

“Without A Fair A Town Goes Dead”

by Gail Kimberling
of the Hells Canyon Journal

The Baker County Fair - Halfway and Panhandle Rodeo is celebrating its 100th year 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 and other sources.

Part VI

In the early 1990s the annual Baker County Fair in Halfway was challenged by the annual August Fair in Baker City for the name “Baker County Fair.”

As expected, members of the Pine Valley Fair Association were quite taken aback. Not only did they learn of the matter through a local 4-H publication, their records

showed Baker County Court had officially designated the fair in Halfway as the “Baker County Fair” on July 26, 1933.

Doug Payton, then-president of the fair association, led a delegation of residents from Pine and Eagle valleys to a rather heated meeting with the Baker County Fair Board where naming rights, state ratings and finances were at stake.

While the locals and others boasted of Halfway’s ability to produce “a good county fair,” county fair board officials hinted at “poor management out there,” according to a June 24, 1992 edition of the Hells Canyon Journal.

It was ultimately decided that both events would share the same name – although the fragile truce nearly disappeared when the fair board learned the county court had just increased funding for the Halfway fair following an impassioned presentation by Fair Manager Billie Howard.

Howard had argued state and county dollars for the August Fair increased steadily and significantly over the previous three decades while funding for the Halfway fair remained steady at a paltry \$5,500 during the same time period. Howard asked for nearly \$13,000 but was only given \$7,000; it was still the largest budget for the fair to date.

“Floor Pour”

Howard was also behind a huge push to improve the Exhibit Hall on the Pine Valley Fairgrounds, most notably, by pouring a concrete floor.

Nellie Forrester, a former county fair board member and local fair manager, recalled, “There was sawdust and dust everywhere. All the exhibits ended up dusty and, of course, needlework and other things were almost ruined ... it was a mess.”

Forrester said the project got a jump-start when Forest Service personnel used the Exhibit Hall as a staging area during a nearby forest fire. Forrester said the firefighters wired the hall, installed electrical outlets and even built dividers for the different exhibit areas.

The main event – the “exhibit hall floor pour” – took place May 19, 1995 and involved dozens, if not hundreds, of local builders, ranchers and volunteers.

Prep work involved cleaning out the building, pulling “decades of staples” from the walls, removing the sawdust,

leveling the dirt and installing 100 yards of gravel over the entire floor.

Then everyone – from FFA students to old timers – dumped and finished about 100 tons of concrete, with seven truckloads arriving in sequence from Baker City about every 10 minutes.

It took even more people to complete the building in time for the late-August fair and rodeo: painting (Al Joseph), doors (Marion Crow) and new counters and shelves (Al Joseph and Dick Crow).

Forrester added, “The Community Corrections people helped build things and cleaned up the fairgrounds; Forest Service personnel brought picnic tables to the fairgrounds, picked them up afterwards and gave technical assistance.

“Once they got the cement in the Exhibit Hall and painted the displays and dividers there was a lot of people entering things,” Forrester said. “The community came from everywhere, not just Halfway. There were Oxbow and Richland people, and people from New Bridge, too.”

Beyond Halfway

Fair time was “always more than fair week,” said Forrester, recalling how she devoted energy year ‘round to making the event a success.

“I was on the Baker County Fair Board and because I was a widow and had nothing else to do I went to all the conventions,” she said.

Traveling from Tillamook to Eugene to Burns, Forrester said, “I met with other board members and managers and organizers and learned about new information and vendors. Everyone brings in what they have accomplished and by mixing in with other fair people you get lots of ideas and sharing. It was a wonderful time of my life.”

Forrester said she once won \$100 at a convention; another time she was featured in a drawing by a quick-draw artist.

“He just drew me, and the next year I went back after I had been traveling. He said, ‘What have you been doing?’ and I said, ‘I’ve been on the road,’ and he did a sketch of me with a stick over my shoulder with a bundle on it.”

A Fair Tradition

Forrester had just returned from more traveling when she learned Billie Howard had suffered a stroke and was in rehab.

“That’s how I became fair manager [in 2005],” Forrester

said. “Billie left really good notes, and there was never a time that something came up when I needed something there wasn’t somebody who said, ‘Oh, I know someone who can do that,’ or, ‘I can do that.’ People were congenial and helpful and I would hope that will continue to be the tradition.”

Forrester, herself, took meticulous notes and even wrote a weekly newspaper column to keep the fair first and foremost in people’s minds.

“During the year I would try to remind people things were coming up, like in spring when they started planting, so they would be ready for fair,” Forrester recalled. “I enjoyed it, and it gave me something to do.”

Forrester said she met “a lot of wonderful people,” from judges to farmers to business men and women, especially as she was out and about selling ads for the fair premium book.

“It got so people would see me coming and we would laugh about it being ‘that time’ again,” she said.

Forrester also got the county to increase funding for the Halfway event, from \$7,000 to \$8,000.

Forrester, now 97, has watched the fair struggle at times (see more about when Halfway temporarily lost its fairgrounds in next week’s edition) but she said the event has always found a way to survive and thrive.

“In years past the older generation finally got to point they weren’t doing as much and then younger ones came up and took over. In the last few years there hasn’t been as much participation in the fair, but I would hope that changes,” she said. “The fair is important because it brings people together. I think without a fair a town goes dead.”

1990s Grand Marshals

- 1990 - Guy Heater and Derral Thomas
- 1991 - Walter Forsea and Vivian Thomas
- 1992 - Vonnie Bennett and Zelma Laird
- 1993 - Byron Brinton and John Osborn
- 1994 - Joe and Olive Pinaire
- 1995 - Walt Butler
- 1996 - 75th Anniversary - LeRoy Smelcer and Dude Douglas
- 1997 - NW Rodeo Producers (Herschel Jones, George Moody, LeRoy Stacy, Lester Motley, Joe Pinaire, Bill Bird, Walt Forsea, Derral Thomas and Guy Heater)
- 1998 - Tiny Jones
- 1999 - Kenny Grant



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