

1950s Were “Heyday” for Baker County Fair - Halfway

by Gail Kimberling
of the Hells Canyon Journal

The Baker County Fair - Halfway and Panhandle Rodeo is celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2021. As part of the preparations for the centennial event, the HELLS CANYON JOURNAL is pleased to offer this series highlighting the history of the fair with information gleaned from fair board minutes, premium books, newspaper stories, personal recollections from the PINE VALLEY VIGNETTES, a collection of memorabilia from Lynda Bird, secretary of the Pine Valley Fair Association, and other sources.

Part III

“The 1950s were pretty much the heyday for the fair and rodeo,” former Robinette resident Richard Carrithers said.

“It was after the war, and people had more money to spend for leisure,” Carrithers explained. “More people came, and it was a much bigger deal.”

According to memorabilia shared by Lynda Bird, secretary of the Pine Valley Fair Association, the “well disciplined” Baker County Sheriff’s Posse Drill Team was the specialty act for the fair in 1950.

Huge crowds attended the 1950 event, and the Baker Democrat Herald reported, “Take one hot day, 2,500 people, a good local rodeo, homemakers’ and farmers’ exhibits to see, mix them all up with a giant size free bar [with] cold soda pop and beer, throw in some band music and you will have something resembling Labor Day in Halfway.”

Presiding over the 1950 fair were Queen Bernadine Robertson and her court, Darlene Buxton, Betty Dennis, Mary Belle Ratliff and Sally Pierre.

Of special note among the 157 exhibitors was Edna Nave of Richland who swept the ribbons in the cake department.

Fern Gordon of Baker served as Queen of the 1951 fair along with six princesses: Mabel Sipp, Joyce Busby, Ruthie Phelps, Nellie Rock, Janice Busby and Barbara Gulick. Exhibits were once again a highlight of the fair with Judge E.N. Hoffman of Ontario exclaiming, “I have never seen better displays of produce. The booths are all outstanding, which makes picking the winner difficult.”

Crowds swelled past 3,000 during the 1952 fair, which featured a special parade with children dressed as cowgirls, Indians and old timers. The

court included Queen Margaret Peer and princesses Nan McKinney, Cerinne Makinson and twins Joyce and Janice Hansen.

Rodeo winners in 1952 included Del Skeen for saddle bronc; Wally Harris in bareback; Roy Walker in calf roping; Duwayne Sullivan in cow milking; and Don Sullivan for bulldogging. Winner of the 3/8-mile free-for-all race was Vern Gentry riding “Little Sis,” a horse owned by Wayne Curtis.

The Eagles Auxiliary Drill Team was the featured attraction in 1953 and the following were winners in the livestock competition: Bob Chastain had the Grand Champion bull and heifer; Janice Huff had the Grand Champion gilt; Dan Douglas had the Grand Champion fat hog; Jerry Starkey showed the Grand Champion in 4-H breeding stock and sheep; Ray Norris had Grand Champion and Champion for purebred bulls; and Walter Saunders had the Grand Champion ewe.

Reigning over the fair and rodeo in 1953 were Queen Cheryl Kirby and Princesses Sherill Irwin, Trudie Hester, Levettia Binschus and Patsy Ryall.

Nearly \$5,000 in premiums and purses were offered in the 1955 Baker County Fair - Halfway, with the largest payouts going to winners of the mile derby (\$350) and cow cutting contest (\$100). More than two dozen classes of exhibits included grains, fruits, vegetables, horticulture, home-making, amateur and professional baking, soaps, canning and needlecraft, resulting in “hundreds of ribbons” being awarded.

The 1955 royalty included Caroline Logsdon, Charlene Whiteley, Marlene Crow, Earline Cook and Arlene Stellman. The Baker Elks Scout Troop drum and bugle corps performed and dance music was provided by a group called the “Stringbusters.”

In 1956 the royal court included Nora Jones, Sandra Thompson, Judy Huff and Charlene Whitely. A special event for that year featured a fighting steer carrying a Wyler watch from Mack’s Jewelers and a \$20 bill for the taking. In other rodeo events Dean Oliver entered calf roping and bulldogging and later became World Champion; Bub Whiteley, Charley Whiteley and Hershel Jones had a string of horses for the Pony Express race; and Tom Eddy rode “Paiute” in the bareback riding contest.



Photo courtesy of Richard Carrithers and Betty Basché and the Pete Basché Heritage Trust.

THIS EARLY 1950S PHOTO TAKEN BY PETE BASCHÉ gives an aerial view of the City of Halfway with the Pine Valley Fairgrounds and horse track visible in the lower center.

Oregon Representative Sam Coon and Senator Wayne Morse visited Halfway and rode in the parade and rodeo grand entry in 1956, an election year.

The Baker Democrat-Herald said, slightly tongue-in-cheek, of the occasion, “Late model cars and riders on horseback vied for space on the streets of this town of 312. Politicians and ranchers competed for honors. The politicians were seeking votes in November while the stockmen were after rewards for a long season’s work. The ranchers received their laurels, but the vote seekers will have to wait another couple of months.”

Politicians were safely back home or in Salem the following year, leaving room for local headliners. The Pine Valley 4-H Riding Club made its very first appearance at the fair in 1957 and other performances included Danny Ramberg with a Roman riding and dog act, Stan Thompson and his trick mule, “Johnnie,” and the Baker Drum and Bugle Corps. Queen Darlene Lockett and her attendants Sandra Thompson, Jane Ryder, Lynda Thomas and Marjorie Crisp presided over the festivities.

In 1958 another attendance record was set, with 4,000 people visiting the fairgrounds in Pine Valley. Bob Swain of Arlington won All-Around Cowboy honors by taking first in steer wrestling and third in calf roping. However, the rodeo was marred by a serious injury suffered by Jess Ferguson of Idaho after he was thrown from his horse and kicked. N.C. Jones of Halfway used his plane to fly the injured cowboy to St. Elizabeth Hospital in Baker, where Ferguson was later reported in satisfactory condition.

The 1958 Rodeo Court included Lynda Thomas, Betty Basché, Pat Wagner, Sharon Douglas and Terry Kester.

“Beeswax Moore” and his trained mule performed at the fair in 1959. Bob Chambers was rodeo announcer, a small town gig before he later announced for 23 years at the Pendleton Roundup and two years at the National Rodeo Finals. The women’s barrel race in 1959 featured Deanna Gover, Darlene Whiteley, Glenn Mary Reed and Nona Hust; and bareback competitors included Gary Gover, Bub Whiteley and Vaden Ashby. The Durkee Blue Sage Rider 4-H Club also appeared.

Throughout the 1950s the Baker County Fair - Halfway continued its unique tradition of bringing the Old West to a small town, as one reporter waxed, “The old and the new intermingled in this little town set in a picturesque mountain valley ... It was a typical scene of Americana as the colorful clad cowboys and girls wandered about the exhibit hall, the streets of the town and the fairgrounds.”

The fair also continued to be the highlight of the summer for residents and visitors alike, as Neta Myers recalled in Pine Valley Vignettes Volume II.

She wrote, “I enjoy the fairs. I love the fun, the people, the exhibits, rodeos and foods. I have always believed we should take part in the fair’s activities ... We as a family always raised a garden and exhibited vegetables. We had all kinds of fruits, vegetables, flowers and sewn items. The exhibit hall was always full. The 4-H and FFA animals were all judged and exhibited.

“They used to have pulling contests with their huge draft horses. They would pull drags or sleds with sacks of sand or

cement, loading them until the horses couldn’t pull; and whoever had the most pounds on when the contest was over was the winner of the event.”

And the fair was for all ages, too. Myers wrote that prior to expansion of the grandstands there was “a nice grassy plot at the south end” of the fairgrounds where local children would sit, drink pop, play and watch the rodeo.

“That was neat for them,” Myers wrote—and just as neat for adults to see, as well.

Fair Headlines from 1950s

Crowd Of 2500 Attends Baker County’s Fair - Displays Outstanding in Quality; Prizes Awarded (*Baker Democrat-Herald*, September 1, 1950)

Huge Crowd Views Opening Of County Fair At Halfway (*Baker Democrat-Herald*, September 4, 1951)

County Fair Draws Crowd At Halfway (*Baker Democrat-Herald*, August 29, 1952)

Throngs See County Fair For 2 Days (*Baker Democrat-Herald*, September 8, 1953)

Rodeo, Exhibits Due At Halfway Sunday, Monday / Local Youths Participate In Fair Meet - (*Baker-Democrat Herald*, September 3, 1955)

County Fair Winners In Agent’s List / Blue Ribbons Run Into Hundreds (*Baker Democrat-Herald*, September 8, 1955)

Old, New Mingle In Small Town At Annual Labor Day County Fair / Halfway Awakens To Full Day of Events Monday / Professional Riders Take Top Rodeo Awards; Templeton Named All-Around Cowboy (*Baker Democrat-Herald*, September 4, 1956)

Swain Wins All-Around Cowboy Honors At County Fair, Attendance May Set Record (*Baker Democrat-Herald*, September 2, 1958)

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