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# BLOOMING RHODODENDRON HISTORY — AND ME

BY RAMIRO RAMIREZ  
SIUSLAW HIGH SCHOOL  
STUDENT



That time of year has come again. It's Rhody Days here in the town of Florence — where the competition heats up in the Rhody Run, a lucky girl will be Queen Rhododendron and a lucky guy King of the Coast, and ages of all kinds are thrilled by the rides and games that Davis Shows Northwest has to offer.

Some may know it, some may not, but the tradition of having the Rhododendron Festival dates back more than a century ago.

Let's go back to some of the first Rhododendron Festivals. First stop is the first festival. It is 1908, and the town is bustling with new festivity. The very first Queen Rhododendron is Laura Johnson.

Things were presented differently in older times. In this case, the queen got to ride in specially decorated boats on the Siuslaw River with Mayor George Edwards. He then presented the key to the city, which was made out of Rhododendron wood.

Johnson had dinner at the Western House, along with a public picnic. Throughout the afternoon, athletic contests, music recitals and water exercises were booming all around the town.

Here's a fact: the first Queen Rhododendron was not born in Florence. You'll have to skip two years to find the first Florence-born queen. Also during that time period, attendance started to increase. In 1910, 1,200 to 1,500 people attended the festival, and in 1913, 2,000 people showed up for the festivities. That same year,

Rhody Days festivities begin all over town today and continue through Sunday. Visit [FlorenceChamber.com](http://FlorenceChamber.com) for info

the carnival had an arrow shooting tournament with 11 potential queens. The goal of the game was to get the highest score as possible to become queen.

As time passed, many things have changed. One of those moments was the early start of Rhody Days after the Siuslaw River Bridge was completed, and another in which it was the 100th anniversary of the Rhody Festivals in 2008. This year is the 112th year since the first Rhododendron Festival, even though the festival wasn't celebrated for several years.

My first Rhody Days experience can be traced back to 2007. Many of my festival memories consist of me going on many different rides. One particular memory was the bumper cars attraction they had, since I remember being too small for it.

Along with that came the Ferris Wheel ride, a beautiful experience. At the top you can see almost all of Old Town with cars rolling downtown and the Siuslaw River Bridge hoisting the cars across the Siuslaw River.

Other rides that I've liked are Pharaoh's Fury, Wipeout and Sizzler. Rides that I used to go on, but no longer can due to height restrictions, include Dragon's Dream,

a ride that is similar to the Rock Star but smaller, and an Indiana Jones themed maze that contains numerous obstacles.

And while that may be the typical youngster's experience in the Rhody Festival, I will never forget the parade of hot rods that come to town — especially when we get to hear the high RPM whine from them.

That's not the only parade we get though, as we also have the Rhody Parade featuring floats representing groups from all across the county and the state. It is fun to see it in person, but to be a part of it is a new experience.

I have been a part of the Rhody parade three times and am looking forward to my fourth appearance in it. The first two times were with CROW (Children's Repertory of Oregon Workshops) while the third one was with the Siuslaw Youth Soccer Association. This time, I am going to be a part of the Last Resort Players' float to publicize our upcoming musical, "Mamma Mia!"

I am intrigued to see what creative floats our locals and neighboring cities have to offer this year. I'm sure it will be something interesting. Happy Rhody Days!

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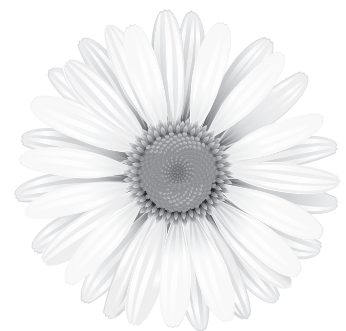
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