

Oregon Trail Pro Rodeo dedicated to the Cunhas



Joe & Barbara Cunha

By Sue Gibbs

Hard work, companionship, competition, community and dedication to a healthy life on the land probably best sum up a unique couple from Heppner who recently past away.

Material goods mean little to Joe and Barbara Cunha. They both spent their long lives ranching and their roots were deep in horsemanship and rodeo.

A good description of the couple's exterior personalities was plainly "gruff". They kept their distance from strangers and almost had a fear toward other people and being taken advantage of. Joe was, perhaps, hard to do business with and Barbara was shy, plain looking and wore mostly men's clothing.

An interior look at this couple, however, revealed very kind, generous people with refined manners.

The best part of Joe's life was rodeo. Why? Simply, it was the companionship and competition. Everyone on the circuit took care of the guy who was down on his

luck. The group made sure everyone had a ride to the next rodeo, entry fees were paid and everyone had food in their stomach. No strings were attached to this type of care.

Barbara had a very feminine side to her. She had talent in raising and training horses that few people had back in the 1930s. This side of the couple was rarely seen.

Joe was a first generation Catholic Portuguese, born in 1912. Barbara was a first generation Lutheran Swiss, born in 1920. Their roots are from Salinas, California, where Barbara met Joe. They lived next door to each in the 1930s.

Joe made a living riding bulls, broncs and bull dogging on the TURTLE circuit (the first professional rodeo cowboys association). He was 16 when he began his career in rodeo. He traveled all over the midwest and the Pacific coast.

Barbara made a living raising and training horses (a very uncommon job for a woman at that time). Barbara learned her methods from renowned horse trainers like Tom and Bill Dorance and Monty Roberts. Their methods at the time were the non-traditional "gentle" horse

training. Of course the couple found a closeness to each other.

Barbara and Joe's family did not agree with the couple's future plans of marriage so the couple started their life together in a simple way and eloped in Reno, Nevada.

They traveled the circuit together for several years. Joe was dedicated to his way of life and, being only a 145-pound bull dogger, he had his work cut out for him. Barbara was beside him through these years.

Joe began working on the family ranch in Salinas in 1942 while he continued to rodeo. The ranch was mostly row crops of lettuce, celery and other table vegetables. The ranch was large with a yearly cash flow of \$140 to \$150 thousand a year. They had immigrant housing and the ranch prospered during this time.

Joe's main events in rodeo were bull dogging and riding bulls. He knew his talents well, yet he was strategic in his rodeo game plan. He always entered bulls and bull dogging, but then he would look at the competition and if the list was low in "talent" for bareback or saddle bronc then he would enter both these events too.

Joe and Barbara traveled the circuit and ran the ranch until 1952. Joe competed for 24 years of his life in rough stock events and the most amazing aspect of

his rodeo career was that he only broke one bone in his body competing. He broke his ankle from a pick-up man's horse.

Joe and Barbara were sole managers of the Salinas ranch after Joe's dad passed away in 1948. It was a family affair with his brother and two sisters. However, the love of working the land only ran deep in the Cunha brothers' blood and when Joe's brother past away in 1972 the ranch was sold. Joe was bitter about this sale but his love for ranching would not stop. Joe and Barbara began their search for new ground to ranch. They fell in love with 4,000 acres on Willow Creek near Heppner. They began their life in Oregon raising sheep and cattle.

Joe and Barbara lived the last 28 years of their life in Heppner, but their beliefs in life never changed. They worked the ranch until the day they died. The last year on the ranch it was known that Barbara drove truck, Joe drove tractor and they fed out 150 mother cows and over 100 head of ewes. They needed little in their life but companionship, hard work, the land and the animals around them. They believed in a healthy life and their community. Rodeo was a precious part of this and it helped shape them into the people they were.

Barbara past away last year after her health failed from cancer. Joe truly loved her and she was his companion. So, after her death, he simply had little desire to continue living and passed away last November.

Joe and Barbara might have had a rough exterior, but rodeo and this Heppner community touched their lives dearly and they showed it the only way they knew how. They left their estate to those who touched their lives dearly. The Oregon Trail Pro Rodeo was the proud recipient of \$30,000. The money was spent toward payment to the new grand stands. They also left \$50,000 dollars to Pioneer Memorial Hospital because of the care the hospital showed the Cunhas in their later years. They left \$50,000 to both the American Heart Association and the American Cancer Association in hopes the money could help others in time of need. Their last contribution was \$50,000 to the Justin Cowboy Crisis so competing cowboys and cowgirls could be taken care of when they needed help.

The Oregon Trail Pro Rodeo appreciates both Joe and Barbara for simply being the people they were and having the compassion and heart to be so giving to those around them. The 2000 Oregon Trail Pro Rodeo program will be dedicated to the Cunha family in memory of their life in rodeo and the Heppner community. They left this world a better place.



Jim Swanson, Nancy Snider, Stacie Miller

265 N. Main Street, P.O. Box G, Lone, OR 97843

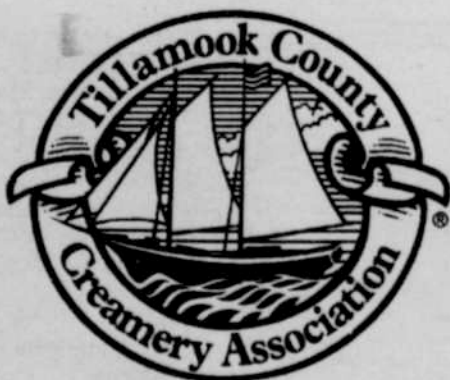
(541) 422-7410 • Fax: (541) 422-7124 • 1-800-585-7410

For All of Your Insurance Needs

Proud to Support Our County Fair



**COME VISIT US AT
THE MORROW COUNTY FAIR
and sample some of our
award-winning cheese**



Tillamook County Creamery Association

4175 Highway 101 North

Tillamook, Oregon 97141

(503) 842-4481

Tillamook®