



An evocative poster advertises the 1910 Portland Rose Festival. (Oregon State Archives photo of Portland Rose Festival Association graphic)

(<https://sos.oregon.gov/blue-book>)

## Oregon Festivals History Essay

Oregon is a festive place, and its people love festivals. Every year, celebrations of the region's food and art, immigrations and occupations, sports and flowers dot the calendar.

"Festivals are often mementoes of transformations in society," says Philip Scher, Professor of Anthropology and Folklore at the University of Oregon. "They keep traditions alive, and memories of homeland. Today's cultural festivals are public events, outward facing, saying 'We are here, we have a voice'."

### Narrative History of Oregon Festivals

Learn about how festivals have grown and evolved from ancient Native American celebrations to the present

### Types of Oregon Festivals

Explore the variety of festivals related to work, crops, cultures, art and more

### About the Writer

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## Oregon Festivals History: Narrative

### Native American Celebrations

Native tribes in the Pacific Northwest have held festivals for thousands of years. The earliest festivals were potlatch celebrations among the Pacific Northwest Coast tribes. Potlatches are “feasts and gift-giving ceremonies that serve a variety of functions: creating alliances, promoting altruism, redistributing wealth, vanquishing rivals and, not least, showing off.”<sup>1</sup> Today, four Pacific Coast tribes – the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde, the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe, the Coquille Tribe and the Confederated Tribes of Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians — gather to continue the potlatch tradition. They co-sponsor the annual Tribal Canoe Journey, where participants paddle canoes and camp along rivers on a week-long journey, celebrating the tribes’ relationship with and dependency upon water. The journey ends with a potlatch featuring traditional dances, music and crafts.<sup>2</sup>



Native Americans dance during a Tamkaliks Pow Wow, a 3 day celebration of traditional Native American culture in Wallowa. (Tamkaliks Celebration)

In Oregon’s interior, Native American tribes celebrated their communities with different traditions. They faced “the severity of cold winters on the high Plateau and its often semidesert environs. Rivers played a key role in the lives of the peoples of the Plateau.”<sup>3</sup> Along the Sprague River in Chiloquin, the Klamath Tribes gather every year, as they have for thousands of years, to honor the Lost River Sucker fish, which they call the C’waam. The fish, now endangered, has been “the mainstay of the Klamath Tribes’ diet and a centerpiece of cultural ceremonies.”<sup>4</sup>

Different festivals have different goals. Some are “private, reinforcing an internal sense of ‘us’ as a group; others are public displays, offering the broader community an insider’s view of a culture.”<sup>5</sup> When representatives of the United States government first arrived in the Pacific Northwest, Native American tribes seized the opportunity to use their festivals as public displays, to broaden the government representatives’ view of their cultures – and to expand trade. Matthew Ordway, a junior member of the 1804 Lewis and Clark expedition, described a Native American festival on the Columbia River, 25 miles north of what is now Umatilla. The Walla Walla tribe invited about 150 members of the nearby Yakima tribe to meet the explorers. “We played the fiddle and danced a while,” Ordway recorded in his diary on April 28, 1806. “Our men sang two songs ... they tried to learn singing with us. We danced among them, and every few minutes one of their warriors made a speech.” Lewis and Clark bought dogs, fish, and roots from the tribes and set off for Washington, D.C. the next day.<sup>6</sup>

A century later, another Oregon tribe got a wildly unexpected opportunity to use a festival to offer “the broader community an insider’s view of a culture.” In 1915, officials in Philadelphia put the United States’ Liberty Bell on a national train tour, to promote national patriotism as the country faced World War I. The Umatilla Pow-Wow was in full swing in Cayuse on July 12, when the Liberty Bell train steamed into its tiny depot. Hundreds of spectators, including tribal members wearing full regalia, Chinese laborers dressed in native silk robes, and African-American ranch hands crowded around the Liberty Bell. Liberty Bell officials and the train crew, surprised to find themselves in the middle of a Pow-Wow, disembarked and joined the party. “It is doubtful whether the red people were half as interested in the bell as the Philadelphians were in them,” *The Daily East Oregonian* reported, as the Native American festival in the tiny town of Cayuse became a triumph of cultural diversity.<sup>7</sup>



Native Americans dance during a Tamkaliks Pow Wow in Wallowa. (Tamkaliks Celebration)

## Early Euro-American Fairs

When settlers flooded into Oregon, they began holding festivals as a way to build community and to improve crops and trade. Because many of Oregon’s first settlers were farmers, most early festivals focused on agriculture. County fairs held competitions for local crops like wheat and fruit. Yamhill County hosted Oregon’s first county fair in 1854, in Lafayette. Enthusiasm soon grew for a state fair and the first official Oregon State Fair was held near Gladstone in 1861. The next year, the state fair moved to its permanent home in Salem.<sup>8</sup>

From 1865 until 1910, the most common festivals, after agricultural fairs, were one-day “camp meetings” — evangelical religious gatherings that often included entertainment and other social events. At these festivals, “Peddlers appeared as if by magic. Local politicians sometimes used the intervals between religious sessions to campaign for office. Men traded horses, nails, tools and good advice. Old friends, isolated by distances or weather, met. Life was a lot of struggling then,” as one attendee remembered a camp meeting in Huntington. “Those who lived out in Eastern Oregon didn’t have much in the way of intellectual or emotional stimulus. The camp meetings were excited.”<sup>9</sup>

## State Fair and World's Fair

In the Willamette Valley, the Oregon State Fair also encompassed entertainment and social events, trade, and politics. In its first years, horse races were the most popular event. Officials cancelled the 1905 fair because crowds and exhibitors flocked to the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exhibition in Portland. In 1933, in the midst of The Great Depression, Governor Julius Meier ordered that no tax dollars be used to pay for the fair, declaring, “Feed the people before we



Fairgoers stroll in front of the Agricultural Palace at the 1905 Lewis and Clark Centennial Exhibition in Portland. (Courtesy Al Staehli)

entertain them,” and fair officials cut admission in half, to twenty-five cents. During World War II the fair was again cancelled because the military was using the fairgrounds and President Franklin Roosevelt’s administration urged states to cancel state and county fairs so that the public would use less gasoline.

Oregon State Fair visitors included pioneering feminist Susan B. Anthony, who camped out on the fairgrounds in 1871; entertainer Sammy Davis Jr., who performed in 1946; and presidential candidate John F. Kennedy, who campaigned for the presidency in 1960. (After Kennedy campaigned at the fair, he went to Medford, where the Pear Blossom Festival parade was just about to begin. Kennedy immediately agreed to be the parade’s grand marshal, hopped in a car, and rode through downtown Medford.) However, not everyone liked coming to the Oregon State Fair. On opening day 1979, a steer named Rufus escaped the fairgrounds, swam the Willamette River, and successfully hid in a cornfield for six weeks. Rufus’ owner admitted he was planning on turning the escape artist into hamburger, but instead state fair officials turned Rufus into the fair mascot, saving his life.<sup>10</sup>

A century after Lewis and Clark wintered near Astoria, Portland hosted its first and only World’s Fair, the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition in 1905. The four-month festival drew more than 1.5 million visitors. Part celebration of Lewis and Clark’s triumph, and part regional boosterism, the Exposition included contests for the best local crops, displays by the U.S. Navy, and the world’s largest log cabin constructed from Oregon Douglas Fir.<sup>11</sup>

## Portland Rose Festival

At the exposition, Portland Mayor Harry Lane told the crowd that Portland needed “a festival of roses” and two years later, the city held its first Portland Rose Festival. The 1907 festival included a parade of floats through the city streets and fireworks. In later years, events included chariot races and synchronized swimming shows. The Royal Rosarian Court, made of approximately 100 Portlanders, dressed in white wool suits and white hats, represent the city at the Portland Rose Festival and other events. For example, in May 1918, they were on hand to welcome President Woodrow Wilson at Vista House on the newly constructed Columbia Gorge Highway. In 1908, Carrie Lee Chamberlain, daughter of Governor George Chamberlain, became the first Rose Festival queen, a tradition still continued today although, since

1930, the queen and her princesses have been chosen from students of Portland high schools.<sup>12</sup> Today, the festival’s centerpiece is the Grand Floral Parade, featuring flowered-covered floats gliding through downtown Portland. At Waterfront Park, U.S. Navy ships dock and conduct guided tours for the public, while sailors enjoy shore leave.<sup>13</sup>



A parade of vehicles covered in flowers drives through downtown Portland during the circa 1908 Portland Rose Festival. (Oregon State Archives photo of Portland Rose Festival Association post card)

Three years after the Portland Rose Festival began, Pendleton established in 1910, a very different celebration — the Pendleton Round Up, now held every September. While the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition and the Portland Rose Festival touted Portland’s future, the Pendleton Round Up focused on Oregon’s past. It billed itself as “a frontier exhibition of picturesque pastimes, Indian and military spectacles, cowboy racing and bronco busting.” Today, the festival remains true to its goal of celebrating Oregon’s past. Its Westward Ho parade includes sheep, horses, and cows — but no motorized vehicles, and its week-long rodeo draws spectators from across the nation. Native American events at the Round Up, include performances of tribal dances and music. In its early years, soldiers from nearby Fort Walla Walla came to the Round Up, bringing their Army band and performing military drills.<sup>14</sup>

## A Range of Other Festivals

Other communities began organizing festivals around the arts and culture, a sense of place, local crops, and Oregon industry. One of the earliest festivals, the Astoria Regatta, began as a celebration of Astoria’s maritime heritage. The first regatta in 1894, featured dances on the wharfs and races on the Columbia River. Today the festival centers on the Highwater Boat Parade and sailboat races.<sup>15</sup>

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland is Oregon’s largest art festival. It opened in 1935, tickets cost \$1, and the first performances were *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*. The festival limited itself to plays by William Shakespeare until 1969, when it added plays by other writers. Today, it is a world-renowned regional repertory theater, with an eight-month season, an annual budget of \$32 million, and 400,000 visitors per year.<sup>16</sup> Few Oregon festivals have enjoyed the longevity of the Ashland Shakespeare Festival.

The Bend Winter Carnival became so rowdy that it closed in 1964, three years after it began. More than 6,000 people, many of them college students, attended the week-long 1964 festival. Its official events included “ski races, a talent show, queen’s coronation and ball, bonfire, and noise parade.” Its unofficial events included “lusty ski ballads” and “acts that just escaped being risqué,” as well as acts that didn’t escape being risqué.<sup>17</sup>

By comparison, the Vortex I Music Festival was relatively tame. In the summer of 1970, opposition to the war in Vietnam was tearing the nation apart when the American Legion announced it would hold its annual convention that August in Portland. Rumors swirled that President Richard Nixon would attend, and the state braced itself for anti-war protests. Governor Tom McCall came up with a solution — hold a Woodstock-like rock festival at Milo McIver State Park, on the Clackamas River near Estacada. Thirty-five thousand young people showed up at McIver, Nixon skipped the convention, and Portland remained peaceful.<sup>18</sup>



A banner celebrates the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland. (Oregon State Archives)

As communities changed how they perceived themselves, their festivals changed. McMinnville started holding its Turkey Rama in 1938, when the Yamhill County turkey industry was rapidly growing. When the county's turkey production peaked and began declining in the 1980s, local community tensions threatened to derail the festival. In 2009 and 2010, disagreements between the McMinnville Chamber of Commerce and the McMinnville Downtown Merchants Association split the annual celebration. The Chamber and the Merchants held separate turkey events. By 2012, the two organizations reconciled and joined to co-sponsor the Turkey Rama. Due to changing attitudes about animal rights, the festival abandoned turkey races.<sup>19</sup> Similar concerns prompted the Pendleton Round Up to ban ear-biting in its Wild Horse Race in 1967.

## Science and Politics

Scientific advances also changed festivals. The Oregon State Fair began as an agricultural event, only to become a showcase of new technology as scientific advances swept the nation. Many Oregonians saw their first telephone at the 1877 fair. They saw their first car when the 1904 fair featured its first automobile show, and six years later, an airplane was the top attraction of the 1910 fair. After years of introducing Oregonians to national inventions and innovations, the fair extended its reach to outer space in 1970, by displaying rocks from the moon.

Changing political views about alcohol also changed festivals. The Oregon State Fair Commission decided that beer could be sold at the fair in 1952, then reversed its decision a few days later after church groups protested; beer was not sold at the fair until 1971.<sup>20</sup> Today, the explosion of Oregon's craft beer industry has spawned several local beer festivals, including North Bend's Annual BBQ, Blues & Brews by the Bay, and the Oregon Brewers Festival in Portland. Oregon's burgeoning wine industry is also represented with festivals like Canyonville's Greatest of the Grape celebration.



Women hoist steins of beer at the Mt. Angel Oktoberfest. Beer has not always been a welcome part of many of Oregon's festivals. (Mt. Angel Oktoberfest)

As new festivals emerge, older festivals end. After 60 years, the Jefferson Mint Festival and Frog Jump suspended its celebration in 2018, citing a lack of volunteers to staff the festival. The Albany Timber Carnival, which once attracted 1.5 million people, closed in 2000. "As the character of the town changed and the importance of timber to Albany's economy declined, support for the Timber Carnival ebbed."<sup>21</sup>

Through more than two centuries of changes in politics, industries, the environment, and culture, one thing has not changed — Oregonians' desire to gather together and celebrate all parts of the Oregon experience with festivals.

## Notes

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## Oregon Festivals History: Types of Festivals

### How We Work

Where can you compete in log pole climbing, axe throwing and log pond roll offs? The Estacada Timber Festival's timber competitions celebrate the logging industry's past. The festival struggled with attendance in the early 1990s, when the timber industry was in sharp decline and finally closed in 1993. But in 2013, nostalgia for the logging industry and a sense of community sparked the reopening of the festival, which drew more than 3,000 people in 2018.

In Cottage Grove, Bohemia Mining Days recall the area's hard-rock mining heydays in the 1860s, when miners pulled about \$1 million of gold and silver out of the nearby mines. Today, the festival keeps memories of the industry alive with costumes, history presentations and mining demonstrations.

Most of Oregon's pioneers were employed in agriculture. Farm Day at the Farm, in Eagle Creek shows how they did it. Festival goers learn how to make rope, plant and harvest crops using the tools pioneers used, and how to farm as Oregon's pioneers farmed.

Early pioneer women often turned quilt-making into an art form and today the Mt. Hood Oregon Trail Quilt Show: Past & Present (A Heritage Exhibition) in Rhododendron, displays heritage quilts along with contemporary quilts.

### Crops

Baking the world's largest strawberry shortcake each year, putting it on parade through downtown, and then serving all 8,000 pieces of it — that's Lebanon's homage to the strawberry. The Lebanon Strawberry Festival has been baking the record-breaking cake since 1931. To bake the cake in 1975, ingredients included: 514 cups of sugar, 992 cups of flour and 448 cups of milk. The cake weighed more than 5,700 pounds. [Footnote <sup>1</sup>](#)

Five percent of the nation's cranberries are grown around Bandon which gives the city more than enough reason to host the Bandon Cranberry Festival. Festival attendees can watch cranberries being harvested in nearby bogs and sample delicacies like cranberry jelly and cranberry fudge.

Quick: What is Oregon's official state nut, and what is its largest nut crop? So large, in fact, that Oregon produces 99% of these nuts in the United States. Hint: It's the star of Mt. Angel's Hazelnut Festival.



Contestants participate in the log rolling competition at the circa 1979 Sutherlin Timber Days Festival. The event ran from 1948 until 1997. (Douglas County Museum)

Not all Oregon crops are edible as the state produces more lavender than any other state except Florida and California. Waltherville, east of Springfield, throws the annual McKenzie River Lavender Festival, while Canby holds the yearly Dahlia Festival, Salem is home to the Peonies in Paradise celebration, and Keizer hosts the Iris Festival.

## Cultures

“Some events are private, reinforcing an internal sense of ‘us’ as a group; others are public displays, offering the broader community an insider’s view of a culture.”

### Footnote <sup>2</sup>

And some festivals are about both — retaining a sense of community and reaching out to a broader community. Among Oregon’s oldest cultural festivals are the Portland Greek Festival, established in 1952; Junction City’s Scandinavian Festival, first held in 1961; and the Woodburn Fiesta Mexicana, established in 1964.

At the Idaho/Oregon Buddhist Temple near Ontario, the Japan Nite Summer Obon Festival features Obon dancing, Japanese Food, and live Taiko. Eugene’s Asian Celebration highlights several Asian cultures, including Japanese, Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese, including art displays, performances and food, to “create opportunities that foster greater understanding of Asian and Asian American cultures ... to promote friendship and harmonious relationships.” [Footnote <sup>3</sup>](#)

Music and demonstrations of how to make traditional Easter-egg art highlight Springfield’s Ukrainian Day Festival, along with dancers performing traditional dances in traditional costumes. Joseph Oregon’s Alpenfest bills itself as the only Swiss-Bavarian festival in the West, and features polka music, dances, and Swiss yodeling.

The Mt. Angel Oktoberfest, held every fall since 1966, mirrors traditional Bavarian celebrations of the German and Swiss which is only fitting since a good majority of the people of Mt. Angel are of German and Swiss heritage. Festival proceeds go to local causes and have funded a forty-nine-foot high Glockenspiel in the middle of town — it is the largest Glockenspiel in the United States. [Footnote <sup>4</sup>](#)



A crowd forms around the World’s Largest Strawberry Shortcake as free portions are served to hungry spectators at the 1966 Lebanon Strawberry Festival. (Lebanon Strawberry Festival)



A German-themed band performs at the 2013 Mt. Angel Oktoberfest. (Mt. Angel Oktoberfest)

In Portland, the first annual Black History Festival NW was held in 2018, billing itself as “A celebration of culture and heritage showcasing African American artists, businesses, organizations and leaders.”

[Footnote 5](#)

In the mid-1800s, immigrants from Mexico began coming to rural Oregon, working as sheep herders, cowboys and farmers. Today, their heritage and contributions are highlighted each May at Portland’s Cinco de Mayo celebration. Portland’s sister city, Guadalajara, Mexico, sponsors the celebration, with folk dancing, exhibits of native art, and international musicians.

## Art

Oregon’s growing film industry has sparked movie festivals throughout the state, including the Ashland Independent Film Festival, Bend Film Festival, Portland International Film Festival, and We Like ‘Em Short Film Festival in Baker City. Oregon’s art festivals are as varied as Oregon’s artists. Reedsport hosts the Annual Oregon Divisional Chainsaw Carving Championship, while Eugene is home to the Oregon Bach Festival, attracting musicians and classical music fans from around the world.

## Geography

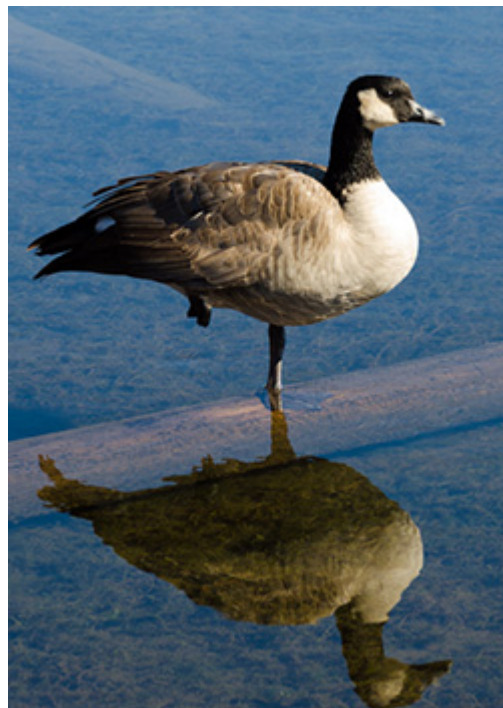
Cascade Locks hosts the Pacific Crest Trail Days at the northern terminus of Oregon’s portion of the trail, while bike riders and hikers can circle Crater Lake without worrying about cars during the national park’s “Ride the Rim”, when vehicles are banned on the lake’s East Rim.

In April, birdwatchers may want to flock to Burns for the Harney County Migratory Bird Festival. The United States Bureau of Land Management and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife staffers lead birding tours and often find bald eagles and sage grouse. They also lead tours of Native American petroglyphs in the area.

For festival goers more interested in rocks than birds, Hines sponsors the annual Obsidian Days Rock & Gem Exhibition. Nyssa’s Thundereggs Days and Festival offers something for everyone. Thundereggs are nodule-like rocks created during volcanic eruptions. Native American legend holds the nodules were considered to be the eggs of the thunderbirds that occupied Mt. Hood and Mt. Jefferson. When the festival began in 1965, it was geared for rockhounds. In 2018, the Nyssa Police Department Bubble Ball Tournament was added to the celebration to widen the festival’s appeal. [Footnote 6](#)

## Honored Individuals

Daredevil Al Faussett, who specialized in riding canoes over Pacific Northwest waterfalls and barely survived a wild 1928 trip over the 177-foot South Falls waterfall at Silver Falls State Park, near Silverton, is celebrated as part of the annual Historic Silver Falls Day with a miniature canoe race celebrating



The Harney County Migratory Bird Festival celebrates over 300 species of birds that make the area a bird watcher’s paradise. (Oregon State Archives)

Faussett's quest for notoriety. The celebration also showcases the park's heritage with horse logging demonstrations and displays of Civilian Conservation Corps artifacts.

Nearby Silverton honors its most famous native son every year at the Homer Davenport Community Festival. Davenport, who died in 1912, became one of the nation's most famous political cartoonists. He never forgot his roots and arranged to be buried in Silverton.

South in Jacksonville, the Peter Britt Music Festival, established in 1963 on the grounds of the Britt home, is named for the pioneering photographer who took some of the first photographs of Crater Lake – pictures that helped Crater Lake win its designation as a national park.

## Category-Defying Festivals

Seaside's Ghost Conference bills itself as the Pacific Northwest's largest paranormal convention and features lectures by local paranormal experts. "If The Truth Is Out There," it may be out in McMinnville, home to the McMenamins UFO Festival, which welcomes both believers and non-believers with its alien costume parade.

Separate Civil War re-enactments and campouts are held at the Clatsop County Fairgrounds, Colton, Camp Sherman and Brooks. The Oregon Country Fair, in the woods near Veneta, is a three-day throwback to the 1960s. Brightwood celebrates the elusive Bigfoot with the annual Mt. Hood Salmon, Mushroom & Bigfoot Festival with Native American storytelling, Sasquatch lectures, mushroom identification and art shows.



A colorful band performs at the Oregon Country Fair near Veneta. (Oregon Country Fair Archives)

As times and culture evolve, so do festivals. "Cultural festivals and events are increasingly becoming arenas of discourse, enabling people to express their views on wider cultural, social and political issues. In Eugene, an example of that is the Society for the Legitimization of the Ubiquitous Gastropod, or SLUG. SLUG lampoons and protests the common festival practice of crowning female festival queens and princesses. The Eugene Slug Queen Competition holds a mock-pageant, satirizing beauty contests. Contestants are judged on their wit and campy costumes. Winners include actors, postal workers, and drag queens.

Through more than two centuries of changes in politics, industries, the environment, and culture, one thing has not changed – Oregonians' desire to gather together and celebrate the Oregon experience with festivals.

## Notes

“Seasonal Celebrations.” [oregonhistoryprofect.org/narratives/Oregon-folklife-our-living-traditions](http://oregonhistoryprofect.org/narratives/Oregon-folklife-our-living-traditions)

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