

## Frontier Days - The Old and New West (July 21-30, 2006)

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By Claire Walter

Cheyenne Frontier Days, the world's largest outdoor rodeo, launched modestly when Wyoming truly was on the frontier. In 1896, just six years after Wyoming achieved statehood, some hands from the nearby Two Bar Ranch gathered for a one-day contest of cowboy skills. This forerunner of what is now a 10-day extravaganza could have been called "Frontier Day."

The following year, an ambitious new mayor looking to bring some business to town and a Union Pacific Railroad agent looking to lure passengers to his trains decided to beef up the cowboys' casual contest. In addition to rodeo, the early years boasted such trappings of "civilization" as vaudeville shows, moving pictures balls, vendors selling all manner of trinkets and treats and even opera.

From the earliest early years, the Frontier Days rodeo featured bronc riding, steer roping and a wild-horse race. Beginning in 1911, rookies have tested themselves in an amateur bronc riding competition. Nine years later, calf roping was added to the program. In many ways Frontier Days came of age after World War II. A three-pack of timed rodeo events – steer roping, calf roping and steer wrestling – was introduced. The cowboy who completed each skill in the shortest time won. Bareback riding and bull riding also appeared in the '20s. These, along with team roping, are the classic rodeo skills. The million dollars in total prize money now offered at Frontier Days constitute rodeo's second-biggest purse, after the National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas.

But Frontier Days is not just about rodeo. As it has been for decades, it's about all manner of diversions and entertainment, about things to do, things to see and things to buy. The first parade in downtown Cheyenne consisted of little more than cowboys galloping through the streets, occasionally firing their pistols in the air or lassoing pretty girls. Decorum of sorts reigned in 1898 when Buffalo Bill Cody and his Wild West Show came to town and again in 1903 when locals organized a gala parade and rodeo for President Theodore Roosevelt.

In 1926, one Dazee Bristol started making themed parade floats. Some of them –Dazee's Dance Hall, Harry P. Hynds Blacksmith Shop, Placer Mine (depicting South Pass City) and the Silver Crown Mine (which pokes fun at investors in a mining scam) endure to this day, as do Vigilante, Hells Half Acre Saloon and the One-Room School House floats that she created in the 1930s and '40s. Today, floats, antique horsedrawn carriages and marching bands highlight four parades that wind through Cheyenne's banner-festooned streets.

At Frontier Park, visitors find a carnival midway with rides and live entertainment, horse races, vendors, pancake breakfasts, a chuckwagon cook-off, an Old West saloon (families until 4:30 p.m., adults only from then until midnight) and more. Native Americans have participated in Frontier Days since the beginning too. In 1898, local civic leaders acknowledged that the Native American, a good friend and an important part of the Western scene, ought be part of the then-new event. Since the 1960s, a permanent campground, dubbed the Indian Village, has been their Frontier Days home. Dancers, drummers, musicians and artisans share their heritage with visitors. Concurrent with Frontier Days is after-dark entertainment that has been dubbed Frontier Nights, featuring some of the nation's top country stars.

If you don't make it to Cheyenne in July, you can get a taste of the real thing at the Cheyenne Frontier Days Old West Museum, which celebrates the pioneer spirit of the American West and the history of the Cheyenne Frontier Days. Don't miss the world-class collection of historic horse-drawn carriages and wagons. During Frontier Days, it is the site of a celebrated Western art show and sale.

Since the beginning, Frontier Days has been locally organized and remains an example of citizen participation, the efforts of some 2,000 volunteers and old-fashioned civic pride. In 1921, as Frontier Days celebrated its 25th anniversary, it acquired a nickname that stuck: "Daddy of 'em All." And to the half-million real and wannabe ranchers and cowboys, to fans of the Old West and curious visitors from around the corner and around the world who attend each year, it still is.

*For more information:*

[Cheyenne Frontier Days](#)

[The Cheyenne Chamber of Commerce](#)

[The Old West Museum](#)