

## Recapping the years 1959.....2010

By Sarah Lindsey

Fifty plus years of Rattlesnake Rodeo progress as told by The Granddaddy of the Rodeo, various members and volunteers. References include past rodeo programs and brochures as well as stories told to news persons to be shared on radio, television or in the magazines and newspapers

J.P. Jones, “Granddaddy” of the Opp Rodeo, started the simple event with animal shows at the Parkmore restaurant. Animals included black bears, bobcats, monkeys, a skunk, deer, an anaconda, mice, and rattlesnakes. He knew that people were attracted to animal shows and people get hungry. The two, animals and food, would attract people.

It took Mr. Jones a few years to convince the Opp Jaycees that having a Rattlesnake Rodeo would be a good idea. After at least two years, J.P. convinced the Jaycees to try the rodeo. The first years, 1960-1963, were slow. Reasons varied from bad weather to no organized activities. In 1964, J.P. Jones and Jaycee president Cliff Kersey unveiled a new, revitalized Rattlesnake Rodeo. This was the first year for cooking rattlesnake meat. It was a “dare” to eat rattlesnake meat. With varying opinions about the taste, the small, bony portions would sell like hot cakes, and still do. There was not and still isn’t enough to satisfy demands. In 1965 another first for the rodeo occurred. Beautiful girls from Florida, Georgia, and Alabama came to enter the Rattlesnake Rodeo Beauty Pageant, which was initiated by J.P. Jones. The winner reigns for one year as a City and Rodeo representative. Snake hunting was a big sport with the largest snake weighing in at around 10 pounds.

In 1966, the largest snake weighed around 11 pounds and lots of snakes were turned in. This year the national media got involved. Environmentalists and ecologists criticized the event saying that the rattlesnakes were being eliminated from the area; however rattlesnakes kept multiplying and being more plentiful each year.

In 1967, many snakes were turned in. Unusual as it may be, that year someone raided the snake pens taking a few snakes, including the largest, a diamondback weighing in at 11  $\frac{3}{4}$  pounds called “Big Daddy”. Even more unusual is that this took place at night, without lights. None the less, the rodeo went on.

1968 marked the year that the Opp merchants got involved. Virginia Benton, chairperson for the Retail Merchants Association, aided in bringing snake activities to town. Also it was the beginning of the golf tournament, square dancing, and an archery tournament.

1969 moved quietly without changes to the rodeo, while 1970 was the year for more exposure for the rodeo. Miss Canada visited and Japanese movie makers and cameras were onsite, which aided in recognition of the rodeo. Still many snakes were turned in.

1971 brought Omar the Snakeman. Some may remember him. He buried himself under dozens of live rattlesnakes. Jack Smith, Opp Jaycees President and great snake handler, would not dare try this. This was also the first year to have over 100 contestants in the Rattlesnake Rodeo Beauty Pageant.

In 1972, with Jerry Kirkland as president and the start of the world championship buck dancing contest, there was over 200 pounds of snake meat cooked and consumed.

Despite the "Big Snow" of 1973, a large number of snakes were turned in. A new snake trailer was built, and the snakes were put on display until the rodeo. The festivities were then moved from the Parkmore to the stadium. 1974 another new attraction, the "Rattler 100" stock car race at the South Alabama Motor Speedway in Kinston Alabama. The heaviest snake weighed 12 lbs.

In 1975 the rodeo was listed in the top tourist attractions nationally.

1976 marked a new addition; arts and crafts were added to the festivities; with Don Childre as president, and a great snake handler.

1977 and 1978, lots of snakes with the largest weighing 12  $\frac{3}{4}$  pounds.

1979 was the year Washington D. C. sent officials to Opp to collect rattlesnake venom for medical research. This was the first year the rodeo had to be postponed for a week due to inclement weather. The next weekend brought great weather and a successful rodeo.

1980, "Real People" came to Opp for filming of the festivities.

1981 brought "P M Magazine", to film the event. These last two years helped in making Opp nationally known.

1982, Montgomery Mayor Emory Folmar emceed the 17<sup>th</sup> annual beauty pageant. Jay Mikel as president saw the start of the Rattlesnake 100 NASCAR Stock Car Race at the South Alabama Motor Speedway in Kinston Alabama.

1983 marked the first year for press night. This event was made possible with the help of Robert Boothe, from WOPP, also a member of the Alabama Broadcasters Association. This aided the Rodeo to be advertised over a broader scope.

1984, the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, more attending, over 25,000 people. More arts, crafts and food vendors. 275 snakes turned in.

1985, 35,000 people attending. This year the Montgomery Zoo asked for a first ever snake show.

1986 the first women joined the Jaycees. This proved to add variety and new ideas. This year's attendance was 35,000 despite the bitter cold temperatures. Also Dr. Charles Hendrix from Auburn University was present to collect specimens for research purposes.

1987 another new beginning; the greased pole climb. 25,000 in attendance.

1988 was the year the Opp Jaycees introduced the 1<sup>st</sup> Rattlin Country Concert, 50,000 attending. Mr. J L Nolen, mayor of Opp commented, "We are proud of the Rattlesnake Rodeo and the people it brings to our City. It gives them a chance to see our new 1,000 acre lake, industrial park, housing projects and a whole lot of friendly hometown people."

1989, 35 to 40,000 people came to Opp. The heaviest snake weighed 11 lbs 12oz.

1990, 45 to 50,000 people. The Rattlin Concert was split into two days. This was the start of the event being the weekend.

1991, the Jaycees tried a Friday night concert which was moved indoors due to rain, however as the weekend progressed beautiful weather made a great turn out for both days.

1992, the rodeo grew from crowds of about 500 in the 1960's to 40 to 50,000 in the 1990's. The event was getting bigger and better. A lot of people working very hard.

1993 was the first lady president. Under the direction of Sonya Hattaway, she lead her group in representing what the Jaycee organization was about; young men and women who learn leadership skills which may enable them to broaden their horizons in their

careers and personal lives. This year was the first Little Miss Rattlesnake sponsored by the Civitan Club.

1994 attendance in excess of 30,000. Arts, crafts, food, music and snakes, yes lots of snakes.

In 1995 the Jaycees had a less than desired Rodeo due to inclement weather; however this year the Jaycees sent their first submission for Ten Outstanding Young Alabamians (TOYA). Robin Davis from Opp, was chosen locally, and then went on to achieve the honor of being recognized as one of the Ten Outstanding Young Americans. In 1970, Elvis Presley had received this honor.

1996 brought the cartoon mascots. This was also the first year for the karaoke contest.

1997, the cartoons were named, the snake "JP", and local elementary students named the Gopher "Pokey". This was the year the Jaycees started their Hall of Fame, naming JP Jones, The granddaddy of the Rattlesnake Rodeo and Bill Horn of Horn Beverage as the first to be recognized.

1998, another woman president, Debbie Wilson. This was the first year the beauty pageant contestants were asked an on stage question. This was added due to the Queens helping in promoting the rodeo during interviews on radio and television. This year marked the Flood of "98"; concerts were moved to the Kiawanis building in Andalusia. Rodeo events were postponed until the next weekend. This year's rodeo was not a failure, rather a great learning experience. The Jaycees learned to take the good as well as the bad, because only GOD above knows what is best.

1999 the 40<sup>th</sup> annual event. Many years of hard work and dedication from a group of individuals who tried to learn from previous events to better the next.

2000, the Rattlesnake rodeo known to people in the U. S. as well as abroad. Same traditions to keep a legacy continuing.

2001 this rattlesnake rodeo was dedicated to a great man, J P Jones. Without his devotion and perseverance this event would not be possible.

2002, Rattlesnake accessories, t-shirts, fried rattlesnake meat, arts crafts and various foods, music and something for everyone.

2003, 44 years of this event has served to unify rattlesnake lovers the country over. The event continues with food, fun and entertainment for the entire family.

2004 the rodeo was held in Andalusia Alabama at the Kiawanis fair grounds due to conflicts with other events in Opp. None the less a successful event.

2005 rattlesnakes, food, arts, crafts and music with the Rodeo in Andalusia again, rodeo followers expressed desires for the event to please return to its home in Opp. Under the direction of H D Edgar, Mayor of Opp and the city council and with the help of many volunteers a Rodeo was held the first weekend in April. Blake Shelton and Sugarland drew large crowds to Opp to make this a successful event and the return for the Rodeo to Opp. With major changes in the Opp Jaycees the City of Opp continues the Rattlesnake Rodeo.

2006, Joe Nichols and Rockie Lynne drew crowds to make the rodeo a successful event.

2007, snakes, snake meat, arts, crafts, food, music and fun for all ages. Rodeo traditions continue.

2008, The Rattlesnake Rodeo continues in its home town of Opp. Great sponsors, great volunteers and dedication from the City leaders help make this yet another successful Rodeo.

2009, Thanks to the continued support from vendors, volunteers, sponsors, entertainers and devoted attendees another successful rodeo.

2010, The City of Opp is celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Opp Rattlesnake Rodeo (formerly the Opp Jaycees Rattlesnake Rodeo) on March 26 & 27 2010. Thank you J P Jones, Thank you Opp Jaycees, and Thank you Mayor H. D. Edgar and the City of Opp.