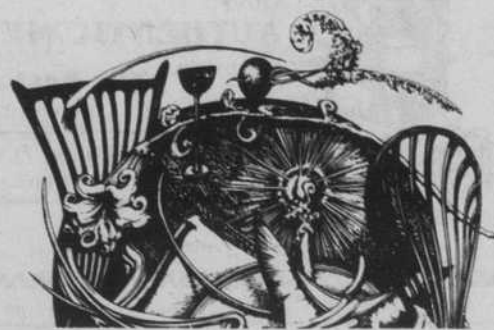


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Small-town festivals add spice to summer life

The months of June, July and August are times for swimming in fresh-water lakes, spitting watermelon seeds, sunbathing and small-town festivals. These are the kinds of get-togethers everyone from grandparents to motorcycle-club members enjoys. Mike Sims describes this old-age tradition that both small-town folk and city dwellers live for.

In these socially and economically uncertain times, there's one thing that provides an annual source of stability to many small-towns: the annual festival.

These festivals take on many forms and pay tribute to many things. Local crops are honored by Florence's Rhododendron Festival and Lebanon's Strawberry Festival, among others. There are odes to major industries, like the Albany Timber Carnival. Rodeos provide the focus for many small-town "big weekends" — the Molalla Buckeroo, the St. Paul Rodeo and the world-famous Pendleton Round-Up come to mind.

If a town or region is heavily populated by members of a particular ethnic group, this fact can be the basis of a festival. Mt. Angel's Oktoberfest and two Scandinavian Festivals (in Astoria and Junction City) are prominent examples.

That reminds me of a story. During the 1968



presidential campaign, Bobby Kennedy was campaigning in a small Midwestern town during its annual Slavic Festival. He asked how many persons of Slavic descent were in the audience.

There were none. Bobby was dumbfounded. "Then why are you having a Slavic Festival?" he asked.

The answer Bobby received wasn't recorded for posterity, but "Why not?" may have been appropriate. These weekend or week-long extravaganzas not only provide extra revenue for local businesses, but also give the communities a rallying point — a source of unity and a morale boost.

That's what the travel brochures tell you. But my good friend Jim breaks the matter down into simpler, earthier terms: "It's a big-ass party."

I doubt that very many tourists go to Lebanon to eat strawberries or Portland to smell the roses, if you catch my drift. I'd say that a lot of visitors to these gatherings are either just passing through on U.S. 101 or whatever, and need something to occupy the kids after 10 hours in the car; or they're bored wage slaves from a neighboring big city looking for a hot time in the little town.

I spent the Fourth of July weekend at the Molalla Buckeroo about eight years ago. I'm not really what you'd call a rodeo fan. My friend and I did to go the rodeo once during the weekend, mainly because a guy we went to junior high school with was riding bull that night.

Had Randy not been in the evening lineup, I'm sure Reo and I would've stayed where we spent most of that weekend: either "cruising" at the carnival, trying to get into one of the taverns or, failing that, drinking warm Heidebergs in a '59 El Camino with a new-found friend who spent his Buckeroo-weekend evenings making rude remarks to passers-by over his CB radio's public address system from the Coast-To-Coast parking lot.

He wasn't a tourist. I guess that's what they mean by local color.

The point of this whole ramble is that, to paraphrase Shakespeare, "the party's the thing." Reo and I went to the Buckeroo to commune with old friends, hoist the jug and get a change of scenery.

That's why the members of the Free Souls motorcycle club make their annual trek to Florence for the Rhody bash each May. The "Rhody Run" is recognized as one of the premier biker "runs" in the West, particularly so after a four-page photo feature in the September 1984 issue of Easyriders magazine.

The article dwelt at great length on the foggy, rainy "Oregon" weather that Florence enjoyed dur-

ing the '84 festival. It also mentioned the incredible amount of money that local businesses (particularly Bay Street tavern owners) raked in, largely because of the biker influx. Let 'em drive their Harleys through the door and right up to the bar rail, the saloonkeepers say. They're good for the damages — and about \$6,000 worth of beer and such, as well.

Lest this make these festivals sound like righteous Bacchanalian brawls, let me say that there is one formality involved where everyone gathers together and focuses on the true purpose of the festival: The Parade.

There's the Grand Marshal. At the '77 Molalla Buckeroo parade, it was Heck Harper, who hosted a kiddie show on KGW-TV during the late '50s and early '60s. The youngsters in the crowd didn't know who the hell he was. But most everyone 18 and older remembered him, and responded with raucous cheers of recognition. (He was astride his old faithful mount, Jody, which gave us overaged rug rats an even bigger thrill.)

Then there's the Festival Court. This usually consists of five or six teenage girls, chosen on the basis of looks, poise, charm and number of festival buttons sold. They have two main functions: to appear in the parade (and five or six parades at neighboring festivals) and to make TV commercials for automobile agencies and discount furniture dealers.

There are the members of the Local Booster Club, like Cottage Grove's Lemati Gang, La Grande's Blue Mountain Boys and the Coos Bay Pirates. They are supposed to drum up community spirit by dressing and behaving in a pre-Neanderthal manner, harassing women and children and, generally, putting on a colorful show for the tourists.

(A few years ago, a couple from California

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thought the men of the Free Souls were performing this function for the town of Florence...)

I haven't even mentioned the carnival. And really, why bother? Most of the money the carnival makes leaves town, anyway. The carnival is there so that the kids can channel their energies while their parents gawk at the rhododendrons or visit the Alibi (Office? Hub?) Tavern.

If every small-town festival were to disappear tomorrow, there'd be a big void to fill — and not just in terms of lost revenue. These festivals are a continuation of a tradition that has been perpetuated for centuries — a community gathering together to celebrate who its people are, what keeps them alive — or just life itself.

By Mike Sims



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