

Ferdie J. Deering

AUG 12 1982

## Crowd Estimates Usually Exaggerated

WHEN THE ERA movement was gasping its last hours recently, a rally was held at the Capitol where police estimated its size at 10,000.

A photograph published in this newspaper showed a fair turnout of perhaps 1,000 or 1,100 people. Maybe some people had gone home before the photographer arrived, or else most of those included in the estimate were on the other side of the building.

About the same time, the new Oklahoma City Stockyards Livestock Exchange building was dedicated. Reports said 3,000 people were there but the Oklahoma Cowman photographer didn't get half that many in front of his camera.

A report from Washington said that more than one million Americans saw the Oklahoma exhibit at the Festival of American Folklife on the Mall in July. Who enumerated them?

Estimates of numbers involved in parades, demonstrations or disasters often run into astronomical figures — hundreds, thousands or hundreds of thousands. Crowds hardly

ever seem to be underestimated.

People moving about are nearly as hard to count as a flock of turkeys, so considerable allowance should be made for error, like 50 percent or so. Nevertheless, it seems to be a little ridiculous when estimated numbers outpace inflation.

It doesn't take a great many of some things to seem like a lot. Take a swarm of wasps, for example. If you disturb a nest six or eight may fly out to investigate. If they attack, you might "estimate" that they constituted a large, well organized air force.

Years ago Oklahoma A&M College held a "Feeders Day" annually in the old Animal Husbandry building. On one occasion when it appeared that an unusually large crowd was on hand, writers and radio men were making "guesstimates" of its size, ranging from 600 to 6,000.

The group scattered when someone counted the chairs per row and multiplied by number of rows. It turned out some 1,200 to 1,500 were present, although it was claimed that more than 2,200 went through

the free barbecue line at noon.

Once in a while photos substantiate big estimates. This happened when a rock festival and anti-nuke rally was held in the Rose Bowl in June. A picture showed the arena was well-filled, lending credence to the estimate of 80,000.

There also may be understatement. Occasionally while visiting ranches as a farm writer we have asked owners about what appeared to be sizable cattle herds in several pastures.

"Well, I think maybe I've got about a hundred mother cows," the rancher might say, "and about that many steers, but I'm going to ship out most of them tomorrow." No wild boasting about big numbers for the press. The tax assessor might read it.

It isn't easy to figure out how many people, dogs, cats, pigeons, sparrows or any other living thing might be gathered.

One thing seems certain, however. If you want to make a big showing, don't let anybody count the chairs or take a photograph. You'll come out a lot bigger with an "estimate."