

Community Effort Saves Historic Pine Valley Fairgrounds

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 VII

The long-running Baker County Fair and Rodeo in Halfway nearly came to halt in the mid-2000s when the gavel came down on not just one, but two separate sheriff's sales on the steps of the Baker County Courthouse.

The first sale took place December 16, 2004 and resulted in a newly-built pavilion and the seven-acre parcel on which it was located being sold to an out-of-town finance company for \$375,000.

The remaining nine-acre fairgrounds property went to the same finance company for \$202,354.76 in a second sheriff's sale held April 15, 2005.

Willamette Valley Construction Financing and Collection Services, LLC was the lone bidder in both sales.

Fortunately, the Pine Valley Fair Association had a 180-day window to redeem the fairgrounds for the price of the auction bid, and through a swift and vigorous fundraising campaign they were successful in keeping the 80-something-year-old facility.

Exactly how the fair association nearly lost their assets has been thoroughly – and agonizingly – debated; however, most agree circumstances surrounding construction of the 45,000-square foot pavilion precipitated the unfortunate events.

David Bird, a PVFA board member at the time, probably summed it up in the December 22, 2004 edition of the *Hells Canyon Journal* when he said, "Unwise decisions were made by a few leaders of the Pine Valley Fair Association. A handful of people had a grandiose idea. It's too bad it didn't work, but it was not sized for our community."

Bird stated not only was the building too large, the overhead on the structure would be too much for the fair association to afford.

It's not that fairgrounds improvements weren't possible; the fair had a long history of successful projects that were completed with tight budgets and ample community sup-



HCJ file photo

PINE VALLEY'S HISTORIC FAIRGROUNDS were temporarily lost to the community prior to a whirlwind fundraising effort in 2005 that put the well used facility back under local control.

port.

In the decade preceding construction of the pavilion a new concrete floor and other amenities were added to the Exhibit Hall thanks to hundreds of helpers (see Fair History Part VI in the August 18 edition of the *HCJ*).

Later, fair association members and community volunteers worked together to upgrade the exterior and interior of the fairgrounds' 12 concession booths, VFW booth and cook shack and improve the bandstand.

"Preliminary approval has been obtained for funding, which will employ up to 16 local young people during the summer on the bandstand and cook shack projects," stated a May 15, 1997 report in the *HCJ*.

And the following year, the Pine Valley Grange Hall was successfully moved from Old Foothill Road to the fairgrounds using a six-mile detour to accommodate the 37-foot wide building.

Planning the Pavilion

A pie-in-the-sky \$660,000 Master Plan for fairground improvements, complete with a 200-foot by 200-foot indoor arena and state-of-the-art race track and grandstands, was developed in the late 1990s but wisely scrapped by the fair association as too costly.

The plan, commissioned by the Baker County Fair Board with a \$25,000 grant from Leo Adler Foundation, also



HCJ file photo

TYLER HINKLE, LENA CARR AND CELISA DIGGES donated proceeds from their lemonade stand and raffle ticket sales to the community's efforts to repurchase the fairgrounds in the summer of 2005. The raffle prize was a quilt made by Norma Apple.

included a 30,000-square foot pavilion for the fairgrounds in Baker City.

The PVFA, instead, pursued the idea of a more reasonably-priced, multi-use pavilion for the Halfway fairgrounds. On September 26, 2000, with grant monies in the bank, the City of Halfway inked a \$452,410 contract with general contractor Mike Becker for construction of the building.

A second contract in the amount of \$428,997 was signed on June 27, 2001, ostensibly for "Phase 2" of construction.

But unlike the original contract, this one had no financial backing and the fair association was forced on March 12, 2002 "to allow encumbrance of the pavilion and the Freeman property as security for [a promissory] note."

The association was unable to repay the note which led to foreclosure and the ensuing Sheriff's sale in December 2004.

However, reported the *HCJ*, "The \$375,000 bid left a deficiency on the debt of almost \$200,000 and with no other significant assets to cover the deficiency the beloved fairgrounds made its way back to the auction block" the following April.

Saving the Fairgrounds

Stunned by the sale of their fairgrounds, the community immediately sprang into action and launched an "I Gave To Save" campaign to repurchase the fairgrounds before the legal 180-day redemption window slammed shut.

A large painted thermometer was placed in front of the bank on Main Street to

track donations and pledges while volunteers under the leadership of Nancy Warner scrambled to reach their goal of raising \$250,000 by September 12, 2005.

(Meanwhile contractor Mike Becker allowed use of the fairgrounds for the Junior Rodeo in July and the Baker County Fair over Labor Day weekend as long as the fair association covered insurance and utility costs, which they did.)

The fundraising campaign elicited hundreds of contributions, large and small, from Halfway and beyond.

Tyler Hinkle, Lena Carr and Celisa Digges raised \$100 through a lemonade stand, and the local youngsters made another \$200 by selling raffle tickets for a quilt created by Norma Apple.

Rancher Jay Sly donated proceeds from the sale of a 1,000-pound steer at a livestock auction, and Fern Gordon Taylor, the 1951 fair rodeo queen, donated a cowboy rug to raffle.

One former resident donated \$12,570 through the Oregon Community Foundation while another pledged \$50,000 – although this donation had to be rescinded due to conditions placed on the gift, including a guaranteed seat on the fair board.

Cycle Oregon also gave \$50,000 towards the effort in recognition of the area's generous hospitality for cyclists during their annual rides.

The fundraising thermometer passed \$150,000 in mid-August, and by fair time had topped the \$200,000 mark.

At the September 21 fair association meeting the fund drive was deemed a success

and fair board members announced paperwork was being drawn up to declare redemption of the fairgrounds.

With the facility once again under fair association ownership, a feast with steaks provided by Dry Creek Ranch was held to celebrate the occasion and acknowledge the many hardworking volunteers and donors who made it possible.

Under photos of the feast in the October 26, 2005 edition of the *HCJ*, the caption reads, "The successful redemption of the Pine Valley Fairgrounds was cause for celebration on Sunday, October 23 as well over 100 people turned out to enjoy a steak barbecue and potluck feast on as beautiful a late October day as one can imagine in eastern Oregon."

It was a beautiful occasion, indeed, for everyone who had kept the fair going since 1921, for those who saved the fairgrounds that year, and for the many future fairgoers who continue to enjoy the annual Labor Day weekend event.

Baker County Fair Grand Marshals in the 2000s

- 2000** – Don Haight and Jack Corning
- 2001** – Louise Sly and Bill Bird
- 2002** – Arlene Thomas and Beth Rowen
- 2003** – Ben Dunleavy and Christina Gover
- 2004** – Marcella Taylor and Eunice Squiera
- 2005** – Belle Johnson and Lela Shold
- 2006** – Nellie Forrester
- 2007** – Dale Chamberlin and Jim Estes
- 2008** – The Gulick Sisters – Margie Harris, Barbara DeMastus and Opal Matile
- 2009** – Bill Waldron and Don Rock

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