

48 Hours with the Pendleton Round-Up

*Commissioner Nick Fish
September 2015*

When Martha Pellegrino, the City of Portland's Director of Government Relations, invited me to represent the City at the Pendleton Round-Up, I jumped at the chance.

But first, she told me I would need to invest in western wear. So naturally I headed to the Outdoor Store, and asked my friend Larry Allen to outfit me. He sold me a straw hat, a pair of boots, three Pendleton shirts, and a belt.

Now, I was ready for the Round-Up.



The world famous Pendleton Round-Up is held the second week of every September. It is 105 years old and draws 50,000 visitors to this Eastern Oregon city of about 16,000. The rodeo is affiliated with the Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association (PRCA), and is a qualifier for the finals held in Las Vegas.

I arrived in Pendleton on Thursday after a spectacular drive through the Columbia River Gorge. I began my adventure at a welcome reception and dinner hosted by Oregon State University.

It was held in the Slickfork Saloon at the historic Hamley Steakhouse restaurant.

OSU and Portland have many important ties. Our legislative agenda this year included funding to help grow OSU's Statewide Public Service Programs, like Extension Services.

I met Mayor Phil Houk and his wife Kathy, and sat at their table. He has been mayor for almost a decade, and was a very gracious host. We compared notes about our different forms of government.

OSU President Ed Ray spoke and fired up the faithful. Round-Up Queen Kylee Jensen said a few words, and her Court was recognized. Governor Kate Brown gave a spirited speech. There were lots of "Go Beavs!" and "Let 'er Buck!"

I got caught up in the moment, and remarked to a stranger in a cowboy hat that tonight "we are all Beavers." He was not convinced. It turns out, he was Michael Schill, the new President of the University of Oregon!

After dinner, we visited Hamley & Co. western wear. They make beautiful hand crafted leather saddles on site, and the place was packed at 8 pm.



We started the next day with a Pendleton tradition: the VFW Cowboy breakfast in

Stillman Park. Judging from the lines, everyone in the city joined us for breakfast.

I visited with State Senator Bill Hansell. We talked about issues that divide urban and rural Oregon, like agriculture, timber and new mandates on small businesses. And we enjoyed a hearty breakfast of pancakes, eggs and ham. I also met Dr. Camille Preus, the President of Blue Mountain Community College. The Blue Mountain rodeo team is a past national champion.



Representative Tobias Reed and I were interviewed on a local radio station. I talked about the Benson Bubbler in front of the rodeo grounds. The City donated it to Pendleton in honor of Heather Corey, former Round-up Queen and beloved civic figure.

Next up: the Westward Ho! Parade. We walked over to City Hall to meet up with our host, City Councilor Jane Hill. Jane is the Executive Director of the Pendleton Center for the Arts—and justifiably proud of the city’s art collection. She showed me the James Lavadour art in City Hall. He is also the co-founder of the Crow’s Shadow Institute of the Arts.



We ran into Pendleton City Manager Robb Corbett, Attorney General Ellen Rosenblum, and a contingent of Royal Rosarians. Then we joined Jane’s family and friends, including Multnomah County Circuit Court Judge Nan Waller, to watch the parade.

Living in Portland, we are spoiled by the Rose Festival and Starlight parades. The Westward Ho! Parade lived up to its reputation—marching bands, covered wagons and buggies, elected officials and local dignitaries, Rodeo Queens past and present, and Native Americans in tribal finery. By tradition, no motorized vehicles are allowed. So plenty of horses, mules, oxen, and cattle.

It is a classic—and the spirit was infectious.

After the parade, I headed to a reception in honor of Governor Kate Brown. I knew it was the place to be, because I ran into Gerry Frank!

The rodeo semi-finals started at 1:15 sharp with a rousing rendition of the national anthem. We got our tickets and entered the historic open-air arena.



Built in 1910, it holds about 17,000 people. It was decked out in patriotic colors, with “Let ‘er Buck” signs everywhere. And it was packed.

The announcer, Wayne Brooks, delivered a non-stop stream of introductions, fun facts, cornball, encouragement, and good humor. He is the reigning PRCA Announcer of the Year, and he didn’t disappoint.



I got a crash course in professional rodeos. There are two basic events—timed and roughstock. The difference is racing against the clock, versus being judged on ability and style.

We watched the bareback, Indian relay, calf roping, saddle bronc, steer wrestling, team roping, bull riding and more. The horses had colorful names like Tootsie Roll, Lil’ Devil, and Bad Onion. Every time a contestant from

Oregon was announced, the crowd cheered a little extra.

Senator Hansell invited me to a behind-the-scenes tour of the stock pens and chutes. It takes great courage to get on a 1700 pound bucking bull in a confined space. Ironically, one of the smallest contestants had a banner day, which suggests that technique and heart are more important than size.

Later in the afternoon, we headed out to the Wildhorse Resort and Casino for the Buckle Club Dinner, hosted by the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla. I resisted the urge to play the slots.



Saturday morning was another early day—and started with breakfast at the Rooster restaurant, a local favorite. From there, we headed back to the arena for the Native American Dance Competition. It was held on the grass in

the center of the arena, not far from a grand tribal village hosted by the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

The competition was open to young and old. I had the honor of handing out a Pendleton blanket to the second place finisher in the boys' competition.

After a whirlwind visit to the Round-Up, including a rodeo, a parade, a dance contest, speeches, meals and receptions, it was time to head home. My first Pendleton Round-Up was a great success. The pageantry and hospitality were unrivaled. We made new friends, and made plans for future gatherings.

And it seemed like the fabled urban-rural divide got a little smaller.

As I was leaving Pendleton, I pulled over on Interstate 84 to check my phone. A few minutes later, someone knocked on my window. It was a guy from Les Schwab, just checking to see if I needed anything.

Things are different in Eastern Oregon. I can't wait to bring my family back to a future Round-Up.

“Let ‘er Buck!”