Pendleton

Pendleton, a city of 16,354 in the 2000 census, sits in the foothills of the Blue Mountains. The city center is built on the south bank of the Umatilla River, which runs roughly east and west through town. Pendleton's motto is "The Real West," and it prides itself on its agricultural and ranching past. It is home to the Pendleton Woolen Mills, which originally made blankets for trade with nearby Native Americans**,** and the Pendleton Round-Up, one of the ten largest rodeos in the world.

The earliest commercial business in Pendleton dates to 1851, when Dr. William C. McKay (pronounced mack-EYE) established a trading post at the confluence of McKay Creek and the Umatilla River. A post office, Marshall Station, was established in 1865. The community was later renamed Pendleton after George H. Pendleton, the Democratic vice-presidential candidate of 1864, and was incorporated on October 25, 1880.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Pendleton was home to a large population of Chinese laborers who had come to work on the railroads. An underground tour is a popular tourist attraction, where visitors are led into basements of downtown businesses where opium dens, illegal gaming parlors, and a Chinese laundry were purported to have existed during the 1890s.

From its early beginnings, Pendleton was a railhead that served as a shipping point for the wool industry, which included the many sheep ranches in the area and the Pendleton Woolen Mills, originally a wool-scouring plant. Early on, the company began producing blankets for trade with Native Americans, and it eventually expanded its offerings to include clothing. Pendleton blankets are now prized for their quality and distinctive designs.

The Pendleton Round-Up is an annual event that can quadruple the town's population. Occurring in the second full week in September, the Round-Up features four days of rodeo; two parades, including one that prohibits motorized vehicles or rubber tires; a concert; and the Happy Canyon Indian Pageant, which bills itself as the "Epic Drama of the West." The Round-Up is known for including Native American participants in a powwow dance competition, the Indian Village, Happy Canyon princesses, and the American Indian Beauty Pageant. One of the larger-than-life figures from Pendleton's colorful history is Sheriff Tillman "Til" Taylor, one of the founders of the Round-Up. He was shot to death in a jailbreak in 1920, and a park in downtown Pendleton bears his name.

Pendleton also has its place in Oregon literature, providing the setting for Craig Lesley's *Winterkill* and likely the setting for H.L Davis's short story, "Old Man Isbell's Wife." *Last Go Round: A Real Western*, by Ken Kesey and Ken Babb, is a fictionalized account of the 1911 Pendleton Round-Up and its legendary ending in which three cowboys—Jackson Sundown, a Nez Perce; George Fletcher, an African American; and John Spain, a Caucasian—tied for the all-around championship. When Spain won the tie-breaker, there was a general uproar from the crowd, which believed the results were skewed. Reportedly, Sheriff Taylor took up a collection from the crowd by tearing up pieces of Fletcher's hat and selling them. He then awarded the money to Fletcher as the people's champion.

Pendleton benefits from its proximity to the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. CTUIR operates the Wild Horse Casino and golf course; the Tamástslikt Cultural Institute, an interpretive center that tells the story of the effects of the Oregon Trail from the Native American perspective (the only one of its kind); and Nixya'awii, a charter school that is focused on Native American culture, native languages, and the tribal community. Nixya'awii was the Oregon charter school of the year in 2006-2007. Crow's Shadow, an institute for the arts, was co-founded by painter James Lavadour (Walla Walla/Chinook), a Pendleton native. CTUIR also administers Wildhorse Foundation, a philanthropic agency that supports projects in northeast Oregon. While the city of Pendleton shares a border with the reservation, CTUIR has its own government and laws.

Pendleton serves as a cultural center for eastern Oregon, with two symphony orchestras, a strings program in the public schools (the only one in eastern Oregon), a thriving arts center, and Blue Mountain Community College. Many touring bands (mostly alternative and bluegrass) stop on their way from Portland to Boise to play at the Great Pacific in downtown Pendleton. Pendleton is also home to the Eastern Oregon Correctional Facility, a medium security adult-male correctional facility. The business district has undergone recent revitalization, anchored by the Hamley building, an award-winning restoration of one of Pendleton's earliest saddle-making establishments, and The Prodigal Son Brewery, which has resurrected Pendleton's early brewing tradition**.**

Written by John Scanlan

Further Reading:

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