



# Once Upon a Time in the West

A double slice of  
small town life in  
Parowan, Utah, and  
Helmville, Montana

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Two of the best things about RVing are the people you meet and the unusual, often serendipitous experiences you have along the way. Both of these came together for us at two Labor Day celebrations in the American West.

## Labor Day Rodeo

HELMVILLE, MONTANA

I had to get out my detailed map of Montana to locate Helmville, a tiny hamlet of 400 people tucked between Missoula and Helena that just got its direct route to I-90 paved last year. Our friends explained that this rodeo is one of their favorites because it's full of Western horse-and-hay charm, and it's also RV friendly, allowing attendees to dry camp in the fields behind the rodeo fairgrounds for the weekend.



We pulled our rig in alongside all the horse trailers and had to shovel out a few cow patties from under our awning before we could settle into our camp chairs the first afternoon. RVs and horse trailers, cowboy boots and flannel shirts, campfires and laughter surrounded us.

We watched in amazement as kids everywhere pranced about on horses with confidence and pride. Even the littlest girl had full command of her horse. The kids rode around in twos and threes, renewing friendships from last year and cantering off into the mountain-swept distance with their cowboy hats and hair flying. That night we fell asleep to the sounds of horses stamping and snorting in the trailers all around us.

The first day of the show opened with amateur round-robin roping. In this event, a steer was released on one side of the arena, and while it ran as fast as it could to join the rest of its herd on the other side, a pair of cowboys chased after it on horseback, ropes swinging madly. The goal was for one cowboy to hook a horn and for the other to hook a leg, effectively stopping the steer in its tracks. This is much easier said than done, and only a few pairs of cowboys succeeded.

We were just getting the hang of how all this works when the bronc riding started. The gate opened, and a horse and rider came leaping out, the horse kicking its legs and pawing the air with fury. Hanging on with just one hand, most riders took spectacular dives off their horses.

Much like a ballgame, there was as much activity outside the stands as there was in them. Competitors in upcoming events practiced in the fields, herds of cattle and sheep milled around in pens, horses were tied everywhere, and professional rodeo cowboys rested between events, nursing wounds and donning protective gear along with boots and spurs. The spectators wandered in and out of the stands in a steady flow to the beer and hamburger stands, hanging out with friends both new and old.

Several clowns kept the crowd engaged with silly pranks, but no one needed their antics to get a laugh when the mutton busting started. Little kids in helmets lined up to ride skittish sheep. Scampering across the arena as fast as their little legs would carry them, the sheep were hell-bent on getting to the out gate, and the kids were equally hell-bent on getting there with them. Lying down along the sheep's back, face buried in woolly





**Biggest little rodeo in Montana:** Helmville's RV-friendly Labor Day Rodeo draws cowboys and cowgirls of all ages.

fluff and arms and legs straddling the animal in a death grip seemed the best tactic for staying on board. One kid even hammed it up when he finally fell off his sheep. He raised his hands in triumph and paraded around the arena, a seven-year-old rodeo pro.

In the evening, we relaxed amid the throng of rodeo families in the RV city that had sprung up out in the back 40. The most adorable group of little girls and boys stopped by our trailer, offering a tray of hand-made beaded bracelets for a dollar each. Their fresh-faced and freckled smiles framed in cowboy hats melted our hearts.

What a surprise it was the next day to see these very same kids appear in the

junior barrel-racing event. Not as fleet as the semiprofessional girls who streaked past in a blur of youthful blonde hair, these little riders instead took a delicate turn around each barrel, walking their small horses with grace from one end of the arena to the other. One small girl took so long to bounce down the final stretch, the announcer had plenty of time to crack a few affectionate jokes at her expense, leaving the crowd in stitches. As he so knowingly said, that little girl's ride would be the one we'd all remember years from now.

The calf-roping-and-tie-down event was a mystery at first. Each cowboy slipped off his saddle at full speed and lunged after a galloping calf, clamping its

head in the crook of his arm and twisting the animal into submission as they tumbled to the ground together. I could see how this crazy stunt would be a vital skill on the open range when a cowboy might need to single out a calf for medication or branding. More than one wily calf managed to break free, shaking the rope off with an easy shrug and darting away with what looked like a smirk on its face.

Professional bull riders mounted the most enormous bulls I've ever seen and took rides that reduced them to rag dolls. One professional bareback rider's horse was so cantankerous that he was standing on his hind feet pawing the air before the rider's gate even opened, earning an awed roar from the crowd.

Heaving a collective sigh of relief that no one was hurt in this bucking-bronc showdown, we were ready for the final treat of the day, wild cow milking. Open to everyone, this event lined milking cows up at one end of the arena and crazy rodeo spectators and entrants at the other. At the sound of a whistle, both sides started running toward each other. Working in pairs, one person roped a cow while the other tried to get a cup of milk from her udders and present it to the referee. The chaos was hilarious, and it seemed an impossible task, but two people actually got some milk, and it was a neck-and-neck 100-yard dash for them to reach the referee without spilling a drop.

Watching all this action against the backdrop of the softly rolling brown Montana hills made the magic and mystique of the rancher's life come alive. Long, lonely days filled with grueling physical work out in the rugged open lands of the American West unites the families, ranchers and ranch-hands of this region with a special bond. It's a hard but fulfilling life, and the rodeo circuit celebrates the joy, the challenges and even the humor of this uniquely American lifestyle. Cowboys galloping on horseback across vast cattle ranches are a fundamental thread in the fabric of this land, and the family-oriented Helmville Labor Day Rodeo is the perfect place to experience this heritage.

## Iron County Fair

PAROWAN, UTAH

Sometimes the name of a place, descriptive as it might be, doesn't quite match what you find when you get there.

As we drove through southwestern Utah on Interstate 15, the words on the map, Vermillion Castle, tantalized me with images of red turrets in ruins, perhaps the remote fantasy home of an eccentric turn-of-the-last-century millionaire. I decided I had to visit this castle estate, as it appeared easy to find, lying just beyond the tiny town of Parowan on the twisting road that leads to the Yankee Meadow Reservoir.

"No problem," I cheerfully said to my husband, Mark, as the road dropped to one lane and took a hairpin turn up a steep hill. "It's got to be just a short ways ahead." It was only after we'd hauled our fifth-wheel trailer up 1,000 feet of steep, skinny mountain roads, scanning desperately for signs leading to the castle, that I realized the joke was on me. The towering red-rock hoodoos that soared

above us on either side of the road had rightfully earned the name Vermillion Castle from locals long ago. These were the dwellings of the gods, not some backwoods baron.

The white-knuckle uphill trek delivered us into the beautiful Yankee Meadows area, filled with mountain wildflowers that stretched before us, rolling in waves toward deep pine woods. Zigzag fencing ran along one

side of a clear blue lake, and the air was as crisp and cool as the brook that frothed over stones on its way down the mountain.

While at the Parowan visitor center, we discovered that the Iron County Fair would be held in just a few days and included a 5k run. Never one to pass up a race, Mark had us signed up before I'd sorted out how a tiny mountain road could have four different names, since the road to Vermillion Castle is variously called First Left Hand Canyon, Yankee Meadow Road, Bowery Creek Road and

Fair play: Tractors vie for attention with cows and clowns.







High and mighty: The regal spires of Vermillion Castle crown the Utah landscape. Right, red-rock vistas reward hard-pedaling mountain bikers.

Iron County beauty pageant to horse races to a tractor show and endless arts, crafts and baking contests.

Upon entering the fairgrounds, our first encounter was with the Most Beautiful Baby contest. Proud parents stood in a lineup before the judges, their sweet infants and toddlers adorned in bows and tiny cowboy hats. A guitarist sang songs on a makeshift stage, and in another area a petting zoo filled with soft, furry farm animals kept lots of tiny hands busy.

We stopped to take in a presentation by professional falconer Martin Tyner of the Southwest Wildlife Foundation. He had three large raptors with him, and we were amazed at his descriptions of the flying, diving and hunting feats of these sharp-eyed predators. Their intelligence and memory capacity were undeniable. He told us how a rambunctious prairie falcon he'd rehabilitated and released years ago has always remembered both him and his pickup truck. Whenever he goes into her territory, she recognizes his truck right away and makes contact. One time she dive-bombed him in happy greeting, pulling up just a little late and knocking him to the ground in her enthusiasm.

Clowns carrying balloons wandered the fairgrounds, and the excited shrieks of kids on wild rides and the Ferris wheel filled the air. We paused to watch a group of men engaged in a serious horseshoe championship. The Rodeo Royalty (queen, princess and her four attendants) strolled by, and Mark was quick to join the pretty group for a photo op. Booths sold everything from kitchen gadgets to dietary supplements, and winding through it all was a train loaded with toddlers.

Inside the main tent, all the competing crafts were laid out, ribbons proudly displayed alongside. A photo contest featured lovely images of the Vermillion Castle, and the knitting, crocheting, sewing, needlepoint and quilts were clearly the work of experienced hands. Mark drooled over the endless baked goods, but the blue ribbons made it clear they were to be admired only from a distance.

The running race wove through the fairgrounds bright and early on Labor



Day morning, and I'm sure Mark ran a little faster because he hadn't been able to indulge in those pastries the day before. The final stretch went straight down the main street. Cheering fans lined the sides of the road, inspiring all of us to pour on as much of a sprint as we could muster as we pounded out the final half mile.

The race ended in the nick of time, as the Iron County Fair parade came marching down the street right behind us. Cheerleaders and tap dancers swept past with cleverly choreographed routines, and several marching bands got the crowd humming. Floats with covered wagons paid tribute to the area's pioneering past. One politician even walked with a handcart, reminding us all of the intense dedication of the early Mormons who walked across the country pushing carts laden with their worldly possessions. A float filled with little girls dressed as prairie dogs was my personal favorite.

The Iron County Fair's final day featured a tractor show and vintage car display. Antique red Farmall tractors and green John Deere vehicles took to the streets and paraded around town. When they finally lined up in a grassy park, we had a chance to learn a little of the history of these massive steel behemoths. Initially relieving the hooves and backs of farm

animals, tractors eventually delivered farming into the modern era of air-conditioned cabs with stereo speakers and computerized hay bailing.

Just a few steps from the tractors were the muscle cars, and the most ardent admirers were all in the same age group. There's an appeal in those old cars for everyone, but they hold a special place in the hearts of those who saved up for, owned, worked on, washed and drove them. We heard several men telling stories about how they'd tricked out one car or another back in the day.

I was amazed that so much fun, variety and life could be found on the streets of a small town when it hosts its big annual fair. Parowan, Utah, had been just another town in small type on the map, and we never would have taken the detour there if the tiny words Vermillion Castle hadn't caught my eye. We didn't find anything close to what we expected, but instead found so much more. \*

**Note:** Vermillion Castle and Yankee Meadows are easily enjoyed as a day trip by car. However, the drive up First Left Hand Canyon is extremely challenging for larger RVs. If you plan to camp at the top of the mountain, check out the road with your tow vehicle or toad first.



## For More Information

### Helmville Labor Day Rodeo

September 4 through 7

[www.goldwest.visitmt.com/listings/9769.htm](http://www.goldwest.visitmt.com/listings/9769.htm)

### Iron County Fair

September 2 through 7

[www.ironcounty.net/departments/fair](http://www.ironcounty.net/departments/fair)



### Good Sam Parks

There's no shortage of Good Sam Parks in the West, including 40 in Montana and 31 in Utah. Consult the *Trailer Life RV Parks and Campgrounds Directory* or go to [www.goodsamclub.com](http://www.goodsamclub.com), click on Travel Tools, then click on Find a Campground.



Full-time RVers and Good Sam members Emily and Mark Fagan journal about their travels at [www.roadslsstraveled.us](http://www.roadslsstraveled.us).

FR 049, depending on which map or person you consult.

Having seen the jaw-dropping "castle" along First Left Hand Canyon, we set out to see what lay along Second Left Hand Canyon (FR 048). We tackled this 4x4 track with our mountain bikes, grinding our way up the mountain, accompanied the whole way by a shallow, rock-strewn stream. The views didn't seem quite as

spectacular, but perhaps my senses were dulled by the grueling, head-down effort of the bike ride. However, the euphoric feeling of success upon reaching the top was delicious.

Down in the charming town of Parowan, the Iron County Fair had been revving up for weeks. A classic small-town festival, the fair featured a variety of competitions ranging from the Miss