

The traits that have carried Chief Joseph Days for 75 years

By RONALD BOND
Wallowa County Chieftain

JOSEPH — Good people, hard work and dedication.

These were the characteristics mentioned repeatedly by those who have been involved with making Chief Joseph Days a must-see event year after year.

It was those traits in the 1940s and 1950s, when a group spurred by Harley Tucker kicked the rodeo off.

It's those traits — a desire to continue to make the rodeo better year after year — that carried it into the 21st century, and this week are bringing back the "Thunder" for the 75th time.

"You've gotta put a lot of effort into this, and it isn't like you work the week before Chief Joseph Days," said Darlene Turner, Harley Tucker's daughter who also has been involved with the event for decades. "It's a year-around job anymore."

Longtime involvement

A discussion between CJD Board President Terry Jones and rodeo announcer Jody Carper encapsulated what has kept the rodeo thriving for 7½ decades.

"He said 'Think about what we need to do (for nightly openings) for the 75th,'" Jones said. "We need to do some opening about why it has been here for 75 years.' When I look around, it is the people that have been involved."

The reasons, Jones said, people get involved with Chief Joseph Days — and stay involved — are many.

For him, it was that his daughter, Teah, was a member of the court in 1991.

Jones began to get involved that year, and has been a part of the rodeo since. He said, too, there are several past court members who are on the present CJD board.

The court has been a major part of the rodeo since



Wallowa County Chieftain, File

Those in the arena for four nights get the glory, but it's hard-working volunteers, a commitment to excellence and more from unheralded heroes that have made Chief Joseph Days not only survive, but thrive for 75 years now.

the beginning. Generations of young women have served as court princesses, with one being crowned queen annually — with the exception of 1986, when three of Tucker's granddaughters shared the title, and in 2020-21, with the current court of Casidee Harrod, Destiny Weeks and Brianna Micka all being named queen.

The decades of royalty, in fact, will be honored on the final night of the rodeo.

"On Saturday night we'll point that (royalty connection) out," Jones said. "We're going to have, hopefully, as many past court members as possible walk into the arena, so people can realize there is a big connection."

Turner has been a part, in one way or another, even longer.

"We've spent a lifetime trying to keep it going," she

said.

Her father was instrumental in getting CJD started back in the 1940s, when the first rodeo was held on the moraine.

"It's something that we've all worked for as long as we've been able to do it," she said. "When they started it, there were a few people in town who wanted to make this happen, and my dad had the stock and everything, so that is how it began."

Turner and her late husband, Dave, worked together for decades helping with rodeo operations. Darlene Turner served as the board president four different times. All her daughters served as court members.

Nancy Waters first became involved with the rodeo six decades ago.

"I was on the court way

back in 1961, I was a princess — Nancy Wilson," she said.

Waters joined the rodeo committee and served as treasurer for 18 years. She, like Turner, worked alongside her now late husband, Keith, for years. Her daughters, Diane and Dawnette, were on the court, with Diane being named queen.

Waters lives in Boise now, but still volunteers in the souvenir booth and hospitality room each year when she returns to Joseph.

Volunteers, in fact, play a huge role.

"It's the volunteers and the people they want to show up and do a good job" who make a difference, Jones said.

Waters added that it became a way of life.

"We worked hard to put on Chief Joseph Days, but those were also all of our friends. We were like one family working together," he said. "We all became such close friends. It was a way of life for us."

Making it the best

From the start, Turner said the rodeo staff was always looking for ways to improve the rodeo.

That spirit has also endured for decades.

"We just wanted to make it better than the next year and just strive to do better," Turner said.

Early on, Turner said her parents saw the value in bringing the best entertainment possible to the arena.

"With Mom and Dad being out with all the other committees and everything, they saw what they thought would be entertaining. They brought the best entertainment Joseph could afford," she said. "We had the best announcers, the best clowns. It was because of their knowledge that that happened."

"When we were in it with my husband and I, we tried

to follow those same lines. We tried to hire the best acts, the best clowns and all that so it would be pretty professional."

Jones said the board today has the same vision, and said it's not cheap bringing the top acts in.

"We're between about \$175,000 and \$200,000 that we're committed to in contract (acts)," he said. That's a lot of money for Wallowa County for an event."

The board also pays more \$50,000 in added prize money for rodeo contestants, Jones said.

It's more, too, than just paying for the best. Work is constantly done to keep the Harley Tucker Memorial Rodeo Grounds in top condition, whether it's painting the grandstands, repairing old sections or updating a portion of the area.

One upgrade done this year, for example, was the expansion of the space and seating in the beer garden.

While several volunteers help with updating the grounds, Turner said Max and Gary Prout are two in particular who step up each spring and summer.

The goal, Jones said, is to "make it bigger and better every year."

"We try to improve things, make our grounds better, make our rodeo better, anything we can do," he said, acknowledging that doesn't mean anything is bad, but rather if things can be further improved upon. "In all the time I've been involved, that has kind of been the No. 1 thing. We just want to make this better. They just want to keep improving it. We hope it's been good all along. We hope people enjoy it and that it is good, but we still want to do things better if there is a way we can do it."

Recognition

Jones was shocked one day a few years ago when,

checking into a hotel and picking up a Western magazine that features some of the best rodeos, that the rodeo he was a part of was featured on the list of "Top 10 must-see rodeos."

"You got your Cheyennes and Pendletons and those," he said. "They got a write-up on each one. I go to the top of the second page, and it says Chief Joseph Days. To get mentioned in an article like that with those big rodeos, it was very gratifying. It makes all those long nights, whenever we're up there painting, pullings weeds, it makes it seem worthwhile."

Magazine writers aren't the only ones who constantly sing the praises of the CJD. Hospitality is constantly pointed to as top-notch. Jones said PRCA judges are asked to comment each year on the quality of stock, the arena and more.

"They give us a really good report," Jones said.

Carper, who has been the rodeo announcer for CJD close to a decade and does rodeos across the county, said he is constantly asked what his favorite rodeo is.

He says, unequivocally, that it's Chief Joseph Days.

"Some announcers probably wouldn't say that, (but) it really is my favorite rodeo, just the way it is set up, the way the crowds are, (Wallowa) Lake is a huge draw," he said. "The people in there, they are like family to me. I'm tight with a lot on the committee, and even other people around the area there that are not on the committee."

"And they do everything so great. The food is so good, they feed us three times a day, you don't get that at every rodeo. They take care of you so well. There is an excitement in the air. That is something you don't get elsewhere."

Carper said the people who put on Chief Joseph Days are reasons No. 1, 2 and 3 why it is successful, saying they know what the event requires.

"That is what's pushing it for 75 years is quality people," he said. "At the end of the day, they want it to be good, they know how to make it good and who to ask to take it to the next level."

The rodeo announcer said the popularity of the sport is rising, and that he is seeing packed arenas across the nation.

"And I expect that again in Joseph," he said. "I think it's going to be bigger this year."

Turner said her father, who was so instrumental in getting the rodeo off the ground, would be stunned at where it is, 75 years later.

"To see what they have done, there are so many people who have contributed to that. I think he would be amazed to see how great it is now," she said. "I think a lot of those people that have passed on that had their heart and soul in it worked very hard toward making CJD what it is today."



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