



Carbondale Wild West Rodeo

A Labor of Love



**ARTICLE NICOLETTE TOUSSAINT
PHOTOGRAPHY GEORGE HENDRIX**

Settle your britches in the stands for the Carbondale Wild West rodeo any Thursday night between June 4 and August 20 and you'll see bronc bustin', calf ropin', mutton bustin', barrel racing and bull riding, of course.

But before you get all involved with the critters and the cowpokes, take a gander at the crowd: Here, a row of the stands is occupied by a flax-haired Mennonite family, decked out in gingham, bonnets and suspenders. Nearby, a mom is chattering to two little boys in Spanish. Nearby sit a gaggle of retirees. Next to them, two gents are talking business - a real estate development near Aspen. Behind them, tourists from Denver and two visitors from France are asking locals about the trail to Hanging Lake.

It's an amazingly democratic scene, and that's just how the Wild West Rodeo Board likes it.

The rodeo, which will kick off its 11th season the first Thursday in June, was started in 2003 by a for-profit promoter who ran it for just two summers before getting bucked off. "His aim was to make money," explains Rodeo President Mike

Kennedy. "He didn't. The first season he wanted \$10,000 from the town to cover his losses, and the next year he did the same thing."

That didn't sit well, so Kennedy and Rodeo Vice President Dave Weimer, who were both volunteers at the time, attempted to put things right. They soon found that the promoter had left a burr under more than one saddle by mismanaging funds and breaking promises. "Many of the sponsors were so mad we had to beg them to come back," Kennedy recalls.

"He was abrasive and ended up irritating us too," adds Weimer. "We said we didn't need him, and he insisted that he was essential. We said, 'Just watch.'"

A decade later, there's plenty to watch. Today, the Carbondale Wild West Rodeo is a 501c3 nonprofit organization that sponsors 13 different events each week, fields 90 to 100 competing teams and draws more than 1000 spectators in to watch.



What makes it all go? Volunteers!

"The volunteers have been there from day one," says Weimer. The rodeo board members – Kennedy, Weimer, Treasurer Tom Harrington and Secretary Melanie Gianinetti Cardiff – contribute hundreds of hours preparing and producing the summer rodeo.

At the first rodeo she attended, Cardiff asked herself, "How can I be a part of this?" She volunteered to check in contestants in 2008, and in 2009, Kennedy asked her to join the board and coordinate volunteers. Ever since, she has managed the 20-plus volunteers needed to organize competitive events during the rodeo season. "It's like herding cats," she laughs.

"There is a ton of work that goes into pulling off 12 great rodeos," Cardiff continues, "but I grew up ranching, and I was fortunate that my family took the time to let us rodeo." Cardiff, the daughter of a local ranching family and a former rodeo queen, adds, "It's my heritage and it's important to keep it alive."

Weimer, who was raised on a Wisconsin dairy farm, concurs, saying, "One of the reasons we moved here was that we wanted our kids to have a Western-style upbringing, and the rodeo was part of that. We have always wanted to have activities for kids because that's the next generation of the rodeo. We have developed lots of children's events, including some for parents with kids. We have mother-son and father-daughter roping teams, mutton bustin' and plenty of junior events."



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The Rodeo Board has taken pains to keep sponsorship local and to emphasize community. Although a few well-heeled patrons have asked to buy private boxes and reserved parking – some even waving \$1000 under their noses – the board has nixed elite access in favor of tailgate barbeques and families. Tickets are \$10 per person or \$30 per carload, and it's strictly first-come, first-served. Those who want to park around the arena fence and have a tailgate barbeque can show up at 6 a.m. and wait for the gates to open. They pay \$20 for parking along with their entrance fee and bring a whole truckload of folks. "It's almost like the Oklahoma land rush," says Cardiff. "I have sat out there at 4:30 a.m. to get my spot. Lots of people host bachelorette parties and birthdays at the rodeo. It's almost a separate rodeo event."

"The sponsors and the volunteers have been key to keeping this going," says Kennedy. "We can't stress that enough." The rodeo's sponsors chip in from \$450 to \$1,000 a season and receive recognition in the program and on signs around the Gus Darien Rodeo Arena.

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CARBONDALE WILD WEST RODEO (CONTINUED)



Many local nonprofits collaborate with the rodeo: Senior Matters, the Cub Scouts and the Garfield County Fair Royalty serve snow cones and popcorn from a ringside booth, while the Valley View Hospital Calaway-Young Cancer Center, the Komen Foundation and 4H have pitched in to help with various events that change from year to year. Last year, Alpine Animal Hospital sponsored free horseback rides and their veterinarians helped educate kids about horses and their care.

This year, spectators will be getting a roof over their heads thanks to a \$48,900 grant from the Garfield County Mineral District, plus \$10,000 each kicked in by the Town of Carbondale and the rodeo. "One critical part of the rodeo's success has been its great relationship with the town," comments Weimer. "We can't say enough good things about Jeff Jackel (Carbondale's recreation director). He has been great to work with."

When it comes to putting on a rodeo, it takes a village, or perhaps a town. Why do all they all do it?

Kennedy says, "It's about the community participation. Most of the contestants are local; they come from between Aspen and Parachute. The rodeo gives them a place to go to compete and showcase their skills. For spectators, it's a place to go to on Thursday nights, a place where you see friends and neighbors you sometimes don't get to see. It's a big-time melting pot. The people there are rich and poor, working class and retired; they are kids and parents and grandparents."

Cardiff agrees and says she will continue to be there every Thursday, bringing her three-and-a-half year old grandson along with her. "I do because I love it, and I want him to love it too."

Check out the rodeo on the web at CarbondaleRodeo.com and on Facebook at CarbondaleWildWestRodeo. Volunteers with livestock knowledge or people skills are needed and invited to call 970.379.0809 or email carbondalerodeo@gmail.com.

