

## Heppner Rodeo celebrates 77 years of riding high



Amateur bronc riding, Heppner, 1946

By Merlyn Robinson and Sue Gibbs

The legacy of the Old West lives on as Heppner celebrates 77 years of rodeo.

The Oregon Trail Pro Rodeo will run August 20 through the 22 this year. It's a historical event that began back in September of 1922, when Heppner businessmen and ranchers organized the first four-day event.

J.V. Gentry, one of the founders, donated a field at the edge of town that still continues as the modern rodeo site. Many volunteers built fences from netting wire and poles cut in the mountains. Around the fencing was a complete circle of Model A's.

The October 3, 1922, issue of the Heppner Herald reported that "the track and arena were in splendid condition and the bucking and race stock were full of pep and action" for the benefit of about 4,000 people in attendance.

A band from The Dalles provided music. Dances were held each evening in the large, round pavilion that once stood at the lower end of Main Street.

The livestock for the first rodeos came from local ranches. Potential bucking broncs were brought to town prior to the rodeo, to be tried out by local cowhands.

Without bucking chutes, horses had to be snubbed and saddled in the arena, using a strong saddle horse to hold them. After the blindfold was jerked off and the horse turned loose, the rider used his hat to "fan" the bronc with his free hand.

Those early-day bronc riders were experienced at "biting the dirt," as pickup men weren't part of the action then.

Gerald Swaggart (1996 OTPR grand marshal), a lifetime resident of Heppner, was 12 during the first rodeo and remembers when free-running mustangs were rounded up for bucking horse "soirees" before the local event became a sanctioned rodeo.

Newspaper reports of that first 1922 rodeo show that J.D. Bellingbrock bested Jack French in the bucking horse event. However, French proved to be the top hand on bucking mules. Eddie Sheriden placed over French in the calf roping, and Ralph Reid bested both French and Howard Lane in the steer roping. Frank Swaggart, Gerald's father, was among the race winners.

One of the promoters of that first rodeo was Charles Latgurell, a local auto dealer. He arranged to bring a touring Ford exposition to town during the four-day rodeo. That caravan consisted of 26 trucks and tractors carrying or towing farm and construction equipment, as well as a Delco light plant, pumping systems and many small tools and conveniences.

The entourage was accompanied by a five-piece jazz orchestra, plus nightly movie shows and a modern scientific marvel—a radio broadcasting set.

The success of that first rodeo might have been a difficult act to follow, but the momentum of succeeding shows continued to build. Large carnivals—complete with trapeze artists and high wire acts—came to town

with subsequent rodeos, while an enterprising pilot gave some citizens their first airplane rides—a thrill for those who preferred not to get airborne from the back of a mean horse.

This year's grand marshal, Charles J. Daly, or Charlie as the locals call him, is also a lifetime cattle rancher with roots deep in Little Buttercreek soil. His father, James Daly, was an immigrant from Ireland and herded sheep for area ranchers.

Charlie began to "cowboy up" while he was in high school in the 40's at local neighboring rodeos as well as back yard rodeos. Charlie remembers when wild horses were captured, tried out there and often sold to stock contractors. Local cowhands provided fresh, "waspy" calves, while their mothers were used for wild cow milking.

The relay and pony express races were an exciting and entertaining attraction and were a good draw for the Heppner rodeo. Both Gerald and Charlie remember these races. The fastest horses were donated by volunteers from surrounding towns willing to race their prize animals. Gerald rode in some of these horse races Roman-style, standing on the backs of two running horses.

As time went on, the Heppner rodeo was moved ahead of the Pendleton Round-Up, from which show rules were obtained. Gradually the first professional cowboys' association, the Turtles, was formed. As rodeo circuits developed, the name was changed to the Rodeo Cowboys Association—the forerunner of today's Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association. The Heppner rodeo changed affiliations through the years. For a time it was sanctioned by the Northwest Rodeo Association.

In 1939 the Morrow County Fair joined the rodeo and became part of the now festive week. Its origins began back in 1912.

Rodeo royalty has played an important role from the early days. The rodeo committee first chose young women for court members according to their riding skills.

Heppner's Eva Padberg Griffith was the 1923 queen. Eva, who was 14 at the time, says she chose Jane Allstott as her attendant. The two girls rode in the Heppner and Pendleton parades, behind rodeo committee members.

In later years, the granges within the county selected court representatives. Dime-a-dance "jitney" dance tickets were a way of voting for the queen. By 1940 the war in Europe was casting dark shadows over America, as young men enlisted for national defense. The rodeo committee, under the leadership of its president, Henry Aiken, decided the show would go on.

An enterprising rodeo promotion that year was a three-county junket by Heppner businessmen.

The star performer of the show was "Rosie O'Grady," alias Frank Turner, dressed as a honky-tonk girl, in keeping with the Heppner Rodeo slogan, "She's Wild." Turner was forced to wear his outrageous costume to one Chamber of Commerce luncheon after someone hid his

street clothes.

Tom Wood was champion bull rider in the 1940 rodeo, when the Warren-Dewey Brahmans were featured. Pat Fisk won all-around honors. The newspaper commented that the race horses of Baze, Swaggart, Turner and Hughes were "in fine fetter."

A cowboy breakfast was begun that year by Lee Beckner and Jim Kistner. Amid cowboy singing, head cook Earle Bryant dished up steaks, hotcakes and all the trimmings to around 300 people, at 50 cents a plate.

The 1941 show was the last for a time. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, which finally brought the United States into the war, rodeos were suspended.

The Heppner Rodeo roared back to life in 1945, after a three-year shut-down, as food and gas rationing were relaxed. Top cowboys that year were Vern Evans and Jerry Ambler—the only ones to make qualifying rides on horses from the Harley Tucker string.

In 1949 Queen Shirley Wilkenson Rugg was voted in as queen and her court consisted of four young women. These were Dorothy Wigglesworth Graham, Betty Walker Edwards, Fae Cutsforth, and Ingrid Herman Crawford. These young ladies were talented riders. The community and rodeo life was and still is very important to them. Each woman is still active and riding. The entire court will be riding horseback in the 1999 Heppner Fair and Rodeo parade on August 21, at 10 a.m. to celebrate their 50th anniversary.

In 1950 a large fair exhibit building was built. The rodeo center field was seeded to grass. Cyclone fencing replaced wooden rails. The Wrangler Riding Club began sponsoring a horse show and the Sunday morning cowboy breakfast.

Times change and with time comes improvements. As professional athletes fine-tuned their skills, the idea of a Morrow County amateur show was born. Morrow County ropers began competing for a coveted championship saddle in 1950. In 1951, the Morrow County amateur calf roping contest was created, which sparked renewed participation by local cowboys. Orville Smith, the manager then of the Heppner sawmill, donated the first championship saddle. The mill is today known as Kinzua and, even after its closure earlier this year, it continues to donate this trophy saddle.

In the 1990's the rodeo committee, headed by Jerry Gentry, brought the rodeo facilities up to standards for a PRCA show. A professional-size arena was built, with volunteers spending days excavating clay soil and replacing it with sand. New lighting was installed through community efforts. Rodeo sponsors enriched purses to attract contestants.

New aluminum bleachers replaced the old in '97 and seating has never been better. VIP seats allow front stage viewing and backed seats allow added comfort. The bleacher seats supply ample room to seat a great number of spectators. Handicap facilities and a new announcer's box were added in 1998.

The Oregon Trail Pro Rodeo Arena was awarded a special

award for third best grand conditions in the entire Columbia Circuit. This, too, happened in 1998.

What is in store for 1999? A new warm-up arena for contestants, full chain-link fencing, ushers, improved parking, more food, beverages and community support. Over

150 families support the OTPR every year and without their hard work, dedication and time the tradition could not continue.

The biggest improvement in 1999 is the brand new indoor Wilkinson Arena. The building had over 100 individuals and companies donate toward the arena. The facility was named after another life-long resident and supporter of Morrow County Fair and Rodeo, Dick Wilkinson, and his wife, Virginia. They were a significant factor in getting the building project started.

Today the rodeo committee is run by 21 dedicated and motivated individuals. The chairman of the OTPR is Mary Ann Munkers and the chairman for the Morrow County Rodeo is Ken Eckman. Gates admission is run by Rebecca Ripple and arena crew consists of Ken Bailey, Mike Proctor, Barry Munkers and John Griffith. The awards are handled by Janet McDowell and the children's events are managed by Sheree Mahoney. The excellent food and beverages are organized by John and Sonja McCabe. The outstanding livestock is handled by two competent individuals—Jerry Gentry and Kyle Robinson. Sue Gibbs handles the media for the rodeo and parades and grand entry are managed by Terri Gentry. Promotions was recently taken on by Jamie and Ronda Helfrecht. Jason Hanna is in charge of sales, while Darcy Robinson handles the ever-so-important sponsors for OTPR.

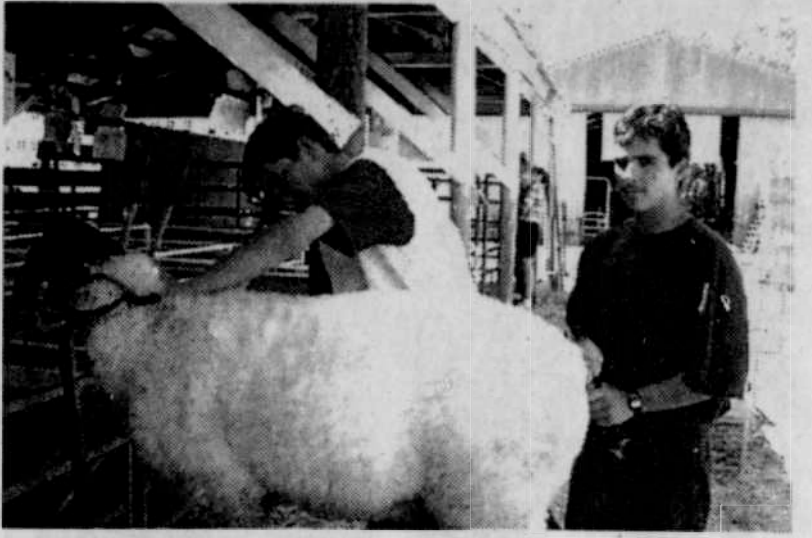
Nicole Mahoney organizes and sells the VIP seating and Marlene Currin balances everyone because she takes on that critical job of secretary. Charlie Daly credits the present rodeo committee with upgrading the facilities with a smaller arena for better management of professional shows. He will be apart of the rodeo once again when he mounts his horse and heads up the parade and grand entry in the 1999 Oregon Trail Pro Rodeo.

Seventy-seven years have passed since 1922. Within this time, events, people, equipment and talents have changed, but some things still hold true. Jasper Crawford, a newspaper editor in 1944 wrote, "... we see the suntanned cowpoke atop the rearin' mustang as one of the outstanding examples of true Americanism."

Rodeo continues to exemplify the heritage of Columbia Basin Co-op country and Heppner, Oregon.

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Heppner Gazette-Times

## 4-H continues with strong programs



A sheep patiently gets groomed at last year's fair

Morrow County 4-H has a total of 301 members and 74 leaders participating in the 4-H youth development program. There are 148 youth enrolled in home economics and expressive arts projects; 60 in the 4-H horse program. The livestock program has a total of 210 youth enrolled in large animal projects and 64 in small animal. Morrow County also sent 39 participants to the Hispanic Youth Leadership Conference in Pendleton. These hardworking 4-Hers have consigned 1,256 exhibits to the Morrow County Fair.

Many 4-H members are in more than one club. Some have more than one animal or home economics project. Several members cross over in curriculum areas. "We encourage 4-H members to try new projects in different areas," said Bill Broderick, OSU Extension agent.

Broderick added that is also important for members to get involved in other activities such as presentations, pre-fair clinics, camp, camp counselor training, Teen Leadership Retreat, OSU

Summer Days, 4-H Ambassador, or Know Your State Government.

During the 1998-1999 4-H year, 4-H member, Shelby Krebs of Ione attended 4-H Ambassador Weekend in Corvallis and had a great experience.

Morrow County has five 4-H Ambassadors: Shelby Krebs, Keith Baker, Macy Rhea, Jessica Krebs, and Kristi Worden

"As members challenge themselves in other activities they develop life skills they can use the rest of their lives," said Broderick.

## Free Internet classes at fair

Blue Mountain Community College will offer free Internet classes at the Morrow County Fair on Wednesday, August 18, between the hours of 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

These classes will be held in two-hour sessions on the stage inside the pavilion.

Everyone's invited to stop by and learn to surf the Internet.

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