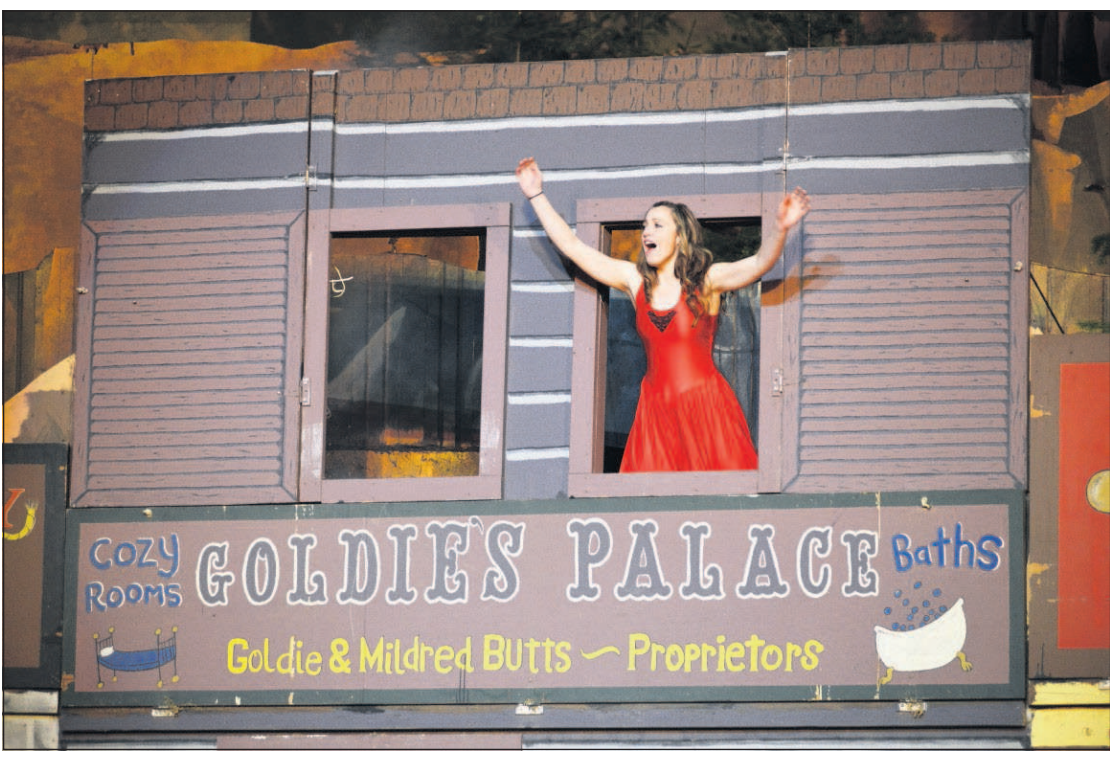




Chris McClellan runs as water flies off him while portraying the town drunk during a dress rehearsal for the Happy Canyon Night Show on Friday in Pendleton.



Smoke erupts from a drum during the medicine man scene of the Happy Canyon Night Show last year in Pendleton.



An actor screams for help during the fire scene during a dress rehearsal for the Happy Canyon Night Show on Friday in Pendleton.



Kyle Bryant scratches the head of an ox during a dress rehearsal for the Happy Canyon Night Show on Friday in Pendleton.

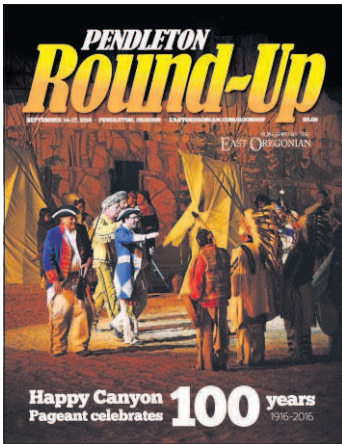


Riders practice the quadrille during a dress rehearsal for the Happy Canyon Night Show on Friday in Pendleton.



Actors wait to have their makeup done before a performance of the Happy Canyon Night Show last year in Pendleton.

For more on the Happy Canyon at 100, pick up a copy of the East Oregonian Round-Up magazine.



Hunters bring down a deer during the Indian deer hunter scene of the Happy Canyon Night Show last year in Pendleton.



The Riata Ranch Cowboy Girls will perform trick roping during their appearance at the 2016 Happy Canyon Night Show.

Cowboy girls return to Happy Canyon

By WILL DENNER
East Oregonian

Specialty acts have long been a part of the Happy Canyon Night Show. Everything from trick rider and stunt man Montie Montana to Bobby Kerr's Mustang Act and the Budweiser Clydesdales have made appearances in one form or another at the show over the years.

This year, the Happy Canyon Board of Directors selected a familiar and proven specialty performance for the 100th anniversary. The Riata Ranch Cowboy Girls, a trick riding and roping act based in Three Rivers, California, will return to Round-Up and Happy Canyon for the first time since 2009. Five girls, aged 16-29, will perform trick roping and a little bit of trick riding toward the end of the pageant's second act, according to Riata Ranch manager Jennifer Welch Nicholson.

Certain past specialty acts have posed challenges when trying to fit into the show, Happy Canyon show director Harper Jones said. Having already seen Riata Ranch performers take part in Happy Canyon, that won't be the case with these girls.

"They'll integrate in very seamlessly," he said.

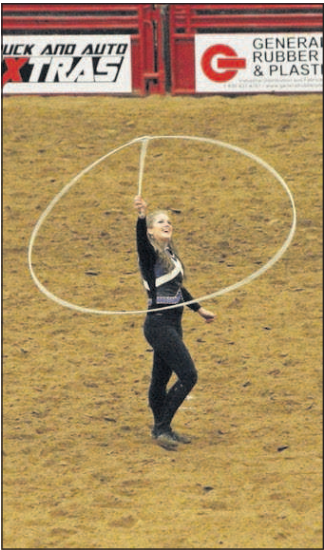
Nicholson has been involved with Riata Ranch since the mid-1970s when she started out as a rider. Back then, former owner Tommy Maier had a school on the ranch to train students for junior rodeo and horse riding competitions. But as soon as students turned 18, they were no longer eligible to participate.

Maier looked for ways to keep interest among those who had moved on from competition. Relying on skills learned from his time as a stunt double in Hollywood, Maier started an entertainment group to complement the rodeo team on trips. The Riata Ranch Cowboy Girls gained popularity nationally and spent the entire 1979 summer traveling around Europe.

"From then on everything changed," Nicholson said. "It just kind of blew the doors off."

Maier decided to eliminate the riding school and the junior rodeo teams, instead focusing strictly on the performing act.

When Maier passed away in 2002, his family asked Nicholson to take over Riata



Contributed photo

Ranch. But the organization was dealing with financial problems while Maier was sick, presenting Nicholson a massive project to undertake.

"I had no intention of taking on Riata and the challenges before the business at that time," she said.

Neither was anyone else. Nicholson figured she would give it six months, maybe a year, before passing on Riata Ranch to someone else. That was in April 2002. She's been running the organization ever since.

"With the help of a board of directors, a lot of support locally and alumni, we've rebuilt Riata and we're still here," she said.

Their most recent international trips included a 2012 trick rope performance in Windsor, England, for Queen Elizabeth II's 60th Diamond Jubilee Equestrian Pageant and a 2014 performance in Montevideo, Uruguay, at the U.S. Embassy.

As their brand has grown internationally, Nicholson said Riata Ranch now draws participants from other states and countries to train. Only one girl of the current core group is from the Riata Ranch area, while the four others come from Boulder, Colorado, Nevada and Australia.

Three of the five Riata Ranch Cowboy Girls were in town last time they performed at Round-Up and Happy Canyon. For as many rodeos and pageants they've traveled to before and after, only a handful measure up to the atmosphere in Pendleton, Nicholson said.

"For 100 years they've been performing this pageant ..." she said. "I think that speaks volumes to the legends and legacies of what Pendleton is all about."

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