

BIG HEARTS BEHIND THE "BIG LOOP"

By Jo Lee T Riley

Announcer Jim Smith rivaled Jeff Foxworthy in dispensing lines at his cohort's expense. He tuned in and "tuned up" the audience in anticipation of each swing of that gigantic loop.

Spectators, mostly in big hats and riding boots, appreciated the fineness of top hands flipping the middle of a 20-foot loop up to catch it, separated by a finger and held doubled in their roping hand to keep clear of horse feet, fence, and chute.

Eyes twinkled and grins creased leathery faces seeing the occasional roper catch his own horse's tail in the mighty effort it takes to get that huge loop swinging while chasing a horse at high speed. Tiny Jordan Valley's "Big Loop Roping" shows the prowess of high-desert buckaroos in roping and fore-footing wild horses with a huge loop in a long rope, as well as how a small community can work together to entertain and accommodate over ten times their total population.

The football field is a tent city, the rodeo grounds is bumper-to-bumper pickups, trailers, and horses, the rv park overflows, and most of the driveways accommodate several campers.

Our friends from North Dakota were set up on the back side of the field with one of the newer round pup-tents, and we had an older rectangle 8' x 10' that the zipper stuck half way down. A large family, from a John Day ranch, camped in their, roundup, wall-tent complete with heat-stove and cook-stove. The four boys slept outside on cots in sleeping bags which were white with frost in the morning when they all crawled out before they joined in cooking breakfast. By noon the youngest boy showed up back at camp with a brand new bedroll tarp that he was very proud of. When we were visiting with them the father said, "We make it our family vacation every year right after we turn the cows out on pasture."

That Saturday morning the local FFA chapter fed us a steaming pancake and sausage breakfast on picnic tables in the cool May sunshine. When asked how it was organized the instructor said, "Kind of each part does its own. It's a pretty busy weekend for sure." The FFA hosts breakfast Saturday and cleans up the camp grounds every morning.

Before noon we headed down to the rodeo grounds, past numerous quality vendors with row-upon-row of tack. We wanted to get a good seat for the 50th anniversary of the Jordan Valley Big Loop. Yes it is quite an event, sporting saddle bronc riding, stock saddle bronc riding, bull riding, cow riding, steer riding, junior and senior barrel racing, calf roping, team roping, and of course the big loop horse roping. Something for all the family to participate in, as well as identify with as a spectator.

We were impressed by whole families who manned the gates from youngsters in big hats to old hands who had seen many cattle drives.

The 24 person rodeo committee puts on the rodeo, with many doing the same job year after year. The treasurer said, "It's amazing, just one of those deals (where) everyone does his job. The day comes and it all works. It's just amazing. The work week (getting the grounds ready) is definitely a community effort."

Different ranchers take turns furnishing cows for the cow riding and the other stock is contracted, some at a nominal fee.

When I asked if it was put on for profit or for tradition the treasurer said "the rodeo committee puts everything back into the grounds after paying the bills. The Lions and other groups raise money to operate through the year."

I noticed that the rodeo program had fifty names as supporters. That's quite a bunch for a town of approximately 225 and community of about twice that.

The rodeo committee is pretty much ranchers, and the towns people take care of their businesses serving the patrons and support the Lions club and their services.

The Methodist ladies started one food booth and when they decided to retire the high school freshmen took over and the EMT's provided another food booth.

After the rodeo there was a bar-b-que before the Lion's sponsored dance. We spent time visiting with people from different parts of the country instead of going to the dance but could hear the music from our tents. All were enjoying themselves and a very few were not family friendly groups.

Sunday morning cowboy church was a lively toe tapping place as we sang praises to our Lord, accompanied by keyboard, fiddle, and guitar, led by a traveling ranch/rodeo ministry. From there we walked a few blocks down to the Catholic church for another great buckaroo breakfast fit for a king (King of the range anyway).

The parade was short and sweet with a six-horse-up stage coach filled to overflowing. We said goodbye to our North Dakota friends and headed to our respective homes after a memory filled week-end that we discuss often and always with a smile.

In my interview with the treasurer of the rodeo committee he said, "We just put on the Rope and Ride (event) and made over \$20,000 for multiple use on public lands. We decided to be on the offensive rather than the defense. The community silent auction brought in over \$2500 alone."

Jordan Valley and community put on the Big Loop in May and the Rope & Ride in September.

To me this is a great place to visit or a nice place to live and raise a family. Any community that can host such an economical entertaining weekend for an event ten times its own population, and raise funds for multiple use on public lands deserves a "hats off, standing ovation" for the size of their hearts.