

'Biggest Little Show In The World' started in 1910

By Sue Stafford
Correspondent

For the past 79 years, nothing has derailed the Sisters Rodeo — until this year, the 80th. The cowboys and cowgirls who travel every year to Sisters the second weekend in June to compete in the rodeo, all got bucked off this year by the toughest bronc — COVID-19.

Whenever early cowboys and ranch hands gathered to socialize, some kind of contests with animals were usually involved. The first record of a rodeo in Sisters was detailed in the local history book, "That Was Yesterday" (available from the Three Sisters Historical Society).

The authors wrote, "Jesse Scott recalls a bucking contest that was held in 1910 on Fir and Adams streets. This used to be the old ball diamond. There was no corral. The wild horse was snubbed up to the saddle of one horseman, the contestant got on the wild horse and the horse was turned loose... There was no admission charge (for spectators) and no entry charge (for participants). The spectators watched from any vantage point which they considered safest."

In a second entry, the authors relayed a story about another early rodeo held in the vicinity of Main and Oak streets about 1922:

"This rodeo was sponsored by the Commercial Club. The women of the group served dinner in the schoolhouse at noon on the day of the rodeo. This rodeo consisted of races, bucking contests and bull riding. The money raised by the dinner and the rodeo was to be spent on promoting the town of Sisters."

Since the first formal rodeo in 1942, much about the rodeo has remained unchanged, although the location of the rodeo grounds has moved a number of times. The first two years, the rodeo was held on the Creighton place, which adjoined property that now houses the Sisters airport.

Twenty head of horses were rounded up from the wild herds roaming the countryside, and pastured at the original Black Butte Ranch, for use in bareback and wild horse riding events. Over the years, a number of local stockmen provided livestock and, nowadays, professional stock companies supply the animals.

An added feature of the second rodeo was a barbecue dinner served at noon at the rodeo grounds. In addition to the regular rodeo crowd, many Army soldiers who were on maneuvers in the

area training to enter World War II, attended both the rodeo and barbecue.

After two years on the Creighton place, a rodeo association was formed and incorporated in 1944. Following the purchase of ground adjoining the city on the northwest (near present day Hoyt's Hardware & Building Supply), the association and many of the local citizens did the carpentry on the grandstand and prepared the arena. Lumber for the corrals, chutes, bleachers, and 2,500 grandstand seats was donated by Maurice Hitchcock, association board member and owner of the Sisters mill. The association continued to put on shows there until 1956.

The rodeo weekends usually began with the Queen's Ball on Friday night in the high school gymnasium when the rodeo queen was crowned. Saturday morning was the rodeo parade down Cascade Avenue. In the early years there was a horse show for locals at the rodeo grounds featuring riding skills and children's pony races prior to the afternoon's rodeo. Novelties included barrel races, relay races, wild-cow-milking contests and pony-express races. One highlight was the chariot races.

Rodeo clowns, some with pet donkeys and one with a chimpanzee who played in Tarzan movies, and bull fighters who entertain and protect the cowboys, have always been popular with the fans as are the special performers like the trick riders, precision equine drill teams, and the One-Armed Bandit.

A buckaroo dance was held Saturday night at the high school gym (sometimes known to get a little rowdy) followed by the Buckaroo Breakfast Sunday morning. The rodeo program Sunday afternoon followed the same pattern as Saturday's.

In 1955, Sisters rodeo fans were introduced to the Brahma bulls imported from Mexico. The program that year described them this way, "Brahmas are fast as deer, mean as wolves, and can jump as though their legs were a combination of springs and India rubber." Several years ago an evening of Xtreme Bulls was added on Wednesday night of rodeo week. There are now four rodeo performances and no organized dances.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars Post No. 8138 and their Women's Auxiliary sponsored the rodeo in 1956 and 1957 after making needed repairs and constructing new concession stands. The money made those two years went toward the purchase of the Sisters Cascade Theater.



PHOTO COURTESY THREE SISTERS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Some members of the 1944 Sisters Rodeo Association. Left to right: Lewis Luckenbill, Ellis Edgington, Maurice Hitchcock, Pete Leithausen, Charles Boardman and Carl Campbell.

The rodeo court and queen, usually young women in their teens and twenties, have represented the rodeo since the beginning. They are now selected based on their horsemanship, speaking ability, and presentation, whereas in the first years, the girls competed for the title by selling raffle tickets for a steer. The most tickets sold earned the queen's crown. One year, in 1961, the court was made up of Sisters girls 10, 11, and 12 years old.

Food has always played a role in the rodeo, including concession stands on the rodeo grounds and the Buckaroo Breakfast held on Sunday morning on the grounds. The breakfast menu over the years has consisted of fried potatoes, ham and

bacon, hotcakes, eggs and coffee. For a number of years, Ellis Edgington's pioneer pan bread was always served. In the 1940s and early '50s, buffalo steak or buffalo burgers were on the menu.

With new governmental regulations and the need for costly improvements to the grounds, the decision was made to sell the property with the grandstands and all the buildings. Not wanting to see their rodeo disappear, the citizens of Sisters reorganized, with Homer Shaw as the president of a new rodeo association. For several years in the late 1970s, the rodeo was held on private property with borrowed bleachers and temporary fences. Finally, in 1979, the rodeo found its

permanent home on 33 acres purchased from Carl and Virginia Campbell who were 1940 original rodeo association members.

From the very beginning, the planning and execution of the rodeo has always been conducted by a large cadre of local volunteers. To this day, the rodeo is known far and wide as "the biggest little show in the world" because the rodeo purse is the largest one in the country offered on the second weekend of June, making it popular with the best rodeo contestants.

For a town of less than 3,000 residents, that's an accomplishment — with deep roots going back 80 years.

**IT'S BEEN
A GREAT
RIDE!**

**CONGRATULATIONS,
SISTERS RODEO
ON 80 YEARS!**

WE LOOK FORWARD TO SUPPORTING YOU IN 2021!

The Nugget Newspaper