

Siuslaw News Coast Life

SENIOR NEWS CALENDAR

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REIGNING RHODY

109th annual Rhododendron Festival begins tonight with showcase

“Flowers, flowers everywhere.”
It started with the rhododendrons, gracing every area hill and hillock, so that Florence became known as the City of Rhododendrons in 1981. To celebrate the flower, and encourage visitors to “Watch Florence Grow,” organizers created the first Rhododendron Festival in 1908.

Throughout May 1908, excitement built in Florence, a small town of 500, for the new festival. Posters declared an address by Mayor George P. Edwards, a clam bake, a speech from “Poet of the Sierras” Joaquin Miller, a parade and a barge procession on Siuslaw River.

BY CHANTELLE MEYER
Siuslaw News

“A good time is assured to all,” an article in *The West* read. A big part of the first festival was the selection of nine local girls in the first Rhododendron Court. Only one could be chosen Queen Rhododendra, and Laura Johnson became the first rhody royalty, winning a popular vote by two votes.

The two-day festival also included a picnic, an excursion to the beach, a visit from Mapleton students, races, music and feasts of rhododendrons all over area businesses and residences.

After the festival ended, *The West* said it was a “memorable day” and *The Oregonian* said, “Florence will gradually become famous for its annual carnival and its millions of wild rhododendrons.”

As predicted by *The Oregonian*, the festival continued with the popular election of Queen Rhododendra until 1914, when both a queen and an empress were crowned. Empress Rhododendra Eleanor Saubert and Queen of Florence Mary Cassidy were joined by Queen of Mapleton Lulu Beers, Queen of North Fork Alfrieda Lindgren and Queen of Glenada Jane Colter. The local theater also showed “a free entertainment of moving pictures.”

In 1915, Rhody Days added motorcycle races at the beach and provided an excursion train from Eugene to

Mapleton, where festival-goers ate a free meal of crab and salmon before boarding boats bound for Florence.

From 1916 to 1934, Florence did not hold the festival “on account of conditions” such as World War I. These years saw the establishment of U.S. Coast Guard Station Siuslaw River in 1917 and the opening of Sea Lion Caves in 1932. In 1935, the Chamber of Commerce



The 13 members of the 2016 Rhododendron Court invite the community to attend tonight’s Rhododendron Court Scholarship Showcase at the Florence Events Center at 6:30 p.m. The three Senior Princesses from Siuslaw High School will lead teams of the Junior Court through a series of activities before one of the seniors is crowned Queen Rhododendra.

held Rhododendron Day in June.

“Rhododendrons are at their best and the weather is fine,” reported *The Siuslaw Oar*.

Queen Rhododendra returned to Florence in 1936 as Gail Darling christened the Siuslaw River Bridge. Commemorative Rhododendron Festival buttons bore an image of the now iconic bridge.

From then until 1941, festivities were held in several of the Kyle Buildings on Main Street (now Bay Street) and in Glenada.

The *Siuslaw Oar* reported, “There is a wholesome welcome awaiting every visitor, and you will find pleasant thoughts that will last undiminished for another year.”

Organizers delayed the festival again from 1942 to 1946, this time due to World War II. However, the rhododendrons continued to bloom and attract visitors to the coast.

The Browning Brothers Carnival reopened Rhody Days in 1947. The festival also dedicated the Florence Municipal Airport with air acrobatics by pilot Dale Hall.

Florence hasn’t missed a festival since. Crowds continue to grow with

each year of the festival. Last year, more than 25,000 people visited the area for the festival. This year will feature barbecues, a car cruise, kid activities, a carnival, the Florence Regional Arts Alliance Arts Festival, the Siuslaw Chapter of the American Rhododendron Society’s Late Rhododendron Flower Show and the Grand Floral Parade on Sunday, May 22, at noon. Head to the Rhododendron Court



“Poet of the Sierras” Joaquin Miller crowns Laura Johnson queen of the first Rhododendron Festival in Florence in 1908.

Scholarship Showcase tonight at 6:30 p.m. at the Florence Events Center, 715 Quince St., for the traditional opening of the 109th annual Rhododendron Festival.

The three Rhododendron Princesses of the Senior Court — Siuslaw High School senior Lyndsey Keppol and juniors Hanna Anderson and Taylor Coolidge — will lead teams, give a speech and show off their talents as the judges pick the next Queen Rhododendra.

Ten area elementary students join the senior girls. The first Junior Princess Court was established in 1953, with five girls. This year features the traditional Junior Princess Court with the first Junior Prince Court. They will compete in team events to win prizes during the showcase.

After Queen Rhododendra is crowned, Davis Amusement Carnival



Last year, 25,000 people turned out to participate in Rhody Days. This year’s festivities include the Junior Parade, Kiwanis Kids Games and the Coast Radio Classic Car Cruise on Saturday, May 21, and the Grand Floral Parade on Sunday, May 22.

will start the Rhododendron Festival on Wednesday, May 18. The carnival first came to Florence in 1950.

Look for a full list of Rhododendron Festival activities in the Siuslaw News on May 18.

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YELLOW
MAGENTA
CYAN