals and equipment paraded up Geneva Avenue to the Cow Palace to the delight of school children that turned out for the annual special procession.

Fortunately, **Bob Hope** started the tradition of performers signing the box office walls at the Cow Palace in 1963. Today the wall boasts signatures of The Beatles, Elvis Presley, and hundreds of noted public figures.

These are some Big Show events that the Cow Palace has offered over the decades:

- 1951: Sonja Henie Ice Revue
- 1952: Musical Ride of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police performed at the Cow Palace for the first time
- 1963: Bob Hope, who began the tradition of signatures on the box office walls
- 1988: Moscow Circus
- 1989: Earthquake Benefit including Bob Hope
- 2000s to 2010s: American Idol auditions

Sports and “sports”

In 1953, the **Harlem Globetrotters** performed for the first time at the Cow Palace.

Pacific Coast Athletic Corp. brought **Big Time Wrestling** to Cow Palace in 1961. This often featured the **Blonde Bombers** led by **Ray Stevens**. The accompanying musical extravaganza featured **Elvis Presley** in 1962.

Roy Shire—the promoter—carried a pistol and usually was in the box office, jacket off, with his pistol in plain view long before “open carry.” He would occasionally spit on the floor (before carpets) to add a little color. During some lean years his monthly wrestling events literally kept the Cow Palace lights on and the switchboard busy.

On one occasion, the State Athletic Commission ordered the Cow Palace to lock the doors and bar Shire from staging his event. The Cow Palace refused and the show went on with no sign of the athletic commission. For a few years, in deference to Roy, the Cow Palace held off the World Wrestling Federation.

These are other sports and “sports” events the Cow Palace has hosted:

- 1966: Golden Gate Invitational featuring the Master Race which included US Senator Alan Cranston
- 1969: Rocky Marciano works as a wrestling referee
- 1970: Evil Knievel set the indoor world record for a motorcycle jump on March 3. He had jumped 12 cars the day before, but a Hell's Angel threw a beer bottle at him on the ride into the arena. His 15-car jump ended with a wipeout into a pole and a shattered ankle.
- 1975: World's Largest Pie Fight
- 1978: Hookers' Ball, a fund-raiser for COYOTE, an organization attempting to decriminalize prostitution and protect sex workers' legal rights
- 2004: WWE
- 2005: WWE Smackdown
- 2006: Malice at the Palace – Mixed Martial Arts
- 2000 – 2009: Exotic Erotic Ball, the longest-running public adult themed event in the world

Lifestyle and Exhibitions

- 1957: San Francisco National Sports & Boat Show. Arguably, the most distinguished event in the early days of the Cow Palace. Over its 45-year run, for 10 days, the show took literally every building at the Cow Palace except perhaps the Sheep and Hog Barns. Parking lots routinely filled to capacity on both weekends of the 10 day show. Parking attendants with radios were stationed on the arena roof to spot open spaces.

Tom Rooney created a special, life-sized theme boat each year that was always displayed in the lobby. The year of the Hot Dog Boat doubled hot dog sales! As the show grew in size with larger boats being added, the large make-up door area was excavated to accommodate the monstrous yachts and the cranes needed to unload them for display in the arena.

- 1958: Billy Graham Crusade – 58 consecutive days with 696,525 attendance.
- 1980s to 2000s: Success Seminars with speakers that included Bill Clinton and Joe Montana
- 1997: Billy Graham Crusade
- 2000s and 2018: San Francisco Garden Show

Up to today

- 2000: The Great Dickens Christmas Fair calls the Cow Palace “home”
- 2010’s: Body Art Expo
- 2014: Hemp Con
- 2015: Taste of the NFL (Super Bowl event) [ongoing?]
- 2016: High Times
- 2000s: AIDS Lifecycle
- 1963: Golden Gate Kennel Club Dog Show. A very prestigious show, at one time it was advertised as the second largest benched dog show in the United States, the first being the Westminster show at Madison Square Garden.