

# Baker County Fair in Halfway and Panhandle Rodeo Once Played Host to Top Professional Cowboys

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 IV

The Baker County Fair - Halfway went big-time in 1956 by hosting a professionally-sanctioned rodeo.

"I am quite sure it was the only time the rodeo went PRCA - Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association," former Pine Valley resident Daryl Robertson told the *Hells Canyon Journal*. "It was quite a big thing to have four world champions at the rodeo in Halfway."

Robertson added it meant a lot of work as the grounds had fallen into a state of disrepair during the Korean War years.

"The chutes, the top railing were in terrible shape. The floor of the Exhibit Hall had fallen in, and there was no money," he said.

But officials and volunteers pulled off the event, and fairgoers set new attendance records in the grandstands for the two-day (Sunday and Labor Day) rodeo.

"The Pine Valley Fair Association announced outstanding success at its two dances, record crowds at both afternoon arena performances and immediately predicted extensive facilities improvement prior to the 1957 edition of the historic County Fair," stated a September 6, 1956 article in *The Record-Courier*, shared by Robertson.

The newspaper article also reported Paul Templeton of Wenatchee won the all-around cowboy award (a saddle donated by Eagle Valley businesses) by taking first in the bareback contest and second in bull riding.

Other professionals at the event included Bill Linderman, president of the PRCA (bareback), Deb Copenhaver of Post Falls (saddle bronc), Bill Boag of Portland (bull riding), Jim Charles of Louisiana (bull riding) and Dean Oliver, the 1955 world champion calf roper.

## Erskine Wood on Nez Perce

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the hills sloping down to the valley. We would drive them to water. We would turn the ones loose we had ridden, and lasso fresh ones to take in to camp for use the next two or three days. That way Joseph always had fresh horses. The reason we drove them to water to catch them is because it was the middle of an opening in the river. That, with the willows around it, made a natural corral. We could drive the herd into that confined space, and the horses would stand in knee deep water. We could catch them much more easily.

The fall hunt, when they go into the mountains to lay in the supply of winter's meat (venison) lasted about 10 days. They would go into the mountains which were at the head of the valley and beyond. They would go in about the middle of October or the end of October and the band would split up into several groups. The whole band can't hunt in one area. So they split up into different groups. I was always with Joseph's group, which would be about eight families. They would hunt together. They would put their tepees all together. Instead of a round tepee, they would have one long tepee. Instead of a fire in the middle, it had four fires going down the length of the tepee. The tepee would be 50 feet long or more. Those fall hunts were what I enjoyed immensely. They were exciting, they entailed hardship, it was cold and there was snow on the ground. We would have to get

The colorful rodeo coverage also noted, "It was Claude Bruce of Huntington who was tougher and more agile than the fighting steer to take the Wyler watch and \$20 from the horns of the critter in the open arena after the bull had a half-dozen cowboys on the ground and over the fences before he was bested in an event that luckily injured none of the twenty who went after the valuables in the special fair feature."

## The Sixties

The Sixties brought a number of unique specialty acts to Halfway, including chariot racing and a free-falling event from Dan Thompson's airplane. Tuffy Truesdale of St. James, Missouri even appeared with his acting bear "Victor" from Paramount Pictures.

Entertainment also featured the Pine Valley 4-H Riding Club, the Choir Belles of Halfway (12 ladies in old-time costumes), the Haines Double D Riding Club Drill Team and the Baker Elks Lodge Boy Scout Drum & Bugle Corps.

Royalty for the decade included Frances Oliver, Myrna Rae Motley and Sayonna Ragsdale in 1960; Cheryl Thomas, Bonnie Makinson and Dianne Sullivan in 1961; Myrna Rae Motley, Vicki Pope and Carolyn Jo Young in 1962; Joan DelCurto, Marlene Bennett and Mickie Bird in 1965; Kay Westberg, Pam Bennett and Mary Grant in 1967; and Tonya Garritson, Sally DelCurto and Alaina Miles in 1969.

In *Pine Valley Vignettes Volume II*, Neta Myers recalled when Berdine Whiteley and her children, Mickey and Jerri Kay, appeared at the fair as part of the Pine Valley Riding Club.

"Of course, Berdine had spent a lot of time and effort getting the kids decked out in red and white riding outfits, and this was the first time they had worn them," Myers wrote. "Here came Berdine riding out, with the riding class behind her. Mickey and another small child on a Shetland pony were at the tail end of the class. Pretty soon, the people in the grandstand started hollering and clapping. Berdine turned to look, and here Bub had put a big black sombrero on Mickey's head, and Mickey was so small that it looked just like the sombrero was riding the pony!"

up long before daylight. The squaws would have breakfast ready for us. We would have breakfast. We would take a hot bath first, before breakfast in the dark. They would make a little hot water bath first in this way: They would dig a circular pit about two feet deep. They would build a fire alongside it to heat rocks. They would build it right close to the creek with only a small bank between the two so the water would seep through the bank from the cold creek into this invented tub of dirt. Then we would get in there and roll the hot rocks into the water and have a very good hot water bath. Then you would get out of the bath and to show their bravado, they would go down to the creek with just a little skim of ice on it and squat down just as if they didn't give a damn that it was cold. I couldn't do that. The object of these baths was to take the scent off our bodies so the deer couldn't smell us. It is a very good thing to know; we white people don't do that, but the Indians always take those baths every morning of the fall hunt."

Erskine Wood specialized in admiralty and marine cases and was admiralty counsel of the United States Shipping Board in 1920. He was a successful attorney in Portland being the lead attorney in the law firm founded by his father, C.E.S. Wood. Erskine Wood died at the age of 103, and his son, Erskine Wood Jr., followed in his father's footsteps practicing law as a partner in the firm that his grandfather founded.

Estella Summers recounted a more somber event in *Pine Valley Vignettes Volume III*, when a trick rider hired to perform at the rodeo perished over a steep embankment on the Sag Road.

She wrote, "He called from Baker a day before the fair and said he was on his way out. He never arrived, and the board decided he had gone to another rodeo. But several days later someone noticed some big buzzards flying around in the canyon and stopped to look down and saw a truck and trailer. The trick rider and his horse were found dead."

## Fair Headlines

In an article titled "New Features Add To Fair Prospects" (*The Record-Courier*, August 31, 1961), it was reported the fair program would extend to three days with final judging and events held on Labor Day.

Regarding the stiff competition for prizes, the paper said, "Inter-community rivalry is strong for sweepstake honors ... as proud growers vie to make good the oft-repeated claim that, 'If it can be grown anywhere in Oregon it can be grown in Baker County.'"

"Open class homemaking draws upon the talents of housewives, those from the city competing strongly with the country women for top honors in canning, culinary, needlecraft and baking."

Tickets for the 1961 fair ranged from \$3.00 for reserved rail box seats to \$1.25 for adults and 50 cents for children in the open bleachers. Reserved parking spots were also available for \$1.00.


On September 3, 1963 the *Baker Democrat-Herald* announced, "Record Number Visit Fair; Weiser Entry Top Cowboy."

The paper reported, "Paid attendance for the two-day rodeo totaled 2,658 as compared to 2,615 last year. And on Saturday, an estimated 150 persons attended the quarter horse show. It is also possible and very probable that a number of families milled around the exhibition grounds without staying for the rodeo."

The Weiser cowboy mentioned in the headline was Bob

OFFICIAL PROGRAM — SUNDAY

# Baker FAIR County



Queen KAY WESTBERG  
Princess MARY GRANT      Princess PAM BENNETT

## HALFWAY, OREGON, SEPT. 3-4, 1967

Announcer ..... CLIFF HAGEY, Haines, Ore.  
Race Judges WALT TARTER, LAWRENCE SMELCER, V. THOMAS  
Rodeo Judges ..... CON ROWAN, HAROLD WOODLAND  
Livestock Contractors NORTHWEST RODEO PRODUCERS, INC.  
Arena Director ..... JIM MYERS  
Pickup Men ..... HERSHEL JONES, DON WHITELEY  
HANK BUNYARD, Richland, Oregon, ..... Race Director  
VIVIAN THOMAS, Rodeo Secy., Ph. SHERWOOD 1-2701

**FOR YOUR PLEASURE DURING THE SHOW—CLOWNS**  
BRUCE BERGEVIN and JERRY COOLEY


Bruce. He was awarded the all-around cowboy buckle after winning buckles for bareback and saddle bronc riding.

The yellowed broadsheet also reported Jyme Stoner of Baker won a buckle for bulldogging, Andy Conforth of Hermiston won the buckle for bull riding and Bud Ingram of Haines took the buckle for calf roping.

Eunice Squires of Baker won the sweepstakes in exhibits for floriculture, baking and canning, and additional awards went to Annaveve

Martin of Richland for vegetables; L.L. Johnson of Halfway for grain, hay and grasses; Gill Wright of Richland for fruits; and Kathryn Braswell of New Bridge for needlework.

And for their display booths - an ever-popular feature in the Exhibit Hall - the Eagle Valley Grange came in first; the Pine Cone Club from Pine Town was second; the Friday Friends of Halfway was third; the New Bridge Grange, fourth; and the Pine Eagle District of the Soil Conservation Service, fifth.



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