

Let er' Buck: A Living History On The Green Mile

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With over a century's worth of stories told on Pendleton, Oregon's green mile, the Pendleton Round-Up is one of rodeo's most iconic venues.

Story by Julia Dondero

What began in 1910 as a post-harvest, late-September celebration quickly grew into one of the largest PRCA rodeos of the year, earning PRCA's Large Outdoor Rodeo of the Year honors 10 times and welcoming fans and contestants from across the globe.>>

A 100-year-old cowbell rings, a cannon booms, a sold-out crowd of 16,000 rodeo fans roar, rodeo queens dressed in traditional regalia spur their horses into action, and just like that, the otherwise peaceful autumn afternoon in this Oregon ranching-farming community gives way to a tradition unlike any other — the Pendleton Round-Up. It's 1:15 p.m., and it's time to "Let 'er buck!"

On any other weekend in this quaint, historic town, farmers would be tilling their wheat fields, and ranchers would be tending their herds. But on the second full week of September, the town becomes dedicated to all-things rodeo.

On with the Round-Up

The close-knit Pendleton community, home to around 17,000 residents, originated as a stopping point on the Oregon Trail during the mid-1800s and boasts ties to the Umatilla, Cayuse and Walla Walla Native American tribes. In a beautiful crossroads of cultures, the town was built with the spirit of a cowboy and kindred affection for the wild West. Just two years after establishing the city, local attorney Roy Raley decided to host "a frontier exhibition of picturesque pastimes, Indian and military spectacles, cowboy racing and bronco busting for the championship of the Northwest," an exhibition that would quickly become the iconic Pendleton Round-Up.

Even the board members were awestruck by the unprecedented attraction the 1910 inaugural Pendleton Round-Up would bring. So much so that during the inaugural event, volunteers built more grandstands in the middle of the night to accommodate the surplus crowd of more than 7,000 attendees. Virginia Roberts, Pendleton Historian and Round-Up Hall of Fame member, explains how the community event rose to national stardom in an unprecedented manner, with adoption of the rodeo beyond anything they imagined it would be in the early 1900s.

In 1951, an agreement was made with the local school district that the stadium would be turfed and used for high school football games. That recognizable grassy field in the middle of the rodeo arena has become fondly known among rodeo athletes as the "Green Mile," making the Round-Up as unique — and difficult — a rodeo as they come.

Because the rodeo is located in a region rich with American Indian legacy, their presence has always been a significant piece of the Pendleton culture. This can be seen from their

undeniable impact on the Round-Up to their influence on colors and patterns at the legendary Pendleton Woolen Mills.

During the rodeo, native dancing takes place in the arena between events, and there is a tribal market in the park on the rodeo grounds. The most impressive display of American Indian heritage, though, is in Tipi Village.

Members of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation — the Umatilla, Cayuse and Walla Walla Indians who live eight miles east of Pendleton — host a grand tribal village on the Round-Up grounds. It has served as the center of activity for American Indian community members attending the rodeo for more than a century, with teepee sites being handed down through generations. Many families occupy the very same space in the village their ancestors did 100 years ago, bringing tangibility to the significance of tradition and legacy at the Pendleton Round-Up that reaches far beyond the rodeo arena.

The village boasts 300-plus teepees each year, making it the largest annual Indian encampment in North America.

Showcasing their history and culture, the tribes also participate in performances, known as powwows, during the rodeo. In 1914, the Pendleton Round-Up introduced Happy Canyon, a live telling of the region's prolific history and a fan-favorite attraction. Happy Canyon presents a live retelling of Pendleton's founding and honors both the legacy of the region's tribes and the spirit of the West. The show welcomes all ages to join, and many of its performers are descendants of the early actors and crewmembers from 1914.

Aside from the two years the Pendleton Round-Up didn't happen due to World War II, nothing has kept the rodeo from trucking year after year. A Eugene, Oregon, newspaper put it best: "In good times and in bad, Pendleton has gone on with the Round-Up. People on the Umatilla have always been willing to take a chance. Maybe that's the real cowboy spirit. Maybe it's a little bit tougher brand of civic spirit. Anyhow, in Pendleton, the show goes on." The town became synonymous with the rodeo, and that's something that hasn't changed in more than a century.

Roberts was born in Pendleton and raised in a family of Round-Up volunteers.

"There are two seasons in Pendleton: Before Round-Up and after Round-Up," Roberts says.

Today, Round-Up week doesn't look much different from more than a century ago. It remains to be run as a nonprofit, serving as the community's largest fundraiser of the year with funds going towards scholarships, community betterment and more. Local volunteers from all walks of life band together to welcome more than 50,000 fans to the historic town for a rodeo which has an economic impact of more than \$68 million annually on the Pendleton area. In 2022, the Pendleton Round-Up generated annual revenue of \$790,000, excluding additional revenue generated by hotels, restaurants, bars or shops.

Whether you're a rodeo fan traveling to the small Northwest town to experience the world-famous Let 'er Buck Room, or a world-class professional rodeo athlete in pursuit of a

championship gold buckle, the Pendleton Round-Up is a unique intersection of the historical wild West and modern entertainment.

More than a Green Mile

The Pendleton Round-Up has the power to transform rodeo seasons and change lives. Just ask professional barrel racer Stevi Hillman, a native of Granbury, Texas, whose 2023 rodeo season became \$10,000 more profitable after her winning run catapulted her into the top 15 in the world standings and qualified her for her eighth Wrangler National Finals Rodeo.

“Running on the grass is the scariest, most fun thing I’ve ever done,” says Hillman, who won the prestigious Pendleton Round-Up title in 2016.

It’s become a tradition for cowboys and cowgirls to sit out on the grass during roughstock events, testing their bravery in exchange for the best seat in the house.

In the same arena that has been standing since the event's inception, rodeo fans and athletes will quickly notice it looks much different than most of the 650 Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association-sanctioned rodeo arenas around the country. You won’t see national sponsor banners dotting the fence line of the arena, or any advertising at all. You also won’t find an electric roping chute and barrier; rather, roping cattle are run down a hill and into the arena, just as it was done in rodeo’s early days. The Round-Up committee prides itself on keeping traditions alive, and no sponsor flags or electric chute will disrupt this piece of living history.

“Some may call us old-fashioned here, but we pride ourselves on tradition. We’re loyal to it and don’t plan on changing anytime soon,” Roberts says.

The second week of September also marks a pivotal time in a cowboy’s PRCA season. With only two weeks remaining in the regular season, tensions — and, if you’re lucky, celebrations — are as high as the Blue Mountain Range. With more than \$600,000 up for grabs, the prestigious payout is the ninth largest in the PRCA, and has the power to create — or destroy — NFR qualifiers.

Hillman’s last-chance stop at the 2023 Round-Up drastically changed her rodeo season after her 28.23-second Green Mile run. This time presents slow compared to a standard barrel pattern, but it was one of the fastest of the week in Pendleton. The palatial arena tests both a horse’s athleticism on the grass and their stamina to reach the finish line in an enormous barrel pattern.

Many contestants prepare their horses for the treacherous ground with special conditioning and horseshoes designed to run on the grass. Hillman expresses the importance of trust to cover the Green Mile.

“It is so important to be able to trust and feel your horse to push them across the grass and into the dirt to turn,” says Hillman.

The stories told and epic rides witnessed behind the brightly colored bucking chutes make this rodeo a must-stop on PRCA and Women's Professional Rodeo Association schedules. The energy is simply summarized in one statement, "Let 'er buck."

Rooted in Traditions

When you emerge in the Pendleton Round-Up arena, you're greeted with bold, rainbow-colored chutes along the far fence line. While the colors feel vibrant and nostalgic, they also hold significance for the culture and locale of the Round-Up. The chute colors are red, like the bold pigments in a legendary Pendleton Woolen Mills blanket; green, like the bright grass of the Green Mile; blue, like the nearby Columbia River; and yellow, like the golden wheat fields of the Palouse region. The century-old chutes are hand-painted by Round-Up volunteers.

The autumn air is only disrupted by the nearby harvest and the distant shouts of rowdy cowboys from the Let'er Buck Room, an icon of the Pendleton Round-Up boasting one of the longest continuous bars in the world. Throughout the town, you can hear the echoes of sold-out crowds cheering on Indian Relay Racers and the proud drum behind the American Indian powwow dance.

Another significant aspect of the Round-Up's story is the beloved Pendleton Round-Up Queen and her court. Chosen for their dedication to preserving and promoting the Pendleton Round-Up's traditions and heritage, these ambassadors represent the living history of the Round-Up and the Pendleton community.

Josilyn Fullerton, of Dayton, Washington, grew up attending the Round-Up and was welcomed by the community's warm embrace as an official ambassador of the rodeo's legacy.

"It was surreal [serving as queen and princess]," says Fullerton, who first served as princess in 2019 and later as queen in both 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

As a member of the queen and court, those who hold the crown also have the honor of carrying on generational traditions. One of the most noticeable is the court's uniform shoulder-length hair and custom, handmade leather outfits. Weighing upwards of 25 pounds, these symbolic leathers were reintroduced at the event's centennial anniversary and carry the legacy of past Round-Up royalty.

At exactly 1:15 p.m. when the rodeo begins, the queen and court fly over the rail and greet the roaring crowds with thrilling spirit.

"The grand entry is truly unlike anything else," Fullerton says. "We practice for months prior to the Round-Up, but nothing can prepare you for the level of adrenaline and excitement of the crowd. It was so special to experience it alongside my court, with whom I became so close."

In addition to the excitement of Round-Up week, the queen and court work closely with the rodeo's Board of Directors throughout the year to carry the spirit of the Round-Up across the country at various rodeos and events.

“It’s a big family and a true honor to represent the Round-Up all year,” Fullerton says. “I grew up watching the Round-Up, and it has truly been a full-circle moment to continue to be an ambassador for its heritage. When someone says, ‘Let ’er Buck,’ there is a sense of pride in it, and an understanding of the many traditions behind the saying.”

By the third week in September, the rodeo has come and gone. Another year of stories and traditions will be recalled as memories from the Green Mile. Farmers will return to tending their crops. Local tribes will deconstruct their teepees and clear the camping grounds. Contestants will load their trailers and head to the next rodeo. And the Pendleton Round-Up team will get started on plans for the next one. Until next year, let ’er buck!