The Big Four
Rodeo’s Crown Jewels

By Casey Beard

Like swallows returning to San Juan Capistrano, every Labor Day weekend through the second full week of September, the world’s top rodeo cowboys flock to the Pacific Northwest for the “Big Four.” This annual pilgrimage signals the rodeo year’s final stretch drive to the National Finals Rodeo.

The Big Four is comprised of the Ellensburg Rodeo and Walla Walla Frontier Days staged on Labor Day weekend, the Lewiston Roundup held the following weekend, and the Pendleton Round-Up mounted the second full week in September. They are among the most venerable, colorful, fun and lucrative events on the cowboys’ calendar. Their slogans, “Let’er Buck,” “She’s Wild,” “Wild and Wooly” and “The Greatest Show on Dirt” are embedded in rodeo lexicon. Bound by more than proximity on the calendar and map, they share a common heritage.

Oregon’s Pendleton Round-Up, founded in 1910, is the senior partner, followed closely by the Walla Walla, Washington Frontier Days which debuted in 1913. Although the Kittitas County Fair featured bronc riding and a rodeo was staged during a Grand Army of the Republic reunion in 1885, Ellensburg Washington’s rodeo wasn’t officially chartered until 1923. Lewiston, Idaho’s Roundup, the junior member, traces its lineage to 1935.

The Big Four’s host communities are historic frontier towns with deep Western roots. Born in the transitional period when the old West was fading away under “civilization’s” relentless onslaught, these rodeos were created to preserve cherished traditions and pass them on to future generations.

Writing about the creation of Ellensburg’s rodeo, historian Dr. Michael Allen observed, “Interestingly, the desire to stage a rodeo can be attributed partially to nostalgia. This was a nostalgia felt by townspeople and many valley residents for a pioneer way of life that was already vanishing in their world of automobiles, airplanes, moving picture shows and radio broadcasts.” It was an opportunity for everyone to be a cowboy again for a day.

The rodeos strengthened the bond between host communities and their country cousins whose herds and crops nourished the town folk’s commerce. The rodeos also were blatant acts of boosterism, staged to bring tourists, and their dollars, to town. On this theme, Dr. Allen observed, “Townsmen, businessmen and professional men were in the forefront of the rodeo movement. They were joined by local cattlemen and farmers, and all looked upon the event as a grand way to foster business and promote their community around the Northwest.”

From their inception, these were community rodeos distinct from the more common “suitcase” events staged by itinerant promoters. Local citizens donated time, labor, money and equipment to build the rodeo grounds, organize the events and raise the contestants’ purses. The community volunteerism that started the Big Four is responsible for their continued success in a vastly changed world.

For host communities, the Big Four Rodeos are not once-a-year events. A writer for the travel blog, IgoUgo, sensed this spirit when he...
Members of the Yakama Indian Nation ride down the sage covered Craig's Hill before each Ellensburg Rodeo performance.

wrote: “Though we didn’t attend this world-famous Round-Up, and likely won’t since we don’t like big crowds, its presence permeates Pendleton even during the 51 weeks a year it isn’t happening. From the ubiquitous bucking horse logo on the city limits welcome to Pendleton signs (and everywhere else), to the vast Round-Up rodeo grounds on the west side of town, Pendleton’s western theme predominates.”

To this day, thousands of people volunteer hundreds of thousands of hours year-round to ensure a successful rodeo. Organizations like Ellensburg and Lewiston’s Top Hands, the Kittitas County Sheriff’s Posse and Pendleton’s Main Street Cowboys assist the rodeo committees. Locals often use their vacations to work as unpaid volunteers. Jobs — pulling chute gates, taking tickets, directing parking and dozens more — are hereditary; passing from generation to generation. Currently, the Pendleton Round-Up has 1,815 registered volunteers while the other Big Four members have hundreds of helpers.

With their September dates, the Big Four Rodeos also serve as a western harvest festival. The cattle have been gathered and the crops are in. After a long year’s toil, it is time to “cut loose the wolf” before winter’s grim advent. Part of the Big Fours’ charm is their rodeo grounds. The Round-Up arena and Happy Canyon grounds dominate Pendleton’s western approaches. Its turf arena, colorfully painted bucking chutes and Indian village nestled along the banks of the Umatilla River exude history.

Ellensburg’s grounds are set in a natural amphitheater carved from Craig’s Hill. Its old covered wooden grandstands, historic buildings and frontier main street carry fans back to the days of Old West glory.

Foreshadowing today’s publicly financed sports stadiums, in 1923 the Washington State legislature appropriated $10,000 toward purchase of the rodeo grounds. Walla Walla’s Frontier Days are staged on a Victorian-era fairgrounds that looks like a movie set from “Pollyanna.”

Although construction of Lower Granite Dam on the Snake River in 1982 forced the Lewiston Round Up’s relocation from its historic grounds, its committee has worked to retain an authentic Western setting and a link to its past with the “She’s Wild” Club Room.

Like Europe’s crown courts, the Big Four rodeos are united by royalty. From inception, each rodeo has featured a queen and attendant princesses. Selecting the queen...
can be marked with the intrigue of a Hapsburg succession. Often, crowns pass through dynastic succession from grandmothers to daughters to granddaughters. The Pendleton Court’s appearances are chronicled by the *East Oregonian* newspaper like the *London Gazette* reporting the British royal family’s social schedule. Each year, there is a royal progress report as the courts travel from rodeo to rodeo; appearing in parades and grand entries while enjoying the hospitality of the host committees.

Although the arena contests remain at the heart of each town’s celebration, rodeo week is an all-consuming festival filled with parades, barbecues, concerts, pageants, cowboy breakfasts, parties and dances. It is a frontier Mardi Gras. For many revelers, a day in the Behind the Chutes, Let ‘er Buck, or She’s Wild Room makes Bourbon Street seem tame.

A noted boot maker who once rode with a motorcycle gang observed, “I rode through Sturgis wearing colors and it couldn’t even warm up Pendleton during Round-Up.” Many a contestant has awoken with a splitting headache that cannot be attributed to biting the arena dust.

For cowboys, the Big Four is a two-week family reunion. In the early days, traveling to the Pacific Northwest required a major train journey for cowboys, cowgirls and their horses. Once in the region, the extended rodeo family stayed with friends on local ranches; moseying from Ellensburg to Walla Walla to Lewiston to Pendleton at a leisurely pace. It was a rare opportunity for camaraderie amongst cowboys and cowgirls from all parts of the country.

While the Iron Horse has given way to the pickup and trailer, this relationship with hosting ranchers continues. Ranching families with rodeo roots have hosted generations of contestants. The Severe Brothers bunk house is an institution among rough stock riders. The epitome of Western hospitality, one rancher installed water and electricity hook-ups in a pasture and put a washer and dryer in a barn for the touring contestants’ use.

Fraternal harmony, however, did not always rule among the Big Four rodeos as expressed in an *East Oregonian* editorial about upstart Walla Walla’s first Frontier Days: “Walla Walla’s effort at a frontier show is a plain infringement on the Round-Up and in view of the previous friendly relations between the towns is inexcusable. Walla Walla has shown a poor spirit in this case and it is a fair inference that those in charge of affairs over there are men of small caliber or they would have acted differently.”

Perhaps the true reason behind the *East Oregonian’s* diatribe lay in the editorial’s final sentence, “The fact the Thursday Round-Up crowd this year was small may be charged chiefly to the fact almost
every other town in the country had been having a frontier show of its own.”

The rodeo committees, however, soon realized that their proximity in dates and locations, and large purses, would attract more top cowboys and cowgirls. By working together, all would benefit. An early example of this cooperation was a seminal event in rodeo’s development, creation of the Association Bronc Saddle.

In rodeo’s infancy, bronc riders provided their own saddles. With exaggerated swells and high cantles, some rider’s saddles provided a significant competitive advantage. To level the playing field, in 1919 four rodeo committees, including Walla Walla and Pendleton, developed a standardized bronc riding saddle.

Built by the venerable Hamley’s firm of Pendleton, the early Association Saddles were owned by the committees and furnished to the contestants. A sign of things to come, the saddle was built on the “Ellensburg” tree. Over time, the Association Saddle pioneered in the Pacific Northwest became the national standard.

After the Association Saddle’s success, the committees continued working together to address common concerns including competition rules, contestant entries, purses, association approvals, advertising, stock contracting and booking specialty acts. The Big Four members were at the forefront of rodeo trends and innovation.

From a contemporary perspective, one of their early actions would be considered regressive.
Bonnie McCarroll's tragic death in Pendleton's arena in 1929 so traumatized the committee they resolved to eliminate the women's events. Supported by fellow Northwest committees, the boycott eventually drove women from competitive rodeo events nationally.

On the innovative front, the Walla Walla Frontier Days staged the world's first fully lighted night rodeo performance in 1938, along with development of an advanced animal ambulance trailer, shared among the members.

Following World War II, Walla Walla, Pendleton, Ellensburg and Lewiston formalized their relationship by creating the Big Four Rodeo Association. Meeting at least annually, usually in December, the committees share insights into the successes and challenges of their recently completed rodeos.

The Directors collectively address issues with competitors, the sport's sanctioning bodies, sponsors, ticket sales, advertising, entertainers, stock contractors, livestock feed bills, parking, crowd control and the myriad details necessary to produce a successful rodeo. In 1954, Big Four members already were discussing potential impacts of the new medium of television. Directors from one of the Big Four were often assigned to visit rodeos in other parts of the country and attended conventions on the others' behalf. The touring delegates then reported their observations at the association's meetings. The annual meetings also featured a dinner and hospitality room. Today, the Big Four Party held in Las Vegas during the National Finals Rodeo celebrates this tradition of hospitality.

In 1954, the Big Four started discussing a cash prize for the cowboy winning the most points at the four rodeos. The prize would recognize the rodeo's historical relationship, confirm their status among the nation's premier rodeos, provide an incentive for cowboys to enter all the Big Four rodeos and reduce the number of "turn outs." Each rodeo would contribute an equal share, with the prize to be awarded at Pendleton, the last chapter in the Big Four's annual saga.

In 1956, the Big Four Award was contested for the first time. Over the years, the award has increased from $400 to $4,000, a saddle and belt buckle.

The Big Four Award winner's list is a who's who of rodeo history. Fourteen members of the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum's Rodeo Hall of Fame have won the prize. This illustrious group includes champions like Jim Shoulders, Dean Oliver, Larry Mahan and Tom Ferguson.

Ironically, despite earlier efforts to ban women from competition, in 2000 barrel racer Kristin Weaver-Brown won the Big Four Award, joining its illustrious winner's list. Proving it was not a fluke, fellow barrel racer Terri Kay Kirkland repeated the feat in 2004.

Now old enough to draw Social Security, the Big Four face new challenges. They will face these challenges together as they pass the Western spirit that called them forth to future generations of Northwest rodeo fans.

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