



Jim Allen's 'Rusty Nails' remembered as a gentle clown

By KC Cowan
The Southwest Portland Post

The prelude at Jim Allen's memorial service was a selection of Allen's favorite songs. It should have surprised no one present that one of the songs was "Send in the Clowns."

A Southwest Portland resident, Allen had an alter ego that was beloved and well known to any local Baby Boomer.

Allen was Rusty Nails, the clown who entertained kids on his own television show from 1957 to 1974. Allen died July 28, 2015, at the age of 87.

According to his daughter, Allen had wanted to be a clown after seeing rodeo clowns at the Portland Exposition Center.

"At age nine he was offered a chance to be in a talent show and from that he began getting into clowning and magic and that led to doing appearances at the local movie theatre," Jody Allen said.

By age 16, Allen had fully developed his character, Rusty Nails, a gentle, friendly clown with a pumpkin-orange thatch of a wig, giant (real leather) shoes, and an oversized bow-tie that

always matched his plaid pants.

Allen had a radio show, "The Jimmy Allen Scrapbook," before taking the story-telling program to television. It ultimately developed into the Rusty Nails show.

Allen was a true pioneer in the television industry, and always wanted his show to be something for the whole family.

"He was very attracted to cartoons, and he loved the idea of clowning around in a family atmosphere so that it was safe to watch," said Jody Allen. "And that the parents could enjoy the show and the kids would love the antics."

Alpenrose Dairy was the original sponsor of the Rusty Nails show. Carl Cadonau Jr., co-owner of the three-generation dairy, has vivid memories of his father dressing him up in "whites" like the milk deliverymen, and taking him down to the television studio.

"My job was to hand out chocolate milk to the kids in the audience," Cadonau recalled.

By the mid 1960's, Alpenrose was doing a lot of promotional events at local grocery stores, and Rusty Nails was front and center, putting on magic and puppet shows. Allen's daughter, Jody, often appeared in the shows, too, as Penny Nails.

Over the years, the link between Rusty Nails and Alpenrose Dairy became more solid, with Rusty performing in the Fourth of July pageants, doing funny skits between historical segments, and at the dairy's "Fun-days Sundays."

Cadonau said Rusty was willing to try anything, even when the acts could be dangerous, such as the exploding barn skit.

"We put the small barn up in the center of the arena with an escape hatch below.

He would get into it and light a fuse and it would explode," Cadonau said.

"My cousin and I were in charge of the explosives in that thing and a time or two we put in too much and when Rusty walked out, he was staggering a bit. He was concussed."

"He was part of our family, that's for sure," he added. "When I look back on the things (the dairy has) done, he was a big part of our growth, no question about it."

Cadonau says Rusty had a cult following, and when he'd meet people and tell them he was with Alpenrose Dairy, they'd usually ask about Rusty. The secret to the clown's success was how approachable and friendly he was. There was nothing scary about Rusty.

Jim Allen performed as Rusty Nails until his late 70s, and his last performance was a 2006 Christmas show at the Alpenrose Opera House. When the

economy crashed in 2007/2008, the dairy didn't have the money to do the show, so Rusty retired.

"I don't know that he ever said goodbye to Rusty, though," said Jody Allen. "He thought he was just taking a break."

He traveled with his wife, but in his 80s Allen's health began to fail and he lost his eyesight. He never lost his spirit, sense of humor or devout faith, according to his family. When he wasn't clowning, Allen was an ordained minister and traveling pastor.

Allen and his wife, Georgia, raised four children in Southwest Portland who attended Wilson High School.

At the memorial, his children and grandchildren praised him as a loving family man with a great sense of humor.

One friend, a clown who was mentored by Rusty, perhaps summed it up best: "He brought out the child in all of us, and put a smile on all our faces."

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