



Dance hall girls form a chorus line during a performance of the Happy Canyon Night Show.

Happy Canyon turns 100

The Happy Canyon Night Show offers a century of theater under the stars.

In its 100th year, the pageant features a colorful cast and a glimpse into the history of the area. The show explores early American Indian culture and the settling of the Wild West. A cast and crew of more than 500 volunteers presents the show four nights a year every September during the Pendleton Round-Up. This season, performances run nightly from Sept. 14-17. Earlier in the week, the arena serves as the venue for two nights of Professional Bull Riding and a concert.

The Happy Canyon Night Show has shape-shifted over the decades, beginning in 1916 as a vaudevillian Wild West show that started with dancing by faeries and wood nymphs. The whimsical production evolved into a show with two distinct parts. The first portrays early Indian culture and its clash with the white man. The second is a rollicking look at life in a western town. The fast-paced show features gunfights, cliff divers, explosions, square dancers, dance hall girls, a stagecoach, Indian regalia and animals such as horses, pheasants, oxen, sheep, chickens and burros.



Cowboys unwind at Goldie's Saloon after a performance of the Happy Canyon Night Show.

The actors are mostly community members and American Indians from around the Northwest. The roles have been passed down through families. Though the cast rehearses afresh each year, most know their roles as well as they know their names.

Early Pendleton leader, legislator, businessman and sportsman Roy Raley wrote

the first scripts and designed the scenery. According to Becky Waggoner, author of "A Parade with Scenery: A Century of the Happy Canyon Night Show," Raley and two cronies came up with the idea for the production.

The current venue is the third. The show started at Main and Frazer streets, staying there briefly before moving to an all-wood amphitheater at Southwest Emigrant and Third, where it remained for 38 years. In 1955, the show reopened in its present location next door to the Round-Up Grounds.

The show derived its name from a local place named Happy Canyon between Rieth and Echo near the Umatilla River. The little community was known for its horse racing and hoedowns.

These days, after each night's show, those 21 or older can wander onto the set through the saloon door. Inside, they find Goldie's Saloon at the Canyon where they can wet their whistles with beer, whiskey and or other beverage of their choice, as well as dance, gamble or go back outside and listen to a live band. Goldie's stays open until 2 a.m.

— Story and photos by Kathy Aney