

4,000 Witnessed First Rodeo at Heppner 40 Years Ago

By HELEN SHERMAN

Organized history of the Morrow County Rodeo traces back 40 years—to 1922, when the local cowboys and cowgirls thought they could come up with their own "bucking party" after crops were in and everyone felt in the mood for a little celebrating. And, strangely enough, it turned out a tremendous success with approximately 4,000 people attending.

Files of the August 3, 1922 edition of The Gazette-Times give an interesting record of the first promotion of the Morrow County Rodeo. Its headlines read, "Initial Steps Taken to Put on Round-Up; Heppner People in Favor of Wild West Show This Fall—Will Probably be Held at Same Time Tractor Caravan Visits Heppner." The story follows: "At a meeting on Tuesday

evening, (Aug. 1, 1922) held at council chambers, the initial steps were taken to put on a round-up for Heppner this fall. The meeting was well attended by business men and citizens of the town interested in the matter, and after considerable discussion a committee on arrangements of C. W. McNamer, chairman, L. V. Gentry and C. H. Latourell. This committee will take the preliminary steps in the enterprise, such as figuring on dates, getting talent and finding out what the expenses necessary to putting on a creditable show will amount to, and after this is done, to call another meeting, make their report and await instructions.

"The opinion expressed at the meeting was to the effect that it would require something like \$1500 from the citizens and business men of the community, and

if the enterprise is handled as it should be, it should be made to pay out and repay any amount that is put up as a guarantee. It is proposed to put on a three-day program, and the date will likely be about a week following the round-up at Pendleton, though this is a matter to be decided upon investigation and report of the committee."

Gentry Field Selected As Site

Two weeks later, dated August 17, 1922, a second report is given: "The date for Heppner's big round-up has been tentatively selected, being the last week in September, immediately following the big show in Pendleton. It is expected that many of the outlaws from the Umatilla city will be present to test the skill and landing ability of the local riders.

"Gentry Field has been surveyed for the track and the work of putting in the fences, corrals and seats will commence soon, the committee only waiting for the lumber with which to do the work. They will be assisted in this by Mr. Swisler of Pendleton, an authority on the arrangements of grounds for a show of this kind. The committee expects to put in comfortable seats with room for a large crowd.

"Arrangements are being made for a big '49 dance at the fair pavilion, at which amusements to suit all tastes will be furnished. This will not be anything like the traveling '49 show and dance, but will be strictly clean entertainment, although informal in nature.

"All in all, as things are now shaping up, it appears that Heppner will have a round-up second only to the famous Pendleton show, and since it will be much more local in its nature it should furnish better entertainment even than the Pendleton Round-Up."

Big Event Anticipated

As plans progressed through following weeks, articles continued to stir interest, such as this one printed September 21, 1922:

"Rodeo days are drawing near, only seven more days left to dig out the sombreros, boots and spurs, and climb on the dappled pony headed for Heppner town. A big time awaits you, asserts C. W. McNamer, in charge of arrangements, and no means are being spared to make the "wild west" contests the best ever.

"Everything is ready to go. The big arena and race track at Gentry field have been put in A-1 shape and bleachers built on the side of the natural amphitheater that all may have an

excellent view of the performance. A fine assortment of wild broncos, steers, mules and bulls have been obtained and will be brought to town this week. Cowboy and cowgirl talents capable to cope with the vicious animals have also been lined up.

"Liberal prizes will be awarded for events. Two judges, Chance Wilson and Robert Carson, have been appointed, who in turn will choose a third, and it is the sentiment of the management that all will receive a square deal. Entries can now be made through J. J. Nys secretary.

"Friday, September 29, will be school children's day when all school children will be admitted to the show free of charge. It is planned to make this a school holiday for the entire day, and the management extends an urgent invitation for all student kiddies of the county to be present.

"Two dances will be in progress at the fair pavilions each evening. One for those tame individuals who do not care for the boisterous amusement of the '49 dance, carried on in the adjoining pavilion. The '49 pavilion will take care of the wilder strain who would be carried back to the days of the six-shooter and whisky flask when each cattle owner made his own law. Plenty of old-time gambling games will be carried on and all may try their skill against chance in exchange for rodeo money. At the pavilions Rodeo money will be the medium of exchange, and will be accepted for dancing and at all concessions."

Declared A Huge Success

After the event came the headline, "Heppner's First Rodeo A Success. Crowds Totalling more than 4,000 Witness Wild West Production—Pageant Well Managed and May Become Annual Feature Here."

"The success of Heppner's first Rodeo, the fine manner in which

it was handled throughout, the record-breaking crowds in attendance, have combined to encourage our folks to make the pageant an annual affair for Heppner, and there seems little doubt now but that this will be the case.

"The weather conditions were ideal, following the big rain on Tuesday, and the manner in which the events at the grounds were all pulled off combined to put the large crowds in daily attendance in the best of spirits. Record crowds were in the city Friday and Saturday and more than 4,000 people witnessed the parades on the streets and the stunts on Gentry field. And then there were hundreds and hundreds of autos, parked in a semicircle entirely surrounding the track that made a grand spectacle of itself.

"A nice feature of the Rodeo was the parades each day—these being especially fine on Friday and Saturday. They were led by the officials and Queen Marjorie (Miss Marjorie Clark), followed by hundreds of cowboys, cowgirls and others on horseback with the Ford caravan filling in for good measure and the bands from The Dalles making good music.

"No serious accidents occurred and there was no one hurt, except one of the little mules from the Billy Padberg ranch, used in the bucking contest, which in some manner broke a front leg and had to be shot.

"The merry-go-round and Ferris wheel furnished much amusement for the kiddies and young folks, while others enjoyed the dances in the pavilion and helped along the Legion boys by partaking of refreshments at the "bar" and patronizing the various games, reminders of events long past.

"Awards were given in the following track and arena events: Bucking contest; Half-mile Cowboy race; Quarter-mile Saddle race; Relay race; Half-mile

Saddle Horse race; Steer Roping; Calf Roping; Mule Riding; and Boys' Pony race."

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