

Baker County Fair - Halfway in the 1940s:

“Bigger – Better – And a New Grandstand”

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 II

The Baker County Fair - Halfway continued into the 1940s even as headlines warned of the coming world-wide conflict.

In 1940, the Pine Valley Fair Association spent \$25 to hire Kenneth Fisher of Haines to show his trick horse, “Captain.” The board also authorized the sale of beer in the fairgrounds on fair days and sought to bring a carnival to town for the event.

Rayetta Horting Wilson was on the Royal Court in 1941, and that same year there was a “very patriotic opening number” featuring the raising of both American and British flags to symbolize the cooperation between countries.

Members of the Pine Valley Fair Association and other volunteers continued to work hard to make each year’s fair a financial and community success. In her handwritten memoirs, Estella Summers recalled, “Before the [exhibit] building was open, we had to clean for several days; old paper on tables removed and new put on. Before we had a floor, we had new sawdust from Mehlhorn’s sawmill put on the ground and at night before I left we had to sprinkle the ground to keep down any dust. [It was] a wonderful improvement when a floor was put in the hall.”

Other improvements were made in the early 1940s as well, including construction of a grandstand and bleacher section by Henry Mehlhorn and Charles Hulse for a bid of \$2,115. The board also added a new hog and sheep shed, installed a public address system, widened the horse track and graded the grounds. The total cost (\$5,191) of these projects was covered by a bank note, membership sales and gate receipts.

As the facility improved, so did usage, and members of the fair association decided in 1940 to begin charging Halfway schools \$50 per year for using the fairgrounds as an athletic field.

The minutes of September 24, 1940 pointed out “...the use of the Fair Grounds by the schools had, in years past, cost the Association considerably more than \$50 per year for cleaning up the premises, replacing improvements disturbed or completely removed, maintaining a watchman to prevent excessive damages to grounds and improvements, the fire hazard and cost of protection therefrom.”

The fair association also authorized rental of their new public address system to the Pine Eagle Dairy Association and other interested parties “at a sum of \$5.00 plus costs of installation and operation.”

War Interrupts Fair

The fair was not held during World War II, from 1942 through 1944. It was the only time the event was ever canceled until the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

While the fair was on war-time hiatus, the Pine Valley Fair Association held an Adjourned Annual Meeting on April 21, 1943 and it was decided the old officers would hold over for another year. The officers were Harry Alexander, president; M. Cooper, vice president; W.W. Evans, treasurer; and Ray Horting, secretary.

The board also agreed to continue an arrangement with one of its directors, Joe Sample, for use of the pasture

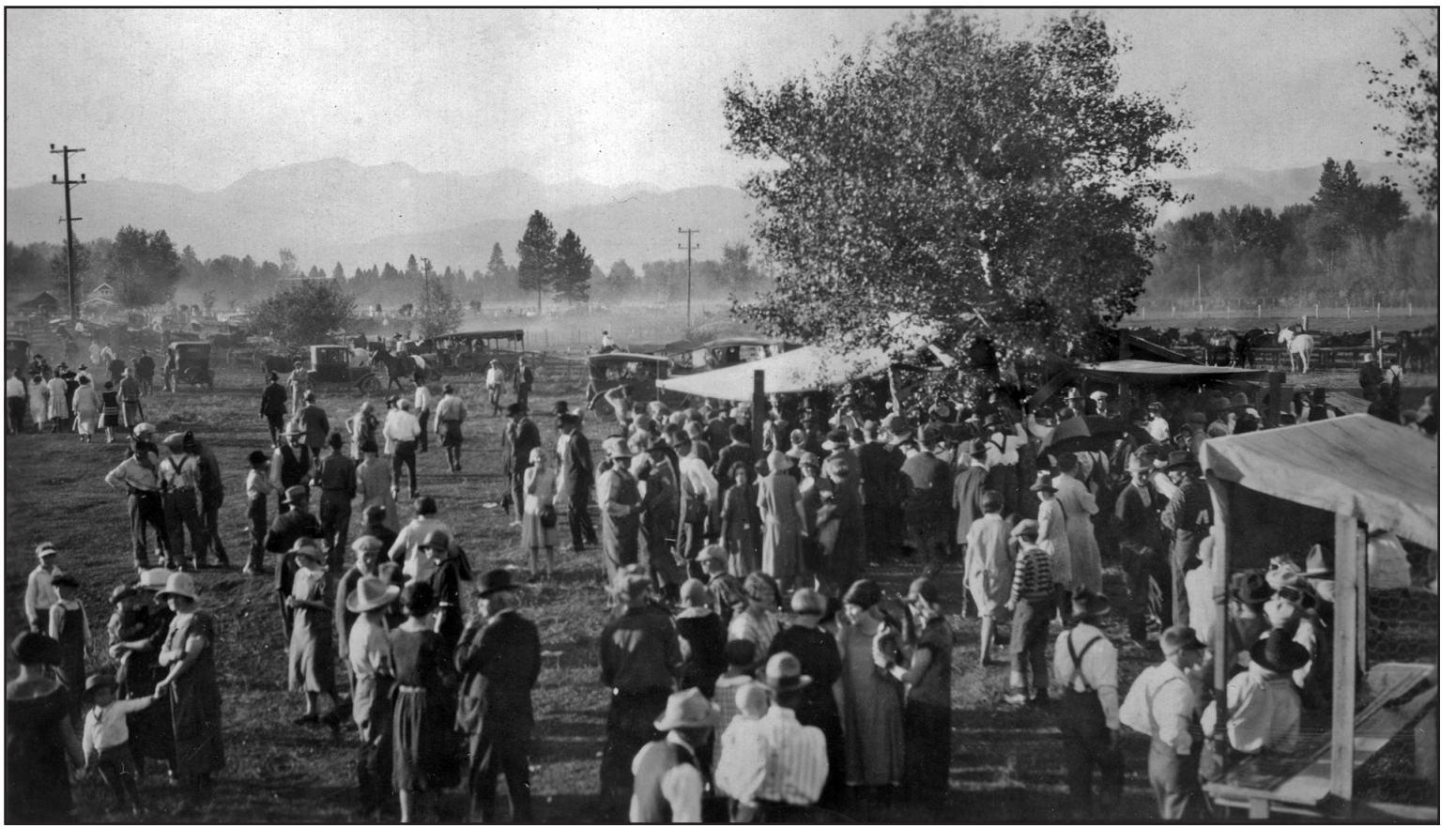


Photo courtesy of Melody Huff

THIS UNDATED PHOTO shared by Pine Valley Fair Association president Melody Huff shows elbow-to-elbow crowds at one of the early events on the Pine Valley Fairgrounds.

on the empty fairgrounds for \$30 per year “plus his labor in looking after the same and keeping the fences in repair.”

When the fair resumed in 1945, there was a new agreement between the Baker County Fair Board, Pine Valley Fair Association and Baker County 4-H Leader’s Association to “establish a program to benefit all 4-H clubs and other farm youth activities in the county,” further bolstering participation.

That same year (1945) the Pine Valley Fair - Halfway featured a full slate of entertainment including the Oregon Trail Riders Mounted Drill Team and Trixie McCormick, a trick rider and roper from Walla Walla. There was even passenger air service from Baker to Halfway provided by pilots Lonnie D. Shurtleff and Ray Childers of the Baker Flying Service.

Royalty was always a big part of the fair with young ladies coming from throughout the county as long as they “could ride and furnish their own horses and equipment.”

Neta Myers, a long-time supporter and contributor to the fair in Halfway, recalled in *Pine Valley Vignettes Volume II*, “The way they got the court for the rodeo in bygone years was by the girls’ selling tickets. Whoever sold the most tickets was queen. One year, perhaps in 1946, the girl who won the queen contest had apparently never ridden a horse in her life. The first day of the rodeo, in came the princesses, one by one. And when the queen came around the track, she fell off her horse right in front of the grandstand. As far as I know, she never did ride into the arena. I think she walked in.”

Neta also told of how, on the last day of the rodeo, she happened to spot “two of our most dignified ladies” walking across the arena wearing hats, gloves and high heels.

“The cowboys hadn’t seen them and were out there working with the bulls, taking them from the north end to the south end, to put them in the pasture,” Neta said. “One bull was kind of ornery. About the time they turned the bulls out, they saw the two elderly ladies. The ladies started to run. They lost their hats, but they made it to the fence and climbed it. Just as they got up the fence, the mean bull sailed right under them. I held my breath, but after it was over, I laughed like the dickens.”

The Panhandle event continued to draw attendance from Baker City, and *The Record-Courier* reported in 1946, “A mile-long caravan with police escort and sound truck through the courtesy of the army recruiting service is the plan of Baker merchants to boost Baker Day – Friday – at the fair.”

A committee of Baker businessmen urged, “Take your car or send your trucks... We look for a lot of fun and entertainment, both on the caravan and at the Fair.”

Equine and other eclectic acts continued to be a staple at most every fair, along with parades, rodeo events, exhibitions and livestock shows.

In 1946, for example, fairgoers were entertained by four-year-old trick roper Sonny Lambert, trick rider Francis Stiller from Walla Walla and a mule named “Halfway Jenny” ridden by Dwight Maddox, while “Roy Page and his All-Colored Band” played for the fair’s annual dance.

Hollywood even visited Halfway in 1949 when actress Anne Gwynne crowned Queen Wilma Emerson and honored princesses Barbara Gulick and Benita and Tiz Smelcer.

And, in what had to be called a success, the *Democrat-Herald* reported on September 8, 1947, “Unusual was the record set during the two-day fair, in that not one fatal accident marred the merry-making during all the time the fair was in full swing.”

Fair Headlines in the 1940s

Halfway Host To Throngs At County’s Fair - More Than 3,000 Persons See Arena Program - Annual Parade Is Successful - Tex Martin Winner of Bucking Contest (*Democrat-Herald*, September 8, 1940)

County Fair To Open On Labor Day - Crowds, Exhibits Hoped To Set Record This Year - 20th Annual Show - Baker Day Monday (*The Record-Courier*, August 28, 1941)

Queen Colleen [Howell] is Fair Enthusiast, She’s Only Missed One Annual Event (*The Record-Courier*, August 28, 1941)

Baker County Fair Of 1941 Declared Best - Large

Halfway Hall Is Crowded With Displays - McKinnis Wins Bucking Final - Archie Murchison Wins Reining Contest (*Democrat-Herald*, September 3, 1941)

Buck Ahern Champ Bulldogger, Bronc Rider, Fair Rodeo - Frank Ebell Has Best Reined Horse; Roping Prize to Clyde Mehlhorn - Eleanor Corning Wins \$50 Fair Prize For Grand Champ 4-H Club Fat Steer (*The Record-Courier*, September 6, 1945)

Crowds Thrilled By Fair Rodeos; Displays Unusual - Visitors From 10 States View Fair At Halfway - Farm Exhibits At County Fair Are Impressive (*Democrat-Herald*, September 8, 1947)

Rodeos, Races, Exhibits, Barbecue Draw Crowds To Halfway County Fair - Donna Smith Wins Thrilling Opening Day Race - Riders Get Breaks As Unruly Horses Crash Barriers (*Democrat-Herald*, September 7, 1948)

Wilma Emerson, Richland, Queen Of County Fair - Other queen contestants included Lorraine Thompson and Patricia Flynn, Richland, Nellie Rock and Marlene Miller, Halfway (*Democrat Herald*, September 1, 1949)



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